Fostering Faith-Shaping Friendships

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How to use this resource for a group study

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.

1. Make enough copies of the Leader’s Guides for everyone in the group.

2. Don’t feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.

3. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.

4. When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.

5. Begin and end the session in prayer.
From the beginning God said that it’s not good for a man to be alone, and he wasn’t just talking about marriage. “Two are better than one,” the Bible tells us. “If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up” (Eccl. 4:9–10). Jesus had a friend named Lazarus, and when Lazarus died Jesus wept. Paul wrote to his friends in Thessalonica, “You are our glory and joy.”

When we go through life without friends, it’s not just our experience of life that’s diminished; we are diminished. We are less than we could be, and that’s especially true for Christ followers, because God uses friends and friendships to shape us into the people he created us to be.

Scripture: Ruth 1:1–22
Based On: The PreachingToday.com sermon series “Living Close,” by Bryan Wilkerson
PART ONE
Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

Spiritual friendships turn the journey of life into a journey of faith. They lead us to God and his purposes. Do you have the kind of friend who will call at just the right time with just the right words—someone who can find you where you are and gently lead you to a better place? Apparently many of us don’t. Seventy percent of Americans say they have few close friends. Forty-three percent say they have only one person or no one in whom they can confide.

The reasons for this decline of friendship in our society are varied: longer working days, constant job relocation, technologies that isolate us, woundedness from childhood that cripples our relational abilities. But knowing the reasons doesn’t change the reality.

Most of us don’t have enough friends—or any friends. And that’s not good.

In this series, we’re going to see what the Bible has to say about friendship, but not just any kind of friendship. We’re talking about spiritual friendships. What we’re going to do is simple. We’re just going to sit in the shadows and watch and listen and see what we can learn about how God uses friendship in our lives. Why are friendships so important? What is the role of a friend? Where can I find a friend? How can I be a better friend? And what makes a friendship “spiritual” anyway?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Who was your very best friend growing up? What attributes made him or her such a good friend?

[Q] What do you think is the biggest reason for the societal decline in friendship today? Why?

☐ Longer working days
☐ Constant job relocation
☐ Technologies that isolate us
☐ Woundedness from childhood that cripples our relational abilities
☐ Other: ________________________________________________
☐ I don’t think there is a societal decline in friendships. It’s all bunk.

[Q] What do you think makes a spiritual friendship unique?
PART TWO
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Friends are on a journey of faith.

Read Ruth 1:1–22.

It’s an awful feeling to be left—left behind, left out, left alone. Naomi was a foreigner living in Moab, where she had moved in search of food. Then her husband died and she became a single mother. Then her sons married Moabite women. Not exactly what every good Jewish mother dreamed of, but at least she’d be provided for in her old age. At least she’d have grandchildren to carry on the family legacy. But then both sons died, and all three women were left widowed and childless. It didn’t get much lonelier than that for a woman in the ancient world. In a time when a woman’s mission in life was to produce children, Naomi’s purpose in life had just been wiped out. Her only real option was to return home to Bethlehem. Maybe some relatives would watch out for her.

So she and her daughters-in-law prepared to go back. But on the way, Naomi stopped and told her daughters-in-law to go back home. They were still young. They’d find someone else to marry. They could still make a life for themselves. It was a kind and courageous gesture on her part. And with tears in her eyes, one of the women, Orpah, went back. But Ruth clung to her mother-in-law.

There on that road those two women decided that they would make the journey of life together instead of alone. Wherever the road led, whatever was waiting for them, they would face it together. They would no longer be just mother and daughter-in-law bound together by marriage or fate; they would be friends. And out of that friendship God would shape their lives and lead them directly into his purposes.

[Q] Scan the passage again. What emotion-laden words or phrases do you see?

Leader’s Note: If necessary, start the discussion by pointing out the word “left” in verses 3 and 5. (It’s translated “left alone” in some versions.) Also note the weeping in verses 9 and 14.

[Q] Imagine you are in Naomi’s place. Describe your feelings and outlook on life as the story unfolds.

[Q] How did life’s circumstances help develop Naomi and Ruth’s friendship?

[Q] Do you have a relationship like the one between Naomi and Ruth, one in which you are making the journey of life together rather than alone?

• If you do, who is this person and how do you know him or her?

• If not, do you feel like you want or need this kind of friendship? Why or why not?
Leader’s Note: Of course, this is a loaded question! For those who do have a Naomi-Ruth-type friendship, ask them to identify this person and how they know him or her, but to stop there for now. They’ll have opportunities to discuss these friendships more as this study continues. For those who say they do not have this kind of friend, handle it with sensitivity. Assure the person that you care about him or her and that you will discuss how to develop this kind of friendship throughout this study.

Teaching Point Two: Friends accompany one another.

Ruth and Naomi accompanied one another (see verse 22). They didn’t just go through life; they went through life together. And on the way they became fully themselves and served God’s purposes. As we’re going to see, it wasn’t because of some remarkable skill or wisdom that one of them brought to the relationship. It wasn’t because of some heroic act that one of them performed for the other. It was simply because they chose to make space for each other, and because they did that, God was able to enter into that space and meet them there, working his healing.

Accompanied is an interesting word. When a soloist asks a pianist to accompany her, she’s not asking her just to bang out some notes on the piano while she sings. No, she wants her to play in tandem with her, so that the piano brings out the beauty of the song, so it heightens the impact of the song. In the same way, when you ask someone else to accompany you spiritually, you’re not just asking the person to tag along and stay in sight. You’re asking him or her to enter into life with you, to share the experience, to bring out the beauty, to heighten the impact.

[Q] What are some of the obstacles to developing this kind of spiritual friendship? In other words, what gets in the way of making space for one another?

