

## Choosing Your Companions

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Guess what! I know a way to figure out what's going to happen to you in the future. Even if I've never met you and don't know much of anything about you, I can tell you a reliable way to predict your own future.

Am I a guru with special powers? Am I a fortuneteller with a crystal ball? Do I study horoscopes? No, but I can still tell you how to predict your future. Here's all you need to do. Look at who your friends are and what they are like, and you can see what's going to become of you. I mean it: to know what your future holds, forget gurus, crystals, fortune cookies, and horoscopes, and just take a hard look at the companions you hang around with.

Am I exaggerating the power of the friendship factor? No, I'm telling the truth. If you have the right friends, it will make you a better person and give you a brighter future. If you have the wrong companions, it will ruin your character and wreck your life. That's not just a theory of mine; it's what God says. The Bible says in Proverbs 13:20, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm."

I remember talking with a man who was living proof of this. In his younger days, he was an athlete. He spent a lot of time with buddies who used foul language and laughed at Christian people and liked to drink and use drugs and get girls into bed whenever possible. With friends like that, who needs enemies?

Within a few years, this man was stealing to support his drug habit. He got a girl pregnant and paid for her to get an abortion, killing the only child he ever fathered. Once, when he wasn't sober, he lost one of his legs in an accident. Now, instead of being an athlete, he limps around on an artificial limb. He's proof that "a companion of fools suffers harm."

But, I'm happy to say, he's also proof that "he who walks with the wise grows wise." A number of years ago, when his life was in ruins, he finally realized that something had to change. So instead of hanging around with his drinking and drugging friends, he started spending time at Alcoholics Anonymous with people who encourage each other to stay sober. The A.A. people helped him to grow wiser and to stay sober.

Staying sober is important, of course, but there's more to life than just avoiding alcohol and drugs. This man still felt a hole in his soul, so he went on a spiritual search. He tried crystals. He went to New Age seminars. He hung around with cult members who talked a lot about "spirituality." But that just made him feel more depressed and empty. Then he met some followers of Jesus. He started going to church and spending time with Christian people. His heart began to change. Before long he repented of his old ways and put his faith in Jesus. When he spoke to me, he wept with sorrow about his past, but he also wept with joy over the change Jesus made in his life and how his pastor and Christian friends helped him find a new life.

Let me say again: if you want to know your future, take a look at your friends. If your friends are truly wise, your future is bright. But if your friends are fools, your future is bleak. "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm." So if you want to change your future, then I have just three short words for you: FIND NEW FRIENDS!

If you want to break free of an addiction to alcohol, it's not going to happen if you keep hanging around with the same old drinking buddies. *Find new friends*, people who are committed to staying sober. Such people are wise in how to deal with addiction, and they can help you to become wise.

If you keep getting into trouble with the law and you want to clean up your act, it's not going to happen if you keep hanging around with the same old gang of troublemakers. *Find new friends*, people who stay out of trouble and work hard and treat other people with love and respect.

If you struggle with doubts and find it hard to trust in God, if you feel far from Jesus and you want to get close to him, it's not going to happen if you keep hanging around with people who laugh at God or who think they're too smart and sophisticated for God. *Find new friends*, people who love the Lord Jesus and live according to the Bible.

### **The Right Friends**

Let me just ask: Who are your friends right now? With whom do you spend most of your time? Whose ideas do you take seriously? Whom are you eager to please? Whom are you afraid to displease? Are your companions wise people who are making you wiser, or are they fools who are leading you to harm? Have you been choosing your companions carefully, or have you been drawn into the wrong crowd?

Joining the wrong crowd doesn't usually happen all at once. You get drawn in, a little at a time. The Bible talks about first "walking" with the wrong crowd and hanging out a bit, then "standing" with them and spending more time, and then "sitting" and settling down in their company.

If you want to have a bright future and enjoy God's blessing, you'll avoid that whole sequence and refuse at every stage to mingle with bad company. Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2). In other words, happiness comes when you avoid bad friendships and instead see God as your closest companion and spend your time focused on him and his will.

Friends influence the choices we make. I remember going on a school trip when I was in my early teens. We were scheduled to visit a factory and a museum and some other important places, but our schedule also included a trip to the mall. My parents gave me a little money to spend, and I proceeded to invest that money very carefully. My first purchase was a squirt gun, because a squirt gun is essential for success in life—and because all of my friends bought one. My second purchase was an engineer's cap, because an engineer's cap is an exceptionally useful and stylish piece of headwear—and because all of my friends bought one. My third purchase was a copy of *MAD* magazine, because *MAD* magazine was an extraordinary literary journal—and because all of my friends bought a copy.

