

INTRODUCTION

Please open your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 4. To find Ecclesiastes, go to Psalms and turn right and go through Proverbs, and you will find Ecclesiastes right after that. Today I'm going to be completing this four-part series on "Blueprints for Beautiful Homes." I've been talking about marriage and about parenting, and today I want to talk about friendship. I'm borrowing a title from an old Beatles song, "I get by with a little help from my friends."

I am reminded of the preacher who dreamed he was preaching and woke up, and he was. I like what Erma Bombeck said about friends. She said, "A friend is someone who thinks you're a good egg, even though you're a little cracked." In America, there is a great interest in friends. One of the most popular television shows is NBC's "Friends." I have not seen it because I had a sitcom bypass and the only sitcom I usually watch are "Andy Griffith" reruns. I'm told "Friends" is a show about six friends who live in New York City. It must be a good show, because every Thursday evening, over 30 million Americans tune in to watch. I wonder, as they watch a show entitled "Friends" how many of them are watching it all alone and lonely inside their bedroom or their den or their living room, thinking, "I really wish I could have some friends like that."

The Bible is a book that tells us how to build strong, healthy relationships. You might wonder why I am preaching a message on friendship in a series on the family. It is because this series is all about relationships. Relationships apply both to families and friends. When I preached on marriage, some of you aren't married so it didn't apply to you. When I preached on parenting, that didn't apply to some of you, but everyone in this room can learn something today about the value of friendship.

Let's look at Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. It says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man that falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. (Then this amazing statement.) A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

Now, this passage applies to husbands and wives. It is a great passage about marriage, because all of these relationship truths ought to be true of husbands and wives. According, to verse 12, what or who is that third cord? One cord is the husband; one is the wife. Of course, Jesus is the third cord that gives strength and stability to a marriage.

That is also true of friendships. When I talk about building beautiful homes, I'm not talking about the houses themselves. As you drive around East Texas and see all the beautiful houses, you ought to look at them and say, "I wonder if there's a home in that house?" One of our younger members, Alexandra Lawrence, wrote me a little poem that talks about the difference between a house and a home. She printed it so neatly. I want to read it to you.

What is a house?

It is brick and stone and wood that is hard,
Some window glass and perhaps a yard.
It is eaves and chimneys and tile floor

And stucco and roof and lots of doors.
What is a home?
It is loving and family and doing for others.
It is brothers and sisters and father and mother.
It is unselfish acts and kindly sharing,
And showing your loved ones you are always caring.

I. FRIENDSHIP IS A GREAT INVESTMENT

I want to remind you that friendship is a great investment. One of the things that makes a difference between a house and a home, a family and just people that are together, is the element of friendship both within the family and outside the family. Today I want us to examine some ideas about friendship. If you still have your Bibles open to Ecclesiastes 4, look at verse 9. It says two are better than one because they have a good return for their work.

Those words "good return" mean dividends paid on a wise investment. The very best investment we will ever make in life is the investment in relationships. We get the best return on that investment than any other investment we will ever make. As we go through life, there are two kinds of things that we may try to accumulate. Some people try to accumulate possessions. They try to get more and more stuff. It is like the old t-shirt that says, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Well, if we spend all of our life trying to accumulate more and more possessions, we will never be totally happy and fulfilled.

On the other hand, we can decide to focus on building relationships, trying to make friends and to be a friend, working on having good strong relationships in our families and outside our families. If we make the wise choice to invest in relationships, we are going to get a good return on our investment every single time.

According to this passage, let's notice three characteristics of a real friend.

1. A real friend is someone who helps you when you are down

Look at verse 10. It says, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up." Now, you may go through life with a lot of acquaintances, but you may have only very few friends. My friend, if you have a few friends, you are fortunate. You are blessed of God.

Do you know how to tell the difference between acquaintances and friends? Easy. When you get into trouble, acquaintances walk out. When you are in trouble, when you fall down, when you make a mistake, a real friend is right there to pick you up. Someone has said that a friend is someone who walks in just after the whole world has walked out.

One reason friends are so valuable is because they are so rare. Gold is valuable because it is rare. Diamonds are valuable because they are rare. The thing that makes friendships so valuable is that it is truly rare – someone to be there when you are in trouble.

A real friend is the kind of person who, when you have a problem, you can call them at 2:00 in the morning and say, "I need you right now." A real friend will not say, "What's the problem?" and then decide whether or not to go. A real friend simply says, "Where are you?" In other words, "I'll be there." That is a real friend.

2. A real friend provides warmth in a cold, cruel world

Look at verse 11. It says, "If two lie down together, they will keep warm. You gain strength and warmth from a real friend. All of these principles apply to husbands and wives, but they also apply to friendship. I believe with all my heart that a husband and a wife ought to be the very best of friends.

