



*“THE INFLUENCE OF FRIENDS”

Biblical Text: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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* Last week the start of school was coming fast. * This week, it’s here! And that means so many things. For fans like me - the start of football is right around the corner! I’m ready - since the Royals are breaking our hearts right now! *

But for those of us with children or grandchildren in our family, the start of school means life gets infinitely more complicated. Some of you have handled that with perfection. * The rest of us are just a little stressed, frazzled and anxious!

If you are like me and that’s ever even partially true, I have a couple of book recommendations! * Frazzled: Everyday Disasters and Impending Doom¹, and the sequel by the same author, * Ordinary Mishaps and Inevitable Catastrophes.²

Sounds like ordinary life to me! * And of course our stress and anxiety ratcheted up a notch or two with the tensions between the U.S. and North Korea this week. And Jesus words of counsel in * Matthew 24:6 became a lot harder to fulfill.

But it’s not like we are the first generation to need help. In our series, * “*Old School Values*,” I’m pointing us in the direction of some values that endure and some practical truth from the Bible that we can hold on to.

(Boys and girls when you received your Bible this morning – you received a whole library of great advice for daily living, when you received your Bible.)

* Whatever your age or stage of life, few things influence us more than our friends. And that’s how God designed us. We are made so that friendships would be an important part of His plan for our lives. But true friendship is rare.

* Every student, parent and grandparent knows that friends can influence us for great good. But few things hurt us more than false or fake friends. I am blessed with many friends., but the ones who stand strong in the trials of life are rarer.

The Bible has a lot to say about friends. From our text for today, for example: * “*If we fall, a friend will lift us up. Woe to anyone who has no one to help them!*” (Ecclesiastes 4:10)³ Or consider Jesus’ words about a true friend in John 15:13: * “*Greater love has no one than this, to lay down your life for your friends.*”⁴

¹ Frazzled: Everyday Disasters and Impending Doom by Booki Vivat. Copyright © 2016, New York: HarperCollins Press.

² Frazzled #2: Ordinary Mishaps and Inevitable Catastrophes by Booki Vivat. Copyright © 2017, New York: HarperCollins Press.

³ Ecclesiastes 4:10. Paraphrased by the author from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

⁴ Ibid. John 15:13.

Listen to the wisdom of Proverbs, **“A friend loves at all times, a true brother or sister is born for adversity.”* (Proverbs 17:17)⁵ And Proverbs 18:24: **“You can have many companions and still come to ruin. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”*⁶ Those kinds of friends are a gift of God.

*If you have ever gotten in a bind, had a major failure, or lost your way, then you already know how rare true friendship is in our lives. My deepest prayer is that we will learn a few things this morning about how to be true friends to one another.

The difference between true friends and those who are really only acquaintances is easily identified. Here are four characteristics of true friendship:

***Unconditional love** - A true friend loves always. Regardless of what you do, what happens, or where life takes you, they love always. On your worst day—when you aren’t fun to be around—a true friend still takes you to lunch. (*And likely pays.*)

***Unwavering support** – True friends are in it for the long haul. A true friend is in your corner. When you call—even when you’re in trouble—they come. True friendships endure longer than a season. If distance or circumstance intervenes, the relationship still lasts. True friendships are consistent.

***A willingness to challenge** – Love and support is not failing to speak the words we most need to hear. A true friendship makes us better. Proverbs says *“As iron sharpens iron, good friends sharpen each other.”* (Proverbs 27:17)⁷ True friends will correct us if needed. As Proverbs 27:5 says, *“Better an open rebuke than hidden love.”*⁸ Friends won’t let you make a mistake if they can intervene.

***Being full of grace** – Grace and forgiveness are freely and generously given. True friendship weathers the sometime difficulties of relationships, forgiving when needed, and loving each other even when it hurts. A true friendship isn’t one-sided. Both friends are willing to sacrificially love each other.

*I have several friends who are true friends. Of course, Ann and my youngest son always make the list, but there are others. I can’t imagine my life without them.

A true friend sees who you are but also who you can become. A true friend, accepts you’re your past, but believes in your future. And the best way to have those kind of friends is to be that kind of friend to others.

⁵ Ibid. Proverbs 17:17.

⁶ Ibid. Proverbs 18:24.

⁷ Op. Cit. Proverbs 27:17, paraphrased by the author.

⁸ Proverbs 27:17. New Revised Standard Version Bible. Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Our text today is the best friendship text I know. It tells us that being a friend is a blessing to us and those to whom we offer our friendship. Ecclesiastes 4:9 says, **“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.”*⁹

Or as I heard my mother say regularly, ** “Friendship is its own reward.”*

Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, **“Though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one.”*¹⁰ There are few things more powerful than knowing we do not stand alone in the joys and especially the toughest times of life.

And the second half of that verse has the best teaching of all: **“A three stranded cord is not easily broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:12b)*¹¹

**The image of a three-stranded cord is readily understandable to any boy scout or girl scout. It also is understandable to anyone who has held a rope and considered its strength. There are many ways to interpret this verse of ancient wisdom.*

**The most common is to talk about teamwork as the third strand that binds friends together. Sometimes people have interpreted that verse to mean love is the binding ingredient that makes us strong, and it is used as a wedding text.*

I don’t disagree with either interpretation. But there is a deeper message. Since God is the author of friendship, He is involved in our lives. **And he sent Jesus so we could understand that He is with us! The best of friendships become more powerful when we share faith in God together. He is the strand that holds our lives together.

And the best friend we can have is Jesus Christ. When we walk closely with Him, we’ll find the friend who never fails. Remember his words from John 15, **“Greater love has no one than this, to lay down your life for your friends.”*¹² That’s the kind of friend He is, who gave His life for us and is always with us. Let us pray. **

⁹ Op. Cit. Ecclesiastes 4:9. New Revised Standard Version Bible.

¹⁰ Ibid. Ecclesiastes 4:12a.

¹¹ Op. Cit. Ecclesiastes 4:12b, paraphrased.

¹² Ibid. John 15:13.