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Back to School: The Company You Keep Matters

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TEXT: Proverbs 1:1-7 (ESV)

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

A farmer troubled by a flock of crows in his cornfield loaded his shotgun one day and crawled unseen along the fence row, determined to get a shot at those crows. Now, the farmer had a very sociable parrot who made friends with everybody. Seeing the flock of crows, the parrot flew over and joined them, just being sociable, you know? The farmer saw the crows but didn't see the parrot. He took careful aim and bang. The farmer crawled over the fence to pick up the fallen crows, and lo and behold, there was his parrot, badly ruffled with a broken wing but still alive. Tenderly, the farmer carried the parrot home, where his children met him at the door and, seeing that their pet was injured, tearfully asked, "What happened, Dad?" Before he could answer, the parrot spoke up, "Bad company."

Oh, our proverb for today is about the company one keeps—friends, people with whom you associate. It's an important matter in life. I have always valued my friendships. As you know, friends can be such a wonderful blessing in our lives—people we can trust, talk to openly, enjoy life experiences with, who encourage and support us, challenge us, share wisdom, hold us accountable, and even correct us when needed. I've also had many valuable associations over the years, being a member of a few bands, baseball teams, and some jobs, running a business, and serving on church staffs, and being a church leader in two congregations.

All of these associations have had an influence on me, sometimes in good ways and other times not so good. Well, here's a truth about friends and our associations: they have the power to influence the direction and quality of your life. And where does such power come from? It quite simply comes from the fact that we human beings crave acceptance. When someone accepts me and I want them to keep on accepting me, I become more vulnerable to their influence and their ways. The company you keep, you see, matters. Sometimes these relationships can be a positive blessing in our lives. Some persons can bring out the best in us, can't they? There's probably a list of people that you can think of. They make us soar like eagles and help us to live lives of integrity, accomplishing good things, and being smarter, sharp thinkers. But there are also other relationships that have a more negative impact on our lives. These people's attitudes and values and foolish ways can rub off on me and cause me to cross over boundaries and break with values that I once held dear. Or they might cause me to suffer from the fallout of their actions. And they can lead me astray through the influence of such people. I can find myself involved in things that are quite harmful to myself and even others. For instance, when I was seven years old, it was the first time I smoked a cigarette.

It was with friends out behind their barn who had stolen a pack of Kent cigarettes from their dad's carton. I wanted to be one of the guys, so I took one of the cigarettes and tried it. And it did nothing but leave me feeling sick and terribly guilty. I confessed it the next morning to my folks just to get it off my chest. It was with a friend of questionable character who had taken a bottle of Wild Turkey liquor from his parents' liquor cabinet that I took my first drink and many more that followed that evening, making me very sick and very dangerous as I drove my dad's jeep, running with agnostic and atheistic friends that caused me to walk away, stray from my faith for a couple of years. That's why parents have always been concerned about what kind of crowd you're running with and the company you keep when you're a kid. They know the principle that friends have the power to influence the direction and quality of your life. They can be a blessing or bane, a cause of righteousness or ruin.

What I've been describing here actually reflects a biblical principle, an observation that was made long ago and is found in Proverbs 13, verse 20. Remember, the proverbs are for covenant people who are in a relationship with God, who have the fear of the Lord. And keep in mind that proverbs are not promises. They're not commandments, but they are observations of how things are in the world. They're a flash of insight into the

repeatable situations of life on this earth. They serve as miniature case studies, so to speak. And here is today's case study: "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." Meaning? Because regular companions seem to inevitably influence you, then who you connect yourself to really matters. The company you keep is important, for whoever walks with the wise can become wise themselves. Now, who are the wise? Well, according to scripture, they are those who have the fear of the Lord. They walk in God's ways. They are righteous, and they have respect for God's authority over them. They aim to do the right thing. They ask the right questions, like, "What would Jesus do here?" Hanging out with them can have a positive impact upon you.

I'm reminded of a young woman I know from church. She had a terrible upbringing as a child, raised by fools—immoral parents who dealt drugs, broke lots of laws, and didn't do much to help their kids. When I first met her, she was nothing like them. Her sister and brother had wound up in prison, but she was on a very positive trajectory. I asked her to tell me what happened, and here's what happened to that kid with a rough start and having the odds stacked against her.

She found her way or was led by God, I believe, into a couple of friendships with peers who came from Christian homes whose lives rubbed off on her. Their families were a blessing in her life. She learned about God and His love shown in Christ Jesus, and about the difference between right and wrong and how family life really could be. And it changed the trajectory of her life. "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise" rang true for her. Notice the contrasting statement in this proverb that follows the antithesis, which serves as a warning: "But the companion of fools will suffer harm." Running around with fools will negatively impact you, it seems. You will even suffer some harm—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. So first, we need to ask, what are the characteristics of a fool that we're not supposed to be companions with?

Well, there are three words in Scripture for "fool" that all speak about it in terms of a lack of moral orientation and a lack of intellectual ability. For instance, in Psalm 14, we're told, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt and do abominable deeds. There is none who does good." Jesus also talked about fools in the New Testament when he said, "Everyone who hears my words and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand, and the rains fell."

The floods came, the winds blew, and beat against that house, and it fell. And great was the fall of it. According to other proverbs in the Book of Proverbs, fools are those who might know the difference between right and wrong, but they don't care, and you can't tell them anything. They never seem to learn their lesson. Their mouths get them into trouble constantly. They think they know what makes life work, and they're gullible, stubborn, irresponsible, and dangerous. Listen to a few of Solomon's Proverbs that describe fools:

Proverbs 14:16: "One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless."

Proverbs 18:2: "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinions."

Proverbs 18:6: "A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating."

Proverbs 18:7: "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul."

Proverbs 26:11: "Like a dog who returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly."

Proverbs 29:11: "A fool gives vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back."

We see there are some very devastating consequences that fools suffer, and you could suffer as well if you are a companion, as the proverb says that we're studying, is warning us: the companions of fools will suffer harm.

Douglas O'Donnell, in his book "The Beginning and End of Wisdom," writes this: I imagine he says you're familiar with the phrase "ship of fools." It was a common medieval motif used in literature and art, especially religious satire. One such satire is Hieronymus Bosch's famous oil painting by the same name, "Ship of Fools," which hangs in the Louvre in Paris. This marvelous work, which is filled with symbolism, shows ten people aboard a small vessel and two overboard swimming around it. It is a ship without a captain, and everyone on board is busy drinking and feasting and flirting and singing. They're too busy to know where on earth the waves are pushing them. They are fools because they're enjoying all the sensual pleasures of this world without knowing where it's leading. And atop the mast of the vessel hangs a bunch of dangling carrots, and a man is climbing up to reach them. Yet above the carrots, we find a small but significant detail: a human skull. The 13th head in the painting, unlucky in every unimaginable way. The idea is here that these 12 fools who think all is perfect are sailing right into their doom. The only pilot on board, the only figure leading the way is death. So if you're hanging around and spending a lot of time with an unhealthy crowd, a ship of fools, you could get yourself hurt down the road.

You just might get hurt. You can suffer the consequences of someone else's poor or immoral decisions and actions. You can get the fallout. Being with them, walking alongside them down their path and heeding their advice, you could suffer things like a ruined reputation, a record with the law, physical harm from an accident or a fight, a painful marriage or an unplanned pregnancy, or financial harm, and of course, spiritual harm, as God becomes less and less in your life. This is a caution for us as God's people. It's a heads-up. If the face of a friend or associate or acquaintance matches what Scripture has described as a fool, be careful. Back off, step away. Create some margin between yourself and that person. You're living in a danger zone. Jump from that ship. On my car dashboard, there are several warning lights, and every once in a while, one of them will light up, warning me that something bad is about to happen. If I ignore it and don't do something to correct it, well, here are some warning lights for you to consider in your relationships when you find your conscience a little uneasy and you realize this person isn't moving in the same direction I want my life to be going. They're not doing something right here. Don't ignore that. You'd better jump ship. Or when someone you've trusted in the past tells you, "I feel like I don't know you anymore."

Since you've gotten involved with this crowd, this isn't like you. Don't ignore that. You need to jump ship when what has never been a temptation before suddenly becomes a live option that you're considering because of your peers. Don't ignore that. Perhaps you'd better jump ship when you say to yourself, "I'll come along, but I won't participate because I know this is stupid and wrong." Don't ignore that you're in dangerous territory and you'd better jump ship. And when you hope the people you care about don't find out where you've been and who you've been hanging out with and what you've been doing with them, don't ignore that. You probably need to jump ship.

But some people reason, "That doesn't sound very loving or compassionate or Jesus-like. I care about this person." And didn't Jesus keep company with sinful types who ignored God? Yes, He did. But He was not seeking their acceptance or their friendship. He was offering His friendship. He wasn't dependent on their acceptance. He was seeking their salvation. His goodness attracted them, and His main intent was to bring them into the Kingdom of God, into the wisdom of God. He called them to repentance and to follow Him. So often, the most loving thing you can do for the fool in your life is to speak up when they're headed in the wrong direction. And if they won't listen, then

step away. So when they crash, and they will, you will be safe from harm and healthy enough to step in and help them find the right path, God's path.

The point this proverb is making is simply this: It's important for you, as one of God's new Covenant people who have the fear of the Lord, to be discerning about the company you keep. So here's a personal question for you: What kind of company are you keeping these days? Are you walking with the wise or sailing with the fools, soaring with the eagles or running with the turkeys? You've probably heard this: It's hard to soar like an eagle when you're running with turkeys. If it's the latter, then, according to this proverb, it would be wise to find some new people with which to keep company, to lean upon. Jump off the ship of fools. I know it can be awkward and painful because you don't like the thought of losing friends. Friends are valuable and sometimes hard to come by. Also, some people don't want to let you go. They make it hard for you. They'll come after you and refuse to let you go. They might get angry and put you down and make fun of you if you won't go with them. And then there's Satan who is encouraging you to get on and stay on the ship of fools, questioning you seductively, whispering in your ear: "Go ahead. Nobody's going to get hurt. Have a little fun. You deserve this. Don't be so judgmental."

But if you are considering jumping ship, or if you are one who's looking for wise friends and associates in your life, then keep this in mind: If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are never on your own. He's with you always as a faithful friend. He's the wisest and best friend you will ever have. For He went to the cross to make you His own. And He wants what's best for you. Lean heavily into Him for wisdom on this matter of relationships. And if you are also empowered by His Holy Spirit, which you are if you trust in Christ, you have a counselor who gives wisdom and power and help as you strive to do the Word. He'll lead you. And always remember and trust that God, your Heavenly Father, is faithful, and He preserves, protects, and provides for you. So turn to Him constantly in prayer and ask Him to help you be discerning in your relationships and to provide you with opportunities to keep company with wise, God-fearing, righteous people. For whoever walks with the wise becomes wise. Let's pray.

Almighty, wise, and loving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, guide us and help us to be discerning in our choice of friends and associates so that we might live wisely and righteously to the honor and glory of Your holy name. Amen.