We all tend to act like our friends, don't we? That's not such a big deal when all it means is buying a squirt gun or a cap or overpriced athletic shoes with a swoosh or a swirl. But in the big picture, our tendency to be like our friends is a big deal. It can do us great good, or else it can do us huge harm. "He who walks with the wise grows wise," says the Bible, "but a companion of fools suffers harm."

What is it about friendship that has such a powerful impact on us? Well, the need for companionship is built into us. God designed each of us for relationships, for a relationship with him and for relationships with other people. God didn't design you to be a loner. You need to be with others. You need their company. You need their encouragement. You need companions.

The question is, what sort of companions do you have? If you're a child, are your closest companions your parents who encourage you to be the best person you can be, or a crowd of other kids who just want you to do whatever they do? If you're a teenager, do you still have

companionship with your parents and spend time with them? And what about companions your own age—are your friends people who study hard and stay out of trouble, or do they get drunk every weekend? Are they members of a street gang or are they Christians? Do they introduce you to sex and drugs or to Bible reading and prayer? If you're an adult, do your friends focus on big houses and lavish vacations, or are they God-centered people with wise priorities?

Companionship is so important that if you get lonely enough, you may be tempted to hook up with the first people who show any interest in you. But that's a mistake. You're better off waiting for the right friend to come along than having a whole crowd of the wrong friends. Proverbs 12:26 says, "A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray" (Proverbs 12:26). Proverbs 18:24 says, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24).

Don't be in too big a hurry to make friends. The only thing worse than having no friends is having bad friends. Don't be so anxious for companionship that you'll do anything to fit in with the first people who act friendly to you. Phony friends are easy to find; a true friend is much more rare. As the Bible puts it, "Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?" (Proverbs 20:6) So choose companions cautiously. Find friends who are faithful: faithful to Jesus Christ and faithful to other people. Entrust yourself only to friends whom you want to be like, because that's what's likely to happen.

### **Romantic Companions**

Your friends affect you and shape your future. This is true of all companionship, and it's especially true of romantic companionship. If you cultivate romance with a wise person, you will grow wise. If you pursue romance with a fool, you will suffer harm. You may be so eager for a companion of the opposite sex that you'll go with the first person who shows an interest in you. But it's better to be single and wish you were attached than to be attached and wish you were single. The Bible says, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

You may be tempted just to go ahead with a relationship even if you know it's wrong. You hang on to the wrong person and tell yourself you can change him into the right person. But that often leads to crazy situations. For example, a girl dates a non-Christian boy and nags him to go to church with her. At last he agrees. He goes to church to keep her happy—and then after church they go to his place and go to bed together. Now, is that girl leading her boyfriend to Christ? No, if she's teaching him anything, she's teaching him hypocrisy. She's also showing that she's rather please him than please God.

Romantic companionship becomes even more important when it reaches the point of marriage. Marry a wise person and you will grow wise; marry a fool and you will suffer harm. I've spoken with a heartbreaking number of people who learned the ways of God as children but whose lives have been ruined by marrying the wrong person. Some have completely fallen away from the church and from God, while others have held on to their faith but have ended up so at odds with their faithless partner that both have become miserable.

Some of these people knew already before the marriage that it was wrong. In fact, some even prayed and told God that they were going to go ahead with the marriage in spite of knowing God was against it. They told God they needed this person, and they asked God to bless them anyway and not to allow this disobedient marriage to lead to any troubles they couldn't bear.

How do you think God answers a prayer like that? Well, if the shattered, weeping people I speak with are any indication, I'd suggest that you not count on God to make disobedience a

pleasant experience for you. “A companion of fools suffers harm”—nowhere is that more true than when you knowingly decide to marry some who is wrong for you.

### **Campus Companions**

Let’s get back to the wider subject of choosing friends in general. Perhaps you are attending a college or university. This may be the first time in your life that you’re completely free from your parents and from the community where you grew up. You’re developing a whole new set of relationships that will have a profound impact on you. Your books and lectures have some impact on you, but the biggest impact may come from people at the university whom you meet and admire and want to be like.

The biggest changes in your mind and soul are often more caught than taught. If you come from a non-Christian background and you haven’t accepted Jesus as your Savior and Lord, your experience at university might change you for the better. You might discover that your new roommate is a Christian. You might meet a Christian professor. Someone might invite you to a group organized by Campus Crusade for Christ or InterVarsity Christian Fellowship or some other fellowship of Christian students. Christians you meet at university may draw you into a way of believing and behaving that transforms your life.

On the other hand, a university experience can also have the opposite effect. More than one person has gone off to university thinking he or she was a Christian, only to end up rejecting faith in Jesus. Why? Usually not because of any evidence or logical proofs, but because of companions.

You may be drawn to professors and fellow students who seem smart and self-assured. When you hear them talk as though the Bible is only for uneducated, simple-minded types, you might feel eager to fit in with these people who sound so knowledgeable. Even if they don’t actually prove anything against Christianity, you catch the virus of unbelief from being too close to them.

Then again, you may catch a deadly case of unbelief, not from friends who seem smart, but from companions who simply devote themselves to doing whatever feels good. A hard-drinking, sex-crazy crowd can swallow up your beliefs like quicksand. Once you’re up to your eyeballs in sin, you can’t really afford to believe that Jesus is alive or that he’s coming again to judge the world. The Bible says, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

### **Christ’s Companions**

Whether you’re on a campus or anywhere else, spend time with the right people, with faithful, Christian people. Do that, and you may come to know the risen Lord Jesus for yourself. In fact, that’s the most important part of choosing your friends: discovering that Jesus is your friend, and having a friendship with him that grows stronger and deeper all the time.

How important is companionship? Well, during Jesus’ time on earth, he didn’t just preach great truths. He called people to follow him and spend time with him, to be his companions and friends. The night before Jesus was crucified, he told these people, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command... I have called you friends, for everything I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:13-15).

Jesus is the ultimate friend. Jesus lived with his friends, died for his friends, and rose again to give his friends eternal life. Before Jesus returned to heaven, he told his friends to continue what he had started: a fellowship of people who trust in God, who rely on Jesus as their Savior, who

together celebrate the Lord and focus on his truth, who encourage each other to obey Jesus' commands, and who keep inviting others into this fellowship of Christ. This fellowship of Jesus' friends has lasted for 2,000 years now. It's called the church.

Getting involved in the church isn't an option; it's a necessity. If you want to choose the right friends, then choose to be a friend of Jesus, and choose other people who are friends of Jesus. A prayer in the Bible says, "I am a friend to all who fear you [Lord], to all who follow your precepts" (Psalm 119:63). If you want to get close to God, then get close to the friends of God, the people of his church. The Bible says in Hebrews, "Let us draw near to God" and immediately adds, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward 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" (Hebrews 10:25).

Don't misunderstand. Hanging out with Christian friends doesn't automatically make you a Christian—the Lord must open your heart to him personally. But where does God most often prepare hearts to be open to him? In his church. And whom does he use to draw people to himself? He uses Christian companions, friends and relatives. Companionship—ties to Christian people and the fellowship of the church—this is vital to companionship with Christ.

Now, back to where we started: what does your future hold? The answer depends on your choice of friends. "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm." Why be a companion of fools and hurt yourself when you can make friends with the wise? And don't tell me you can't find any friends like that. In even the most sinful city, in even the rottenest neighborhood, you can find a church of Jesus. On even the most anti-Christian campus, in even the grimmest prison, you can find wise people who have discovered God's wisdom in Jesus Christ. Ask God to help you find such people. Walk with the wise, and grow wise.

Let the friendship factor help you rather than harm you. When you find a faithful church or Bible study fellowship or prayer group or a small group of Christians, you'll find out how much true friends can help you. The Bible says, "The pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel" (Proverbs 27:9). True friends talk with you about what really matters and give you good food for thought. If they see you doing things that are wrong or harmful, they can hold you accountable and point out problems that you might not have noticed yourself and apply positive peer pressure. As the Bible puts it, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted" (Proverbs 27:6). The right friends love you enough to tell the truth even when it hurts. And when you do fall down, says the Bible, your friend is there to help you up (Ecclesiastes 4:10). Christian companions make each other better, sharper people, whether it's spouse to spouse or friend to friend. Scripture says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

In all of this, always remember: the friend above all friends is Jesus himself. He is truly the "friend who sticks closer than a brother." Trust in him. Ask him to live in you. Spend time with him every day. Pray to him every day. Listen to him every day by reading the Bible. Count on the Lord to teach you and counsel you. Count on him to encourage you. Count on him to correct you. Count on him to forgive you and lift you up. Count on him to sharpen you and make you a useful tool in God's hand. Be Christ's companion. Then you will indeed be walking with the wise, for you will be walking with Wisdom himself.