If you want to build a strong marriage, make sure that you and your mate are best friends. Guys, make sure that you don't have any other old buddy that is a better friend to you than your wife. Ladies, make sure that you don't have some girlfriend who is a better friend to you than your mate. Work on making your mate your best friend. That way you can draw strength from each other and you can help each other when you are down.

Someone has said the characteristic of a real friendship is that you feel comfortable with him or her. You don't have to always be talking. You can enjoy comfortable silences with a real friend. Do you know some people who feel they are called of God to fill every silent time of life? They have to stick something in there to say. With real friends, you don't have to do that; you can just be with each other.

Someone has said that in each of our lives, there is a gauge that measures our emotional health. It is like a gas gauge on the dashboard of our car. When it is all the way over to empty, we had better go to the gas station and get filled up or we will break down. We fill it up and the needle goes over to full. Let's face it, in life we encounter a lot of people who, when we spend time with them, they send our emotional gas gauge all the way to empty. But there are other people, and these are the friends I'm talking about, that when you spend time with them, our gauge goes all the way over to full.

The problem is, some people are unhealthy emotionally because they are spending all their time with those people that drain them. We have to spend some time with those folks, but minimize that time and maximize the time we spend with people who build us up and who strengthen us, who are like a good, warm fire on a cold night.

3. A real friend is someone who fights to protect you

Look at verse 12. It says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves." This is a picture of a military strategy that was used in the ancient world, before they had guns and things like that. It was mostly hand-to-hand combat. The most successful armies were those whose soldiers went into battle with a partner. The purpose of this partner or buddy was to fight back to back when they were in battle. One stood up against the back of the other one, and they always kept their backs in contact and fought whatever enemy came from any side. They were always protecting the back of the other one.

The Bible says that is what friends do. Friends don't stab you in the back; friends protect your back. Not many of us are being attacked physically these days, but all of us are attacked verbally. Do you know what a real friend does? A real friend never puts up with gossip when someone is talking about a friend. What is gossip? Gossip is when somebody says something negative or unkind about someone else when that person is not there, whether it is true or not. That is gossip and the Bible says it is a sin.

If you are a true friend, you will not stay silent when someone talks about your friend. You will speak up, pull out your verbal sword to defend and protect your friend. You will say, "Please don't talk about that person. That is my friend." That is what a real friend does.

You may be saying, "Well, I wish I had a friend like that." The key to having friends is to be a friend. The Bible says in Proverbs that if a man would have friends, he must show himself friendly. I came across a little poem the other day that goes like this:

I went out to find a friend,
and I found none out there.
But I went out to be a friend,
and friends were everywhere.

You may be sitting there feeling sorry for yourself and thinking, "I wish I had some friends like that." Find somebody who needs a friend and be a friend to that person. Friendship is a wise investment.

II. THE BEST FRIENDS ARE "FAMILY"

The second thing we can learn about friendship is that the best friends are family. Let me explain it. When I use the word family, I'm talking about both your relational family, husbands and wives, children, parents, brothers and sisters, but I'm also talking about another kind of family – the family of God. You may need some friends and you don't know where to find friends. Here is the key: The best place to find friends is in Green Acres Baptist Church. If you want to find the wrong kind of friends, there are places you can go to find them. If you are looking for the right kind of friends, look in a family of faith.

Here is a key to some dynamic relationships: Treat your guests like family and your family like guests

Think about that. Treat your guests like family and your family like guests. Don't you like to go over to somebody's house, and they really mean it when they say, "Make yourself at home." They mean they want you to feel comfortable. But when they say, "Make yourself at home," you probably don't take off your shoes and socks and go back there and pull out the drawers in their bedroom and check things out. No, you are going to show your hosts manners, even though they say, "Make yourself at home." When you are trying to be a good host, you show your guests courtesy and kindness. You always serve them first, and make sure their needs are taken care of.

It will be a great awakening in your emotional life if you treat your family like guests. For instance, husbands and wives, do you remember how nice you were to each other when you were first dating? You opened the car door for her and treated her like she was someone special. Are you still doing that? Remember when you were first dating, and you would pay attention and look into her eyes and nod your head and respond to her when you were talking to each other. Put that magazine down; put that newspaper down. Treat your family like guests.

Kids, when you go to somebody's house, your parents want you to use good manners. That is just a good thing to do. Kids, you ought to show the very same kind of manners in your own home. Treat your family like guests, and your guests like family. It is amazing what would happen if we would do that.

Now, let me just mention some gifts that you ought to give to your friends, and I'm talking about husbands to wives, wives to husbands, kids to parents and parents to kids. Here are some great relational gifts. They cost a lot, but return a lot, too.