[Q] What are some specific ways we can make space in our lives for spiritual friends?

[Q] Some spiritual formation experts call this kind of spiritual friendship “the ministry of accompaniment.” How can friendship be a ministry?

Teaching Point Three: Spiritual friendships have five characteristics.

Ruth and Naomi’s relationship included five characteristics of a spiritual friendship. Let’s take a closer look at these and discuss what it really means to be in an accompanying relationship.

1. Mutuality: Spiritual friendship is not like discipleship, where a more mature believer nurtures a newer believer. It’s not like mentoring, where an expert passes on wisdom to a protégé. It’s not like counseling, where one person offers advice to another. Friendship is reciprocal. The wisdom and the strength flow back and forth. Friends relate to each other as peers, as fellow travelers, even if one of them happens to be older or wiser or stronger than the other.
2. **Honesty:** Friends need to be able to tell each other what’s really going on. Friends need to be their true selves—no pretending, posturing, fibbing, or image-control.

3. **Acceptance:** For honesty to work, there has to be acceptance. Acceptance means I’ll receive you where you are, as you are. Author and psychologist David Benner says that “spiritual friendship is a place where others are accepted as they are for the sake of who they can become.”

4. **Attentiveness:** Attentiveness means focusing on the other person—their needs, their questions, their struggle, their mood—instead of focusing on yourself. Attentiveness means listening to what the other person says without thinking about what you’re going to say next. Attentiveness means watching and listening for what God might be doing in another person’s life and circumstance.

5. **Spirituality:** This last characteristic distinguishes this from other kinds of friendships. Spiritual friendships point us toward God. They introduce us to God. They restore us to God. They strengthen us in God. Sooner or later, God becomes part of the conversation. God becomes a companion on the journey. “Two are better than one,” Ecclesiastes says, and “[a] cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Could the third strand, the third person, be God?

[Q] Look again at Ruth 1:1–22. Give an example or two of each of these characteristics of spiritual friendship from the relationship of Naomi and Ruth.

**Leader’s Note:** Keep the pace of the conversation moving here. One example is enough for each characteristic. The purpose of this question is to engage group members once again with the text before moving on to the following application questions.

[Q] When you think about your own friendships, in which of these characteristics are you strongest?

**Leader’s Note:** Sometimes people hesitate to respond to this kind of question because they fear sounding prideful. This isn’t about puffing yourself up, however, but about honestly (see #2) assessing both your strengths and weaknesses. You may want to go first, to model honest sharing. As others share, ask for specific examples.

[Q] With which of these characteristics do you struggle most? Why do you think that is?

[Q] Looking at all of these characteristics together, share how it feels or would feel to have a spiritual friend with all of these characteristics.
Optional Activity

On a blank sheet of paper, write a short letter to a good friend, thanking him or her for at least one of these five characteristics. If you cannot think of anyone right now to whom you would write this letter, think of someone who you would enjoy having as a friend, and write it to him or her. If you want to send this letter to your friend, by all means do so! But you don’t have to; you may keep this to yourself if you prefer.

PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

Lois found herself in a challenging season of life. She was raising a houseful of boys, her husband was working long hours, and she was grieving over the recent loss of her sister and then her mother. Lois was part of a women’s group, and she was very grateful for the leaders, teachers, and mentors that she had, but she felt like she needed someone else in her life—someone she could just talk to, someone who could relate to what was happening in her life. She needed a friend. So she asked God to show her one, and she began to look around.

One day, looking around the Bible study group, she felt drawn to a woman named Charlotte. Charlotte was about her age and had a godly spirit, but that was all Lois knew about her. When the study ended, she took a risk and asked Charlotte if she would have coffee. Charlotte said yes, and they quickly discovered they both were raising kids, both were eager to grow in their faith, both wanted to pray, and both had husbands who were not very spiritually engaged. They began to meet every week to pray. They became friends, spiritual friends. That was 30-some years ago, and they are still friends today.

Both have talked about how this friendship has shaped their faith. One said of the other, “She’s brought healing to my life.” The other said, “She’s helped me grow as a friend, because I didn’t have that kind of pattern.” Each of them said in separate conversations, “I can’t imagine my life without her.” When asked what made the friendship work, they said things like: “We listen to each other”; “I can say anything to her”; and “We made a commitment never to let go.” And along the way, they’ve not only grown in their faith, they have seen God do remarkable work in their husbands’ and children’s lives and in the lives of many others they have served over the years.

Action Point: How do you find or develop a spiritual friend like this? This week, ask God, look around, and take a risk. Look at the people you’re around right now, the people in your small group. Put yourself in a place where you’ll meet likeminded people. Join a ministry team. Go on a mission trip. Go on a marriage retreat and meet other couples.
Remember, you’re not looking for a mentor. You’re not looking for a role model. You’re not looking for a counselor. All you’re looking for is someone to talk to, someone to be with for this season of your life. And when God puts that person on your heart, take a risk. Ask the person to have coffee. Invite him or her to sit with you in church. Ask someone to go skiing, maybe. Because spiritual friends turn the journey of life into a journey of faith that leads us right to God and his purposes.

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Michael C. Mack
The Pace and Pull of Spiritual Friendships

Finding a drafting buddy

Do you have the kind of friend who will find you in a dark place and remind you of who you are and what you're about? Someone who will speak courage into your life and get you going again? We all need friends like that. Spiritual friends help each other find and follow God in all the seasons of life. Your friendships are as important to your spiritual development as your daily devotions and your weekly worship.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 18:1–4; 20:1–17; 23:15–18
Based On: The PreachingToday.com sermon series “Living Close,” by Bryan Wilkerson
PART ONE
Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

Drafting on a bike is an amazing experience. The rider in front literally breaks the resistance of the wind, so it’s much easier for the one who is drafting to make progress. Not only that, the front rider creates a vacuum that literally pulls the other rider along. You don’t have to pedal nearly as hard or as fast to keep up the same speed. And so two riders taking turns pulling each other can ride a lot farther and faster than they could ride alone.

