

## **Why Can't We Just Be Friends** by Jeff Strite

Proverbs 13:20-13:20

OPEN: Some time back in Germany a couple of women were driving down the autobahn when they realized they were low on gas. So they pulled over to a gas station and the driver filled her car up with gas. But then she discovered that she did not have enough money to pay the bill. So she asked her friend to stay behind as a human deposit while she went to withdraw some extra cash.

A police spokesman in the German town of Muenchberg said, "Unfortunately, the woman did not return."

Two hours after the 20-year-old driver left, the gas station called the police who then questioned the stranded "deposit" before releasing her. At last report, the Police were investigating the driver on suspicion of fraud.

Now a question: how many of you would like to have a friend like that, that would leave you at the gas station? Me neither.

You could say that this so-called friend harmed the person she left behind. This woman she left behind suffered the loss of time, the embarrassment of having to talk to the police, and the humiliation of knowing that her friend had abandoned her.

Proverbs tells us there are friends like that.

There are people who will hurt us.

Proverbs 13:20 tells us "... a companion of fools suffers harm."

Now, why did that girl stay behind as a "human deposit" at the gas station?

Why allow herself to be stranded like that?

Well, she trusted her friend. She didn't expect to be left there. She expected that her friend would return and take her where she wanted to go.

The Bible repeatedly tells us we need to be careful what friends we choose because some friends won't take us where we want to go. And we may end up being stranded someplace we don't want to be.

Having the wrong friends can be a painful experience.

In Numbers 33:55 God tells Israel that "...if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land (if the Israelites allowed them to stick around and become their friends), those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live."

In other words Israel needed to avoid "hanging out with" these people.

The very presence of these "former inhabitants" of the land... could "hurt" Israel

And the Bible tells us the same thing:

Who we hang out with can cause us great pain.

They can harm us, they can hurt our families... our future... our dreams.

As Proverbs 13:20 says "... a companion of fools suffers harm."

ILLUS: A Biblical case in point tells the story of a man named Lot – the nephew of Abraham. At one point in his life, the Bible tells us that:

"Lot ... saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, towards Zoar (and)... Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents NEAR Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD." (Genesis 13:10-13)

Where had Lot "pitched" his tents? Near Sodom.

Was Sodom a good place to live? No, it was a wicked city filled with sin.

So, why did Lot want to live there?

Because it was a beautiful neighborhood. All the bushes were trimmed and the houses were nicely painted, the gardens were beautiful. It seemed like a nice place to raise a family.

Sometime later we're told that Lot "... was living IN Sodom. (Genesis 14:12)

So, first he pitched his tents NEAR Sodom... and now he's moved into town.

Then we're told in a few chapters later that when angels from God came to warn Lot to flee the city to avoid the coming judgment: "... Lot was SITTING IN THE GATEWAY of the city." Genesis 19:1

Who would ordinarily sit in the gateways of cities?

The Elders of the city. Men of prominence in the community.

These were men who called upon by others in the city to settle disputes. It was kind of the courthouse of the area.

So, first Lot pitches his tents NEAR Sodom. Then he moves INTO the city.

Now, he's a prominent leader in Sodom.

A leader in a sin-filled and wicked city.

2 Peter 2:7 tells us that Lot was "... a righteous man..."

But he'd been drawn into a wicked city and after a while the immorality and unrighteousness of his companions began to warp his righteousness and damage his family.

– Genesis 19 tells us that when the men of the town realized Lot had male guests at his home (the angels) they surrounded his house and demanded Lot allow them to have homosexual relations with them. But Lot tries to protect his guests... so what do you think he does next?

That's right... he offers the crowd his daughters instead.

Seriously? This is the act of a "righteous man". I don't think so!

– Then, the angels convince Lot and his family to flee the city, but warn them not to turn around and look back. So what does Lot's wife do? She turns around to look back. And she gets turned into a pillar of salt. She had grown so attached to her home that she just couldn't help herself.

– And then, Lot and his daughters flee to the hills around the city. When the daughters realize their prospects for finding a husband have gone up in flames along with the burning city...what do they do? They get Lot drunk and have sexual relations with him and ultimately bear children by him.