1. Give your friends the gifts of kindness

Just be kind to them. Do you know what kindness is? Kindness is love in work clothes. It is love that is applied to everyday life. And we know what kindness is, because when we are introduced to someone who is important, we are usually going to be kind and courteous to him or her. That is how we ought to be with our family and friends.

I'm told that in California there is a 1-900 number that is 1-900-KIND WORD. It cost about \$3.95 a minute to call this number. This soothing recorded voice seems to be talking to you personally, and all they are saying is kind words.

"You look great today." They can't see you, but that is what they are saying. "You look great today. You are such a special person." It goes over and over, on and on. You say, "Well, surely nobody would call that number, would they?" Thousands of people every day call this number to hear the voice of someone they have never met, nor will ever meet, just to hear kind things said to them.

What does that say? That says some of you are going to go out and do a 1-900-KIND WORD in Tyler and get rich because people are hungry to hear kind things.

2. You ought to give to your family and friends the gift of encouragement

We sing a song that says, "Home, Home on the Range." There is a line that says, "Where seldom is heard a discouraging word." Wouldn't it be wonderful if that were true of every home?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if that were true of every church? You would hear only words that build up instead of words that tear down. The Bible says in Hebrews 10:24-25 that is the main reason we come to church. Sure, we come to worship and praise God, but Hebrews 10:14-25 says, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not

give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

I read recently about a man out in San Diego, California who was wandering around a marina. He wandered out to the end of a pier and saw a group of 12 or 15 people gathered around a sailboat. There was a poster that gave the boat owner's name and it announced that he was leaving that day on a solo voyage around the world.

This stranger walked up there, fascinated by anybody who would do that. As he stood there, he listened to some of the people gathered there. Apparently they were family members and friends, and basically they were trying to talk him out of going. They were saying negative remarks, "That boat is too little. You are going to die in a storm. You don't have enough food. You don't have enough water. You're not going to make it."

It was obvious the sailor was going to try and it was obvious he was heartbroken; because it seemed nobody wanted him to attempt this voyage. As he pushed away from the dock, this total stranger walked to the end of the pier and stood in front of all those people and shouted, "I just want you to know we all love you! You're going to make it! You're going to do a great job! Bon voyage!" This sailor had a smile on his face as he raised his sail. Sure enough, a few months later, he made it around the world.

There seems to be two groups of people: The discouragers and the encouragers. Which group do you stand with and speak with, those who encourage or those who discourage?

3. You ought to give your friends the gift of honesty

That is not easy, by the way. Many times it is tough to be honest with a friend, but that is a characteristic of true friendship. You will be honest with your friend. Look what it says in Proverbs 27:6. "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Let me explain the second part of that verse first.

There are a lot of people who basically kiss up to you. The only reason they flatter you is because they want what they can get out of you, and they are always showering you with empty, flattery kisses. It is exactly what Judas Iscariot did in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas went over and planted a kiss on the cheek of Jesus. Jesus said, "Friend, you betray me with a kiss." Have you discovered there are folks out there who will treat you really nice as long as things are going well and they can benefit from your friendship? They shower you with kisses, but you let something bad happen, and they are out of there. Those are the kisses of an enemy.

Look at the first part of that verse. "Wounds from a friend can be trusted." That means sometimes when you have a friend and there is something in that friend's life that you know is wrong, you go and talk to that friend. You don't talk to anybody else about that friend. You go and talk to that friend about his problem. If there is a man in this room and you have a friend and that friend is messing around with another woman or messing around with substance abuse or anything else like that, doing something illegal, and you just idly stand by and let him cut his

own throat, you are not a friend of that man. If you are a friend, you will sit down with him, one-on-one, and lovingly tell him, "You're ruining your life."

Do you know what you do when you do that? You hurt them. You cut them. You wound them. But this verse says, "The wounds of a friend can be trusted." You know, I've had people tell me things about me, and I know they were telling me just to tear me down, but I've had other friends tell me what was wrong with my life, and the only reason they told me was because they wanted me to be a better person. Those are the ones who are friends. Some of you women in this room have a friend that is doing some things that are taking her away from God. Are you going to sit idly by and watch it happen? You are not a friend if you do that. You will lovingly confront her. When you do something like that, you are performing like a surgeon. I admire surgeons because they take somebody and they create a wound, they make an incision. They cut that person; they hurt that person so they can help that person. They cut them and then they take something out or put something in or fix something that is in there, and then they sew them up. It takes awhile for the wound to heal, but it was done to help them. Sometimes we must perform emotional surgery on our friends if we really love them.

Relationships are tough, but the relationship you show with other people reveals what kind of relationship you have with God. Listen to this:

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives,
But be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies,
But succeed anyway.
If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you,
But be honest and frank anyway.
What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight,
But build anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous,
But be happy anyway.
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow,
But do the good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough,
But give the world the best you've got anyway.
You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.