In this study, we will look at the friendship between two great men: David and Jonathan. As these two men make their journey together, they take turns riding in front, breaking the wind's resistance and pulling each other along.

Spiritual friends help each other find and follow God by setting the pace for one another. We all have days and seasons in our lives when it’s harder to find God, when we can’t hear him that well, when we don’t see him at work around us. Maybe we’re discouraged or afraid. Maybe we’re disappointed in God. Maybe we’re just distracted by the cares of life—raising a family, making a living, getting an education. And then someone comes alongside and tells us a story about something God has done in his life. He shares some insight from his Bible reading that day. Maybe he just points out the beauty of the day that God has made. And suddenly we’re aware of God again. We remember that he’s present and that we’re his children and that we want to follow again. We get pulled along in the wake of our friend’s momentum. We need friends like that.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] How would you describe your drafting experience?

- I’ve been cycling with a group and drafted with other riders.
- I’ve watched bike racing on TV.
- I’ve driven race cars and experienced drafting.
- I’ve driven close behind big trucks on the freeway to save gas.
- I’d never heard of drafting before.
- Other: ________________________________

[Q] Without mentioning names, describe a relationship in which one person seemed to do all the “pulling” (doing all the work in the relationship) while the other did all the drafting. How does that kind of relationship feel?
The Pace and Pull of Spiritual Friendships

Fostering Faith-Shaping Friendships

[Q] Briefly describe an example of a mutual friendship in which both friends took turns “up front,” taking the wind head on for a while so the other could catch a breath—a friendship in which you set the pace for one another.

PART TWO
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Spiritual friends set the pace for one another.

The events of our study in 1 Samuel 18 happened just after David had defeated the enemy hero Goliath (1 Sam. 17). To understand the context, it’s important to remember that Jonathan was a great warrior himself. Besides that, he was the prince, the heir to the throne of Israel.

Back in chapter 14, Jonathan and his armor-bearer went on a midnight raid against the enemy encampment, just the two of them, and together they killed 20 Philistine soldiers. The scene is right out of Rambo.

All of this raises an intriguing question: Where was Jonathan when Goliath challenged the Israelite army? Why didn’t he answer the call? Just before he raided the Philistines, Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, “Come, let’s go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6). What happened to that courage, faith, and passion? He must have been there as Goliath taunted the Israelites. He was second in command in Israel, but he was conspicuously silent.

How could this happen? After that daring midnight raid, Jonathan’s father, Saul, never thanked him, never honored him, never acknowledged what he did. In fact, a short time after that, Saul nearly executed Jonathan for unknowingly breaking a foolish command that Saul had given. So by the time we read of Goliath, it seems that Jonathan had lost heart, he was discouraged, and he had lost confidence in himself—and maybe even in God. But then he saw this shepherd boy come out of nowhere and step out to face the giant, armed with just a slingshot. He heard David declare, “I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” And when he saw the great victory that God gave to Israel through David, Jonathan, it seems, suddenly began to remember who he was and who God is. He saw something in David that resonated with something deep inside of himself and made him want to be passionate for God and a warrior for him. And that day, he declared that he would be David’s friend forever.

Read 1 Samuel 18:1–4.

[Q] Jonathan honored David by giving him his royal garments and weapons. What does this gesture imply about Jonathan’s attitude toward David?
Leader’s Note: Several responses may be discussed: (a) Jonathan considered David an equal; (b) Jonathan was acknowledging that David would one day take his place and be the next king; (c) It’s very possible that David had already told Jonathan about his anointing (1 Sam. 16:1–13); (d) Jonathan prioritized his friendship with David and his relationship with God over any ambition for power or fame.

[Q] How would you describe the words Jonathan used to express his friendship with David?

Leader’s Note: This is a simple observation question, but it very well may lead you into interpretation and application. Use the next question and note as a follow-up to this one.

[Q] Knowing that Jonathan and David were both great men and fierce warriors, do Jonathan’s words, emotions, and actions surprise you in any way? Why or why not?

Leader’s Note: Help members move past simple yes or no responses. The important questions here are “why?” or “why not?” Some men may feel uncomfortable with David and Jonathan’s bold expressions of love and commitment for one another. Don’t be afraid to hang out on this question for a while, and use follow-up questions to give men an opportunity to express their feelings about the stereotypical ways we tend to view masculinity and how men relate to one another as friends. The affection these two warriors had for one another may be described as that of comrades in arms. Use the next question as a follow up.

If yours is a women’s group, be careful not to use this question as an opportunity to bash men. Instead, try to understand men’s reservations, perhaps even fears, of expressing their feelings as Jonathan does in this passage.

[Q] Look at the list of war movies and TV shows below. How are the relationships in these movies or shows similar to or different from the friendship between Jonathan and David?

• Saving Private Ryan
• We Were Soldiers
• Platoon
• Windtalkers
• Braveheart
• Band of Brothers

[Q] Studies have shown time and again that men are far less likely than women to have meaningful relationships. They have fewer friends, and the friends they do have are not nearly as close. If these studies are true, what do you think it will take to bust these stereotypes so men can develop faith-shaping friendships?
Teaching Point Two: Spiritual friends stay faithful.

Read 1 Samuel 20:1–17.

David and Jonathan had been riding together for a while now, but things were getting more difficult. Saul had turned against David and wanted to get rid of him. It was a difficult and dangerous thing that David was asking Jonathan to do (vv. 5–8).

Spiritual friends stick by each other. They don’t give up on each other when the journey gets tough or long or even dangerous.

A little while later, when Jonathan realized that his father was determined to kill David and that he had put his own life and future at risk by going against his father, he had a favor to ask of David (v. 14). Jonathan understood that David would someday be king and that Saul’s household would be destroyed, so he asked David to show mercy to his descendants, even though they were of the household of Saul. Jonathan used the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means enduring, steadfast, loyal love, or “unfailing kindness” in many versions. What *agape*, the unconditional love of God in Christ, is to the New Testament, *hesed* is to the Old Testament, the unending love of God for his people. *Hesed* is what we praise God for when we sing, “Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father. There is no shadow of turning with thee.” When we sing, “Oh no, you’ll never let go,” we’re singing about *hesed*, God’s loyal, enduring, steadfast love.

Spiritual friends love each other like that. They stick by each other through good times and bad, across the miles and across the years.

**[Q]** How do you see the concept of “spiritual drafting buddies” at play between David and Jonathan in this passage?

**[Q]** In your own friendships, how have you experienced a hesed kind of love—an enduring, steadfast, loyal relationship?

**Leader’s Note:** This is an opportunity for group members to tell more of their own stories about a spiritual friendship they have. You may want to ask specific group members to respond based on their introductory responses from Session 1.

**[Q]** If you were to experience the death of a loved one and the ensuing grief, who would be there with you and for you months, even years, after the funeral?

### Optional Activity

What percentage of your friendships would you consider hesed-type relationships—enduring, steadfast, and loyal? (What percentage of your friends would still be calling you and available to you several months after the funeral of a loved one?) Based on that percentage, draw a horizontal line...
Teaching Point Three: Spiritual friends speak faith into one another’s lives.

Read 1 Samuel 23:15–18.

Saul was definitely out to kill David now. David had been on the run for a long time, and he was tired of it. He was tired of sleeping in caves, tired of looking over his shoulder. And he was a bit frustrated with God. Why had God allowed this to happen? He hadn’t done anything to deserve this kind of treatment. Up till now Jonathan had apparently kept his distance, probably not wanting to reveal David’s whereabouts. But Jonathan sensed this was the moment when he needed to go find his friend.

Jonathan had one main motivation: to help David “find strength in God.” How do you help someone find strength in God? First, you just show up. You show up in a hospital room or a funeral home or a courtroom or a coffee shop to be with someone in a time of need. You’re reminding your friend that God knows where he or she is and that God’s there too.

Mostly what Jonathan did was speak into David’s life. And that’s what friends do for each other. They speak courage, hope, confidence, and faith into each other’s lives. They pay attention to what’s going on in their friend’s life. Our friends help us hear God’s voice when it’s difficult. They help us see God’s hand at work in confusing circumstances. They help us do God’s will when we’re tired and afraid.

[Q] What words did Jonathan use to speak courage into David’s life?

Leader’s Note: The purpose of this and the following three questions is to help the group members observe what is happening in this passage, but each of these will lead to some application as well. Use the notes, as needed, to facilitate with follow-up questions and comments. For this question, Jonathan said simply, “Don’t be afraid” (v. 17).

[Q] What words did Jonathan use to speak hope into David’s life?
**Leader’s Note:** Jonathan said, “You will be king.” This was not just wishful thinking. He was not just making it up to help his friend feel better. God had already revealed all of this. Jonathan was simply reminding David of what God had already said.

[Q] What words did Jonathan use to speak confidence into David’s life?

**Leader’s Note:** Jonathan said, “I will be second to you.”

[Q] What words did Jonathan use to speak faith into David’s life?

**Leader’s Note:** Jonathan and David renewed their covenant, reminding themselves that God could be trusted.

[Q] When has someone showed up for you in a hospital room, funeral home, courtroom, or coffee shop to help you find strength in God? How did this make you feel?

**PART THREE**

**Apply Your Findings**

Artie and Kevin are longtime friends. When asked for a good picture of the two of them, Kevin said, “Well, that’s going to be a problem.”

“How come?”

Kevin responded, “There are no good pictures of Artie.”

That statement tells you something about the kind of friends these guys are. They grew up in the same town together. They went to the same schools and knew each other as kids. Over the years they lost track of each other but bumped into each other again in the hospital maternity ward, when both of their wives were giving birth on the same night. While their wives were in labor, they caught up with each other and decided they should get together again. They discovered that they had all sorts of things in common: they were both in the same line of work, worked in the same office building, and recovering alcoholics. So they began going to AA meetings together, supporting each other. After a while Artie began sharing with Kevin that Jesus Christ was his higher power. Kevin was an active churchgoer but had never developed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. So Artie talked with him along the way, invited him to some things at his church, and eventually Kevin and his wife came to know Christ in a personal way. But other things happened along the way. At one point Kevin’s sister became terminally ill, and so Kevin called Artie and said, “Would you come over and tell her what you told me about Christ?” Artie did, and he prayed with her to receive Christ just before she died.

Then it was Kevin’s turn to help Artie when Artie came down with cancer. Now Kevin was the one who came to encourage and speak hope and faith and hope into his friend’s life. Then one of Kevin’s sons was struggling with anxiety and panic attacks, so Artie came
over, because Artie had struggled with panic attacks and anxiety, and he talked the boy through it. That’s what friends do for each other. They take turns setting the pace. They’re there for each other. They stay close. They speak faith and hope and courage into each other’s lives.

**Action Point:** Who in your life is traveling alongside you? Who are you intentionally travelling with? Send a quick note of thanks to a friend who has been encouraging you and speaking faith into your life. Look for ways to begin speaking faith into someone’s life this week because that’s what friends do. They help each other find and follow God in all the seasons of life.

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Michael C. Mack
Spiritual friendships are significant because they form the deepest parts of who we are. Most friendships do their work over time—moment by moment, encounter after encounter, conversation after conversation. But it doesn’t always work that way.

Sometimes God uses a friend to transform us seemingly overnight. A friend speaks a word of challenge that, if responded to favorably, has the potential to help us grow exponentially. The tricky part is that a challenge like this also has the potential to test the limits of the friendship. It often comes as an intervention, a conversation, a letter, an interaction that challenges us to move beyond our comfort zone and step into an area of living that we’re not accustomed to. It tests us and it tries our patience or our selflessness.

Scripture: Philemon

Based On: The PreachingToday.com sermon series “Living Close,” by Bryan Wilkerson
PART ONE
Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

Nestled in the pages of the New Testament is an interesting little document. It’s a six-paragraph letter that gives us a window into a compelling story about a friend who challenged another friend, asking him to take a bold step, asking him to make a fundamental change in the way he naturally operated. He knew he was testing the limits of this friendship. As we read the story, we can feel the tension in this relationship.

The author of this letter is the apostle Paul, who was getting older and wrote this letter under house arrest in a Roman prison. The letter was to his friend, Philemon, a wealthy man who owned a large home in the small town of Colossae, somewhere in current-day Turkey. It’s likely that Paul led Philemon to Christ through his ministry when both men were in Ephesus. Philemon was now one of the leaders of the church that met in his home.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Do you tend to be the kind of person who usually ends up helping to mediate other people’s disagreements or the type that stays out of the middle? Why do you think this is true of you?

[Q] When is the last time you confronted someone?

• Why did you feel you needed to challenge or confront the person?
• What means did you use? A carefully worded letter? Face-to-face conversation? Intervention?
• How did this confrontation go? What were the results?

[Q] Share a time when you were confronted or challenged by a friend. How did it feel? Were you open to the person’s challenge? What did you learn?

PART TWO
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Spiritual friends challenge one another.

Like any great story, this one has several plot twists. The letter Paul sent to Philemon was carried by the hand of a runaway house servant named Onesimus, who came from the same town in Colossae as Philemon. Apparently, Onesimus had robbed his former master.
and ran as far away as he could, making the trip from Colossae all the way to Rome, where any young man could spend his newfound freedom liberally. Paul met Onesimus in Rome while Paul was under house arrest, and the two became good friends.

Eventually, this runaway slave surrendered his life to God, and he committed himself to the wellbeing of Paul, caring for him and keeping him company. Along the way, Onesimus shared with Paul his story, that he was a runaway slave. Eventually, Paul and Onesimus realized that they had a mutual relationship. It turns out—twist number two—that Onesimus’ former master was also Paul’s good friend, Philemon of Colossae. Can you imagine that moment of revelation?

Somehow Paul and Onesimus came to the conclusion that Onesimus should go back to his master and make things right, no matter what the cost. Imagine Paul saying to Onesimus, “Listen, I know Philemon. Let me write a letter to him on your behalf.”

Read Philemon 1–22.

[Q] Based on the words Paul chose in this letter, how would you describe his relationship with Philemon?

Leader’s Note: You will focus on observation and some interpretation in this first section. You’ll get to application in the following two sections of the study. Try not to jump ahead!

[Q] How would you describe Paul’s attitude toward Philemon in this letter? (You can choose more than one.) Why would you describe his attitude this way?

- Bossy
- Bold
- Manipulative
- Mediator
- Respectful
- Apologetic
- Persuasive
- Helpful
- Other: __________________________________________

Leader’s Note: There is no one right answer, of course, and different people may come to different conclusions. In fact, several of these are accurate. Simply ask group members to support from the Scripture passage whatever answer they give.

[Q] What was Paul ultimately asking Philemon to do?
Leader’s Note: Participants may word their answers in many different ways; for instance, to reconcile with Onesimus, to treat him as a brother rather than a servant, to accept him as an equal. Again, ask group members to support their answers from the passage. The point of this question is to summarize the passage.

Teaching Point Two: Spiritual friends test the power of the gospel.

Paul marshaled all of his persuasiveness to encourage Philemon to allow the full force of the gospel to be unleashed in his life. He wanted Philemon to open himself to the possibility that the gospel not only provides salvation and freedom and a personal relationship with God, but also calls people to change their lives in order to bring about change in the world. Paul was not only testing the limits of his friendship with Philemon, he was also testing the power of the gospel. Paul believed that the gospel is not merely an ideology without any real teeth. He believed that the work and teaching of Christ have real power. He believed that the gospel had the potential to transform his friends and the world around them.

Paul was doing what spiritual friends do: challenge each other to let their lives be shaped by the pattern of the gospel rather than the pattern of the world. Paul challenged Philemon by sending a letter with Onesimus. Philemon was forced to make a decision. He was being challenged to live out the gospel on a whole new level. It was a defining moment brought about by a challenge from his good friend.

[Q] In verse 11, Paul made wordplay with Onesimus’s name, which means useful in the original language. What would it mean to you, if you were Onesimus, that in Paul’s eyes you had truly become useful?

[Q] Imagine you are Philemon, and Onesimus—the guy who used to be your servant but then stole your stuff and ran away—is standing on your doorstep, letter in hand. You take the letter and begin to read, and the first word you see is whom it’s from: your old friend Paul. As you read through this letter, what might be going through your mind?

[Q] How do you think you would have reacted to Paul’s appeal? (Be honest!)

[Q] What is an example from your own life of someone being a friend to you like the apostle Paul was to Philemon, someone who knew or knew you well enough to prod and push you along? Someone who knows how to encourage you to let go and surrender when you need to? Someone who knows that you might need to forgive someone in order to move past it and get over it?

Optional Activity

Imagine you receive, out of the blue, an e-mail from a good friend whom you haven’t seen or heard from in years. You have a high degree of respect for this old friend. He is asking you to forgive and reconcile with a person who
has wounded you deeply in the past (put a face and name to this person now). Your friend says he can vouch for this person who harmed you. The wrongdoer has owned up to the offenses, is sorry for them, and has truly changed. Your friend is asking you not only to forgive, but also to accept this person back into your life as a friend and partner in faith. He says in the letter that he will even pay back any financial loss you may have suffered. Your friend appeals to you on the basis of grace—treating the person who harmed you not as he or she deserves but as God has treated you. The offender is planning to stop by your home tomorrow evening.

On a blank sheet of paper, write back to your friend. Then share the highlights with the group.

**Teaching Point Three: Spiritual friends help reorient each other to the gospel.**

It must have been hard for Philemon to do this, to reorient his outlook on this young man, to see his value through the lens of the gospel. The fact is, it’s hard for any of us to do that with anyone. We live in a world in which we’re accustomed to seeing people through the lens of their net worth, their standing on the pecking order, or what box they fill in the organizational chart. We measure other people by the square footage of their homes, whom they spend time with on weekends, or the degree of their productivity. But the gospel does away with all that nonsense. No matter what we are in the world’s eyes, no matter who we are or how we measure up, in Christ we have unending worth and value. Our economic statuses, our positions, our jobs, or our countries of origin don’t matter. In Christ, we have unending value.

The amazing thing about the gospel’s reach is that it finds a runaway slave in a small room in Rome in the same way it finds a wealthy landowner in Colossae. It meets them both at their point of need, at their point of recognition for their own need of a Savior, freedom, forgiveness, and connectedness to God.

It’s one thing to speak the gospel and believe the gospel and read the gospel, but it’s another thing to live out the gospel in our lives, to really test its limits. That’s what the world needs more than anything—people who are courageous enough to embody the gospel with the decisions they make and with their relationships.

**[Q]** How can the presence of a spiritual friend help you put on the lens of the gospel, to see others’ value through the eyes of Christ?

**[Q]** When has a friend boldly helped you reorient your outlook on life?

**[Q]** What impact would a church have if it were full of people who knew their own value in Christ and also saw others around them through the lens of the gospel?
Fostering Faith-Shaping Friendships
The Transformational Power of Spiritual Friendships

[F] What does it look like to embody the gospel, living it out? How can spiritual friends help us do that more effectively?

PART THREE
Apply Your Findings

Cisco and Jauron were once rival gang members, one a former Crip and the other a former Blood. While in prison, Cisco attended a three-day conference with a program that brings restoration and reconciliation to rival gang members.

When he was released, Cisco began working across gang lines. He enrolled in college and started to get his life back on track. One day Cisco was in a van doing outreach to homeless folks, and Jauron showed up to help. He had been a Blood since he was 11 years old, and he was slowly making his way out.

When Jauron entered the van, tension filled the air. It turns out that Cisco and Jauron had once been involved in an incident that included a brawl and a stabbing. They made it through that day, and over the next few months they continued to work in silence side by side. Eventually, things came to a head during a staff meeting. They had to stop everything so that Cisco and Jauron could meet with someone for a time of reconciliation. As they talked, they both realized that what they thought had happened years ago wasn’t exactly the case. They discovered that their friends had put them up to fight each other. They experienced reconciliation that day.

Today, both young men are on a ministry team together. Jauron is an intern at the gang reconciliation program, and Cisco is on staff. They support each other at the community college they attend and are being discipled by a leadership discipleship group. Once they hated each other; now they’re brothers in Christ and partners in ministry.

That’s the kind of thing the gospel does when it gets hold of a person’s life. Christ’s love turns combatants into comrades, enemies into friends, gang members into ministry partners. That’s what it means to let the gospel live large within you.

Action Point: We don’t know exactly what happened between Philemon and Onesimus, but we do know this: when a spiritual friend challenges another friend with the gospel, anything can happen. Do you have a friend like that? Are you a friend like that? Are you someone who lovingly and carefully tests the limits of your friendship so that you might test the limit of the gospel’s force in your life, the life of your friend, and in the world? Identify a friend in your life who can confront you and speak truth into your life. Then identify people for whom you can do the same. Is there truth that you currently need to speak into your friend’s life?

―Study by Tom VanAntwerp, with Michael C. Mack
The Common Causes of Spiritual Friendships

**LEADER’S GUIDE**

*Friends serve one another and side by side.*

_We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;_
_For he today that sheds his blood with me_
_Shall be my brother._

Those words come from a famous speech, given the night before an epic battle in Shakespeare’s play *Henry V*. They live on these many centuries later because they speak so eloquently of the bond that is formed between people when they are enlisted together in a common cause.

It was that phrase, “band of brothers,” that inspired a World War II book and then mini-series. The story follows the soldiers of Easy Company from their jump training in Georgia to the landing at Normandy to the Battle of Bastogne and then to the defeat of Hitler’s army. Those soldiers enjoyed intensity in their relationships, an intimacy and camaraderie that civilians can never fully understand. Something happens when people serve together. When they struggle side by side, when they make some shared sacrifice in pursuit of some worthy goal, they form a special bond and are shaped forever by that experience. And what’s true of soldiers on the field of battle is true of Christ followers in the service of our King.

**Scripture:** *Philippians 1–2*

**Based On:** The PreachingToday.com sermon series “Living Close,” by Bryan Wilkerson
**PART ONE**

**Identify the Current Issue**

*Note to Leader:* Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

Something unique happens when brothers and sisters in Christ serve alongside each other. In this lesson, we’ll consider Paul and his band of brothers and sisters in a place called Philippi.

Of the 13 letters we have from the apostle Paul, Philippians is the friendliest. You sense it in the language right from the beginning. This is not the task-driven, type A, take-the-next-hill Paul we often imagine. He sounds mushy in this warm and fuzzy letter. But it’s not just the words of this letter; it’s the actual form of the letter that is friendly.

Back in grade school or junior high, most of us learned how to write different kinds of letters—personal letters, business letters, and so forth. Each one was formatted a bit differently. The same thing was true in the ancient world. Scholars have found ancient manuals for letter writing in the Greco-Roman world, and it turns out there were 21 different types of letters in the first century. One was called “the friendly letter,” and Paul’s letter to the Philippians follows that format. The language and style of the letter suggests that Paul had a very close relationship with these believers in Philippi, a closer relationship than he had with the believers in all the other places he had been. In fact, in modern language you might say that the Philippians were Paul’s BFFs—best friends forever, in text speak. You can LOL if you want.

**Discussion Starters:**

**[Q]** What is the best team you’ve ever been on (any kind of team)? What made that team so special to you?

**[Q]** There are many great movies set in the sports world in which teammates also become strong friends. Which of these is your favorite, and why?

- Rocky (I, II, III, IV, V, or Balboa)
- The Blind Side
- Chariots of Fire
- Talladega Nights
- Brian’s Song
- 42
PART TWO
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Spiritual friends have commonality.

Read Philippians 1:1–8.

Who are these people that Paul loved so much? And what happened to draw them so closely together? The story is in Acts 16. When Paul first arrived in Philippi he couldn’t even find a synagogue in which to begin his ministry, which is how he always did it. The only sign of spiritual vitality he could find was a women’s prayer group outside the city. So Paul started there, and the first person to come to faith in Philippi was a businesswoman named Lydia. She not only came to faith, she immediately invited Paul and his team to set up shop in her household. So they made her house a home base for the ministry in Philippi. Interestingly, the church in Philippi didn’t start with a band of brothers but a circle of sisters. And Paul was fine with that.

A couple days later Paul and Silas were thrown in jail on trumped-up charges after freeing a slave girl who was possessed by a demon. That night they had a unique opportunity to share the gospel with the jailer and his family. When Paul and Silas were released, instead of leaving town as the authorities wanted them to do, they went back to Lydia’s house one more time to visit with the believers there. They must have had a great worship service as they reflected on all that God had done in those early days. They likely shed some tears, wondering if they would ever see each other again.

No wonder Paul had these people in his heart, after all they’d been through together. Lydia, the slave girl, the jailer and his family—these people’s lives had been changed for eternity. But Paul’s life had been changed too. They had made a mark on him, and he wrote about it in this letter. Together they had done something great for God. They not only planted the church in Philippi, they established a beachhead for the gospel on the continent of Europe. It would all spring from there. Paul and the believers in Philippi weren’t just friends; they were partners. They were friends in ministry and they never forgot each other.

Something happens when believers serve together, when they struggle together side by side. When they make shared sacrifice in the service of the King, they form a special bond and they are forever shaped by the experience.
The Common Causes of Spiritual Friendships

Fostering Faith-Shaping Friendships

If you’re looking for friends like that, don’t sit around waiting for someone to call you. Find a ministry. Get involved somewhere. Join a team. Every church and every community have places to serve. But remember, these ministries are not just opportunities to serve. There are friendships waiting to be found. And there’s something else that happens when you form friends in ministry. You not only get closer to each other, you get closer to God.

Teaching Point Two: Spiritual friends serve each other.

Read Philippians 2:19–22.

Timothy was a young believer whom Paul had met earlier on this same journey. Paul was so impressed with him that he invited Timothy to join him and become part of his team. And you can see how close they became. Notice in this passage how Timothy had grown in his faith. He didn’t look out for his own interests, but for the interests of Christ and others. How mature is that? Timothy was already the most valuable member of Paul’s team (v. 20).

Do you have people who have served alongside you in the work of Christ, people you have struggled and sacrificed with in order to do something great for God? If you don’t have friends like that, you are missing out on some of the deepest, closest relationships available to you this side of heaven.

If you’re looking for friends like that, don’t sit around waiting for someone to call you. Find a ministry. Get involved somewhere. Join a team. Every church and every community have places to serve. But remember, these ministries are not just opportunities to serve. There are friendships waiting to be found. And there’s something else that happens when you form friends in ministry. You not only get closer to each other, you get closer to God.
[Q] Paul describes his connection with Timothy as a father-son relationship. In other places, Paul also calls Timothy a brother, co-worker, fellow servant, and fellow worker. What do all these say to you about their relationship?

[Q] How do you think this young believer, Timothy, got so strong and so mature so quickly?

Leader’s Note: Point people especially to verse 22. Timothy had proven himself by serving together with Paul in ministry.

[Q] What was it about Timothy’s attitude and character that shaped him into someone who would be an effective servant of Christ?

Leader’s Note: Point out verses 20–21. Timothy was the kind of person who took a genuine interest in the welfare of others. He looked not only to his own interests but to the interests of others. See verses 3–4 in this same chapter.

[Q] It’s very easy to get so preoccupied in our own interests, concerns, and busy schedules that we don’t have time to serve Christ and others. What are some ways we can avoid that trap?

[Q] What can our group do to help one another take a more genuine interest in others, serving in the work of the gospel?

Teaching Point Three: Spiritual friends serve others side by side.


Paul wrote this letter as a prisoner in Rome. In those days it was up to the family to take care of a person in prison. Since Paul had no family that we know of, his friends in Philippi took up the cause. They sent one of their own members, Epaphroditus, to Rome with gifts and messages to assist him and care for him in his ministry. And he was a great help and encouragement to Paul. But somewhere along the way Epaphroditus became sick and nearly died. So Paul decided, as valuable as Epaphroditus was to him, that he wanted to send his friend back to his family and friends in Philippi so he could get better.