This is one big tangled MESS.

But it happened because even a righteous man can be led astray. Lot did not choose his companions wisely and it hurt his entire family. Even a righteous man like Lot became warped by the mindset of Sodom.

2 Corinthians 6:14 warns us: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

What has light to do with darkness?

ILLUS: When I served at another congregation there was a man there I'll call "Harry" (not his real name). Harry was a deacon... and Harry was a cantankerous soul. Not really a godly man, and a man who should never been selected as a Deacon... but that's another story. The thing about me is that I like cantankerous people. I actually enjoy them. And I enjoy the challenge of trying to win them over. I had heard that Harry regularly had breakfast with several of his similarly minded friends, and I got to thinking I could go and "beard the lion in his den".

But when I shared my thoughts with one of the Elders (a man for whom I had a great deal of respect), that Elder stopped me with only one phrase: "Jeff. Don't do that. Don't go to their meeting."

That's all he said, but do you know what that Elder was saying? He was saying these were men I shouldn't be hanging around. They were companions that would ultimately hurt me if I got too close. So I didn't go.

ILLUS: Did you notice that word "fellowship" in II Corinthians 6?

"What FELLOWSHIP can light have with darkness?"

That word "fellowship" is fairly interesting.

It's actually made up to two words – "Fellow" and "Ship".

It brings an image to my mind of 2 "fellows" in one ship.

Now, if you have 2 fellows in one ship can they go to two different destinations?

No, of course they can't.

If you have two fellows in one ship, they've got to go in ONE direction.

If you're going to have "fellowship" with someone, you better be sure you want to go where they're going. Because – more than likely, if you're not careful – that's where you're going to end up.

(We displayed a graphic on the screen that showed a team of rowers rowing toward the

following words: "Immorality, Partying, Drunkenness, Drugs, Bitterness, Anger, Gossip, Mocking, Atheism")

This graph points out some of the things listed in Galatians 5

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft (pharmakia – drugs); hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Why would Paul write about the "works of the sinful nature" to these Christians living in Galatia? Because that's where some people row their "ships" toward. That's how they live their lives. And Christians need to be careful to avoid getting into ships headed in that direction.

There's a thin wall that stands between us and sin. Scripture says we "all sin and fall short of the glory of God." And we're also told the "heart is deceitful above all things." The Bible warns us that it doesn't take much to drag Christians out of the will of God and into the sphere of those who practice evil things. Sometimes all it takes are the wrong companions. Paul was warning the Christians in Galatia because some of them have fallen back into those life choices. The draw of the past and of the old friends and companions of the past are hurting them. And Paul was telling them their very salvation could be at stake if they didn't resist.

You don't want to be being a close companion with people who live like that. You don't want to be hanging out with certain kinds of people, because their life choices will have an effect on you.

On one hand, the first part of Proverbs 13:20 says "He who walks with the wise grows wise..."

If you're having FELLOW-SHIP with wise people, then you end up being like them.

ILLUS: Back when I was in Bible College I literally sucked every teacher I could find dry of the wisdom I found there. When I got acquainted with George Faull I tried to do the same thing. I sucked every piece of wisdom I could get ahold of. I once went to a week-long seminar – 3 hours a night – and I was so impressed by the things I learned there, I went back 10 or 12 times until I was sure I'd gotten as much as I could from what was taught.

If you want to be wise... hang out with wise people.  
Learn from them.

But, on the other hand, the Bible warns us that hanging around with other kinds of folks has a negative effect. Proverbs 22:24-25 for example says "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared."

If you hang around angry people... you risk learning and engrafting their anger into your

own lives. Who you hang out with, affects how you think and how you act.

And it's not just the Bible that tells us this:

ILLUS: Just last year, there was a study by Brown University, and the researchers said their research suggested that divorce is contagious. They found that the divorce of a friend or loved-one increases your chances of getting divorced, too.

The study conducted in Framingham, Mass., found that

- 75% of participants were more likely to get divorced if a friend was divorced,
- and 33% were more likely to end their marriage even if a friend of a friend got divorced.

Researchers called the phenomenon a 'social contagion' – the spread of information, attitudes, and behaviors through friends, family and social networks.

Psychotherapist Talia Filippelli does not necessarily agree that divorce itself is contagious, but she said that emotions associated with divorce can be. 'Emotions are contagious, and if you have somebody really unhappy in their relationship around you all the time, you may start to be critical of your own relationship.'

(CBS New York, April 30, 2014).

Repeatedly the Bible warns us against spending time with the wrong kinds of people.

As 1 Corinthians 15:33 says "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"

Now, that doesn't mean you can't have non-Christian friends. It just means – if they're going to be your friends – you've got to be careful they don't steer the boat. And that's a real danger, because most people are rowing the direction they are rowing because they're convinced that it is the right way to go. And if you get in their boat, they'll try to make sure you go where they go. After all, if they didn't think it was right, they wouldn't be rowing that way themselves.

You've got to be careful who you choose for friends because they will try to steer the boat.

ILLUS: I had a young girl tell me this last week that they had a friend who was a Christian that they were seeking advice from. The advice this friend gave them didn't sound quite right, so I asked "how do you know they're a Christian? Do they go to church?"

"No," the girl said. "But they read their Bible all the time. They just don't think they have to go to church to be a Christian." Essentially this friend didn't go to church because they didn't think it was all that important.

Now, what that friend said was partly true.

You don't have to go to church to be a Christian.

But you can't be as GOOD a Christian if you don't go to church.

And if somebody tells me they are a Christian and they love Jesus, but they don't want to go to church, automatically red flags go up. Ephesians 5:25 says "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Did you catch that? Christ loved the church.

He loved the church so much He gave Himself up for her.

And this guy wants to tell me they love Jesus... but he doesn't love His Church.

I don't think so.

This guy is either deceived... or he's trying to deceive me.

Either way, I don't want this man trying to steer my boat.

IF I'm going to have CLOSE friends;

IF I'm going to have friends I spend MOST OF MY TIME with;

IF I'm going to have friends who I'm going to allow to shape and mold who I am;

Then I want friends who will steer my boat toward Jesus and the things that HE loves.

Things like:

- o The church

- o Purity in my life

- o Dedication to God in my family

- o Living as a man/woman of God

- o Standing up for Biblical righteousness

Those are the kinds of friends I want.

Because if I associate too closely with the people who don't share those values then I'll end up going places I don't really want to go and being left in places I don't want to stay.

Proverbs 12:26 tells us – we have to be careful about who we choose for friends.

“A righteous man is cautious in friendship...”

In other words... if you live your life right and you want to please God, you have to be careful about who you choose as friends.

As I was thinking on this though, I realized that - a lot of times – we don't “choose” our friends. Friends are often people that we kind of “fall in” with. We don't so much choose them as we end up spending time with them at common activities. We might bowl with them, attend the same activities together, take our kids or grand-kids to the same activities their kids go to.

We just kind of bump into them in life... and we find we like them and want to spend time with them.

And there's nothing technically wrong with that.

That's how you increase your sphere of influence. That's how you meet people and how you begin to find folks you can introduce to your really big friend – Jesus.

Then I got to thinking about the kind of people Jesus spent HIS time with.

Now, Jesus spent a lot of His time with His 12 closest friends – His disciples.

But He also spent time with people that I just told you you shouldn't spend time with.

What kind of people were those?

Sinners!

Tax Collectors and Prostitutes and general losers in life.

But Jesus never just happened to “fall into” those relationships.

Those people became Jesus' acquaintances and ultimately became his friends... but they

never steered the boat. In fact, there were plenty of times Jesus told these new acquaintances things they didn't want to hear.

For example, there was the crippled man Jesus healed in John chapter 5. Some folks weren't happy that Jesus had healed this man on the Sabbath, but the healed man stood up for Jesus. He didn't back down when they criticized what Jesus had done.

But when Jesus met him later in the day... THESE were Jesus' words to him: "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." John 5:14

This man had stood up for Jesus. He literally had become Jesus' friend, but Jesus says to him: Quit doing what you were doing. Stop sinning. Because - if you don't - things could get worse.

Now, if you have a friend who is smoking, do you think you should tell him to stop smoking? Of course you would, you don't want him to die. He's your friend. And, if you have a friend who's doing drugs, do you suppose you should tell him to stop doing drugs? Of course you do, he's your friend. If you have a friend who's abusing alcohol do you suppose you should tell him to stop drinking like that? Of course you would - he's your friend.

But, now, here's where it can get ticklish.

There are a lot of Christians who have no trouble telling people to live righteous lives. Because for many Christians, the royal law of the kingdom is that people should live righteous lives. But it's not.

Don't get me wrong, we serve a righteous God who calls us to live righteous lives... but that is NOT the royal law of the kingdom. Do you know what the royal law of the kingdom is? "...the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" James 2:8

My point is, if you believe your main job is to call people to righteousness, you can risk becoming like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Those guys called people to righteousness too...but they didn't love the people they confronted. If you don't love people, your call to righteousness will sound hollow and self-righteous, and the folks you're trying to influence will not be likely to change.

Jesus called us to be HIS friends. And part of being HIS friends was that we should learn to love as He loved.

"My command is this: LOVE each other as I have loved you. You are my FRIENDS if you do what I command... 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.... This is my command: LOVE each other." John

15:12, 14, 17

Love is the key thing that should drive us.

If we tell people what they need to hear - and we tell them in love - then we have followed Jesus' example. We've shown them that we are His friends. We've shown Him that we understand His message. We've shown we know how to steer the boat HIS way.

CLOSE: I once read the story about former missionary to Africa named Milton Cunningham. He told of the time he was on a flight from Atlanta to Dallas and he sat next to a little girl with Down's syndrome.

As you may know, such children know few barriers. They are open and honest and ask innocent questions as they seek to make friends with you. So, as soon as Cunningham settled in for his flight the girl asked, in the purity of her innocence, "Mister, did you brush your teeth this morning?"

A little awkwardly, Milton replied, "Well, yes, I brushed my teeth this morning."

"Good, 'cause that's what you're supposed to do," the girl responded.

Her next question was, "Mister, do you smoke?" When he said no, the little girl answered "Good, 'cause smoking will make you die."

The third question was even easier to answer. The young girl asked, "Mister, do you love Jesus?"

Milton answered with confidence, "Well, yes, I do love Jesus."

"Good, 'cause we're all supposed to love Jesus," she replied.

Just then, another man settled into the seat beside Milton. Immediately, the girl urged Milton to ask the new fellow if he had brushed his teeth. Milton wasn't about to disturb the stranger, but the girl wouldn't leave him alone.

Finally, he gave in. He said, "Mister, I don't mean to bother you, but my friend here wants me to ask you if you brushed your teeth this morning."

When the man noticed the girl, he realized that her question was innocent enough and he answered that yes, he had brushed his teeth that morning.

With a sinking feeling, Milton realized where this was going.

Next the girl urged him to ask the stranger if he smoked. Milton and the man went through the second question. And sure enough, the girl wanted Milton to ask the third question: Did this man love Jesus?

Milton protested that the question was too personal. He just wouldn't be comfortable asking it.

Remember, Milton Cunningham was a missionary. But something in him made him uncomfortable about pursuing a spiritual conversation with a fellow passenger.

But the young girl persisted, and so Milton said, "Now she wants to know if you love Jesus." At this, the man's face darkened. He began to talk about his desire to know God. He was at a point in his life he was searching for God, for meaning, for purpose in life. But he didn't know where to turn.

So Milton Cunningham finally took advantage of the opportunity God gave him through an innocent little girl to explain to the man the Gospel of Jesus Christ.



My point is this: a little girl with Down's Syndrome – who steered the boat as she asked innocent questions of the missionary... and then wanted them asked of a stranger who was lost in the emptiness of his life – this little girl understood what it was to tell people what they needed to hear. She steered the boat so that a man who lacked Christ, found Him.