Have you ever thought about it? The way you relate to people determines the way you relate to God. The way you relate to God determines the way you relate to people.

III. LET JESUS BE YOUR BEST FRIEND

Let's learn one other thing about friendship. When I preach, I have a very simple strategy. I make a beeline for Jesus. Let Jesus be your best friend. He wants to be, because that is what He

said in John 15:15. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know a master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my father, I have made known to you." He said, "I want to call you my friend." Why is he your friend? Three ways.

1. He knows you better than anybody else

Isn't that amazing, that Jesus knows everything about you and still He loves you? Still He says, "I want to be your friend." Jesus knows every mistake you have ever made. Nobody else knows that. He knows every mistake you will ever make, and He still says, "I want to be your friend."

Sometimes I think we get confused about the kind of friends Jesus had when he was on earth. We think he was probably a friend of Rabbis, Pharisees, Sadducees and religious people, but He had only bad things to say about those people. He called them a bunch of hypocrites, a bunch of rattlesnakes. He said in Matthew 19, they called him a friend of publicans and sinners. Last time I checked, that applies to every one of us in this room. We are all sinners by nature and choice. He even spent time with prostitutes; he spent time with drunkards. Those are the kinds of people he was with. Even those twelve guys we call the holy apostles, weren't very holy. They were a bunch of smelly, ignorant fishermen, but yet he was their friend. It gives me great joy to know that Jesus is a friend of sinners.

2. He has done more for you than anyone else!

He says in John 15:13, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." The American Indians didn't have a word for friend. They used this phrase to describe our word friend, "He who carries my sorrows on his back." That is what a friend is. A friend laughs when you laugh; a friend cries when you cry. According to Isaiah 53:4, that is exactly what Jesus did and does. It says, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." Jesus took the worst of you and me, our sorrow, our sins, and he carried them for us. Can you think of a friend who has done any more for you than Jesus?

3. He is always there when you need him!

He says, "I'll never leave you or forsake you." Some of you in my generation, remember the James Taylor song that says, "When you're down and troubled, and you need a helping hand, and nothing is going right, close your eyes and think of me, and soon I will be there to brighten up all your days. You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, soon I'll be there knocking on your door."

You know, you could say that about Jesus, because He says in Revelations 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, and if any person will hear my voice and open the door, I'll come in." If you don't at this moment claim and sense the friendship of Jesus Christ, He is knocking, saying, "Let me come into your life; let me be your friend. I want to be your very best friend."

Isn't it great that the God of the universe says, "I want to be your friend?" You may ask, "If Jesus is always there, why do I have to suffer? Why do I have to hurt? There were times in my

life when it didn't seem like he was there to bail me out." Do you remember the story of Jesus and Mary, Martha and Lazarus? The Bible says they were three of the closest friends he had on earth. One day when Jesus and his disciples were out doing whatever they were doing, they got a message that said, "Lazarus is sick." Mary and Martha said, "Please come immediately and help us out. We know that if you will just speak to our brother, he can get up from that sick bed." Jesus didn't go. He lingered. He delayed.

Then He went and Lazarus was already dead. We know Martha was a good friend of Jesus because she was so honest with him. She came out to greet him and said, "Jesus, where were you? If you had been here, our brother wouldn't have died." She was honest. She was his friend. Mary came out and she was weeping. Everyone was weeping. Jesus knew good and well that in a moment He is going to say, "Lazarus, come forth," and he was going to bust out of that tomb. But Jesus looks at Martha and Mary who were crying, and you know what he did? According to John 11:35, Jesus wept.

Sometimes when you are crying and you think nobody knows and nobody cares, I think if you could glimpse into heaven, you would probably see another teardrop rolling down the cheek of Jesus. That is how much He cares for you. He knows your pain and He knows your sorrow. You may say, "Well, Lord, you're not here for me." Yeah, He is here, but sometimes He lets us hurt, because it says, "The wounds of a friend can be trusted." He may just be performing a little spiritual surgery on us, but He is always there when the timing is exactly right for Him. Isn't it good to have Jesus for a friend? I want us to finish by singing that great song:

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

OUTLINE

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1. Helps you when you are down
2. Provides warmth in a cold, cruel world
3. Fights to protect you

II. THE BEST FRIENDS ARE "FAMILY"

Key to dynamic relationships: Treat your guests like family and your family like guests

Give your friends the gifts of:

1. Kindness
2. Encouragement
3. Honesty

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III. LET JESUS BE YOUR BEST FRIEND

"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."
John 15:15

1. He knows you better than anyone else!
2. He has done more for you than anyone else!

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." *John 15:13*

3. He is always there when you need him!



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes