

October 12, 2025

“Being a True Friend”

Proverbs 27:17

### **Intro:**

As I am sure you will recall, I read through the book of Isaiah as part of my summer reading challenge and over the last few Sundays, we have been looking at a few of the passages that had grabbed my attention as I was reading. Well, I also read through Proverbs, and so for the next few weeks we'll take a look at some of the passages that grabbed my attention from that book as well.

Sometimes when you do an exercise like we had over the summer, or if you simply just continue a good habit of reading through the Bible on a regular basis, you come across passages that either you have never read before or that have never stood out to you, and that is exciting as you learn something new about God and your faith. Sometimes, however, it is not the new that catches your eye, but the familiar passage that once again jumps out and reminds you of a truth that you have known and cherished for much of your life of faith.

It is one of those latter passages that we are looking at this morning. Proverbs 27:17. It is a familiar proverb and is often quoted and offered as a challenge to believers, especially within the context of men's ministries, although it certainly is not restricted to applying to only men.

When I was doing my internship in Outlook in the late 90's, I was given the task of preaching on this passage, and while I am pretty sure it was not the best sermon that anyone has ever heard, the lessons and application that I gained from studying it have stayed with me over the years. I hope this morning that some of those same lessons will also find a good hold in your own lives of faith.

### **The Passage:**

As with most of the proverbs, we are dealing mostly with just one verse, but it is, like those other proverbs, able to stand alone and offer much wisdom.

“As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.”

You might be familiar with the translation: “so one man sharpens another.” The inclusiveness of the language has changed between translations, but the meaning and intention of the proverb has not.

This is not a difficult proverb to understand. It is the application and how we live that out with one another that needs more thought and attention.

The image, of course, is quite practical and even though the proverb was written in the ancient time when the bronze age of weaponry and tools was giving way to a greater use of iron, it still connects well to what we understand about sharpening iron. We could upgrade the language to “steel” if you like, without changing anything important.

The problem for the ancient smith was in getting a sword or knife to have a sharp enough edge to be effective as either a weapon or a tool. The process of making the blade would have left it somewhat dull and there would have been a lot of little imperfections and rough patches along the length of the blade. Those imperfections would have hindered the effective cutting power of the blade. You might be thinking that they probably used a whetstone or a grinding wheel to sharpen the blade – and they likely did use items like that. But the ancients also discovered that iron was slightly more pliable than bronze and as such iron could be used to sharpen itself. There is archeological evidence that they had fashioned iron files and the like to use sharpen their blades.

We employ very similar methods in keeping our kitchen knives sharp. As an example, we pull out that sharpening rod and run our knife up and down it to keep the edge nice and clean and mostly sharp. Of course, taking your knife to a proper knife sharpener will get you better results. But we all do our best, don't we?

And really, in terms of the application of this proverb, we want it to be thought that we are doing our best. Right? We want to be people who are good at sharpening others. It sounds like a very good churchy and Christian thing to do. Fits right in with the mandate to make disciples of everyone. But I am getting ahead of things.

Back to the iron. Most times when we think about this passage, we are given the image of a sword rather than a simple kitchen knife. Was that the specific image that Solomon had in mind when he penned this proverb? Maybe, but he could have just said, “As a sword sharpens a sword...” But he didn’t, and the reason is that a sword doesn’t always sharpen another sword. In fact, the opposite is usually the case. When people employ swords, it is with the intention of trying to do as much bodily harm as possible. There is wild and hard hacking and slashing, and in the case of rapiers and the like forceful stabs that are intended to pierce through the defenses and into the other person’s heart.

At the end of a battle, a soldier’s sword would certainly not be sharp, or at least not as sharp as when the battle started. It would be dented and dulled, probably with little nicks of missing metal all along the edge of the blade. This is only to be expected – the sword would have been hammered against a metal (or metal rimmed) shield, or against the thick armour of the opponent, or it would have been blocked by another sword. In each of those cases, the other iron was not sharpening or being sharpened in any way.

But, if you take the aggressive fight out of the equation, two swords could have been used to sharpen each other – if they were angled just right and the correct amount of time and pressure was applied. In this manner, iron sharpening iron would have been a careful, precise, and possibly slow process.

### **Application:**

This is where our application comes into play.

First, the image in this proverb does not suggest that there needs to be an equal relationship for sharpening to happen. Meaning, both people don’t have to be

swords. Maybe one person is the sword that is battered, dull and notched, while the other person is the stable, more mature image of a file or metal grinding stone that does the sharpening. This would be a fitting image of an older Christian mentoring a younger, newer Christian. But that is too impersonal. This is a personal proverb. It is a relationship between friends. It is a two-way street and so very likely, the intention of the proverb is that two swords can be used to sharpen each other.

From here we move to the second point. Sharpening has to be intentional, and it has to be applied in the proper way or it will do more damage than it repairs. When we seek to help bring out the best in others, especially in our close relationships, we need to take care. While we may have the privilege of speaking into another person's life, we need to do so carefully and with love. Two swords will only sharpen each other if they are applied at the correct angle to each other and the proper pressure, speed, and direction is used.

This then leads us to the third aspect of this proverb, which is that even the truth, if spoken without thinking about how it will affect the other person, can be harmful. Think of it as having a sword fight. Sometimes when we seek to help others with our advice, the other person can feel as though they are being hammered by that sword.

### **Conclusion:**

So how do we sharpen one another? First there needs to be a relationship where such mutually beneficial encouragement can be given and received. We need to be humble in our offering, and humble in our receiving. How we receive advice is just as important as how we give it. It doesn't matter if one of the swords is placed at the proper angle, if the other sword is not. Are we people who can receive advice from those we are giving advice to? If you do not appreciate constructive criticism, then perhaps you should be careful about giving it. Be gentle in your approach. Don't just hammer someone over the head with the truth. Take the time to come alongside, to speak the words with love and care, and then to stay alongside and help the person to use them to grow and change.

If you are offering encouragement to change a behaviour, then you should also be open to hearing about behaviour that you need to change. If you are encouraging someone to engage in an activity, you should be willing and ready to participate in that activity with your friend.

Being iron that sharpens iron is about being a true friend to another person. When true, honest, and caring friendship is at the foundation of every word and encouragement, then even those words and encouragements that sting at first will be received well because of who it is that has spoken them.

Proverbs 27:6: "Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy."

Proverbs 27:9: "The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense."

Let's Pray.