What courage and commitment Epaphroditus had acquired. What Christlike character. He was ready to lay down his life for a friend. Paul was honored to be serving among people like Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Something happens when people serve together. When they struggle side by side, when they make a shared sacrifice in the cause of Christ, they form a unique bond and are forever shaped by the experience.

[Q] Look at the three terms Paul used to describe Epaphroditus in verse 25. If you were to label someone with these three names, what would you be saying about them?
Leader’s Note: In general, it seems he lived a balanced life. Dig deeper by talking about each term: brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier. People might point out that he had a deep relationship with Paul, he was committed to the ministry and was industrious in it, and he was a strong ally to Paul—he wasn’t afraid to enter the battle with him.

[Q] When Epaphroditus was sick, whom was he most concerned about (v. 26), and what does this say about his character?

[Q] Since Epaphroditus was so dear and important to Paul, why did Paul want to send him back to Philippi?

[Q] Why did Paul think Epaphroditus was worthy of honor from the Philippians?

Leader’s Note: He was willing to risk his life for Paul. Living sacrificially for others is an extremely honorable attribute.

Optional Activity

True spiritual friends put others’ needs above their own—they live sacrificially. Interestingly, those are the same characteristics of a true servant. Perhaps that’s another reason why serving is such a great way to develop new and stronger friendships. Everyone wants to have a friend who puts them first and is always ready to sacrifice. But it’s more important, of course, to be a friend like that.

Both Timothy and Epaphroditus excelled at putting the needs of others above their own, an important lesson Paul was teaching in Philippians 2:1–11. “[I]n humility,” Paul said, “value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (vv. 3–4). All of us can become more humble, more others-focused.

On a blank sheet of paper, prayerfully and humbly assess how well you put others’ needs above your own. Respond to any of these questions if you need help with this assessment: Do I live more by the words in Philippians 2:3–4 or 2:21? In what areas of my life can I grow in humility? In what areas can I let go of ego? How can I step out of my comfort zone to serve others more? How can I live more sacrificially?
PART THREE
Apply Your Findings

Kelly and Alison are high school students who met on a mission trip to Trinidad one summer. They didn’t know each other before that—Kelly is a junior in high school, and Alison a lowly freshman. But something happened between them on that trip. Something about serving together, being on the road far from home in another culture, sweating under the hot sun, giving themselves away to others, and worshiping together knit their hearts together in a unique way. This is how Alison described it:

We bonded in Trinidad after an emotional night for the team. The group had been reflecting on what God was teaching us through the trip. Kelly and I had a heart-to-heart conversation after the team gathering. We discussed everything from how we came to God to the current boy situations in our lives. On the trip, we became close by working together, keeping each other accountable, and writing encouraging notes to one another. We both now realize that God was working through us during this trip. Since then we have held each other accountable and feel comfortable discussing where we are in our faith today. We love serving together, and we are so thankful that we met on the trip to Trinidad. Our lives would be totally different if we didn’t have each other.

Action Point: Kelly and Alison and many others like them have grown closer not just to each other but to God. They have forever been shaped by their friendship. Consider how well you serve your friends. How often do you serve side by side for a common cause? Brainstorm ways you can better serve your friends and serve side by side with them this week. If you don’t currently have a friend like this, consider joining a ministry team, a missional small group, or a mission trip to serve alongside other believers. You may find a new friend in the midst of your service. Something happens when believers serve together, when they struggle side by side. When they make a shared sacrifice in the service of the King, they form a special bond, and they are shaped spiritually by the experience.

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Michael C. Mack
Reflecting on true friendship

Where are you on your spiritual journey? Are you exploring Christianity? Are you beginning to grow in your relationship with Christ? Would you consider yourself close to Christ? Are you spiritually mature? Research has shown that these are the four discernible stages of our journey of faith. Wherever you are on the spiritual journey, spiritual friendships will take you farther and deeper than you could ever go alone.


Based On: The PreachingToday.com sermon series “Living Close,” by Bryan Wilkerson
PART ONE
Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

One of the most popular TV shows in recent history is *Friends*. The final episode in 2004 was the most-watched TV episode of the decade. Regardless of the many things you could find wrong with the show, you can’t deny its cultural resonance and impact. A whole generation of young adults came of age under the influence of that show.

It had a simple storyline: six young adults trying to make a way for themselves in New York City. So what was it about this show, about these characters, that made them so appealing to so many people? These six friends had a comfort with each other. In the high pressure, image-conscious, unforgiving environs of Manhattan, these six friends could be themselves with each other. Joey was a goofball. Phoebe was ditzy. Monica was controlling. But it didn’t matter. They were still friends. They could come home cranky or giddy. They could be juvenile and it didn’t matter. They were still going to be friends. The theme song said it all: “I’ll Be There for You.” They had this understanding that no matter what happened, no matter how things turned out, no matter who they turned out to be, they would still be friends. And there’s something powerful and liberating about that, about the freedom to be yourself in the company of another person—because if you’re free to be who you are, you’re free to become someone better, someone you long to be. And for everything that the show got wrong, that part it got right.

I’ll be there for you, when the rain starts to pour.
I’ll be there for you, like I’ve been there before.
I’ll be there for you, ’cause you’re there for me too.

And, for some reason, we need these kinds of friendships to help us grow spiritually.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Many TV shows (most of which are now in reruns) focus on the friendships of a small cast of characters. Some also have memorable theme songs. Which of these shows and theme songs bring back the best memories for you? Why?

- *Friends*: “I’ll Be There for You”
- *Cheers*: “Where Everybody Knows Your Name”
- *Three’s Company*: “Three’s Company”
- *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*: “Love Is All Around”
Teaching Point One: Spiritual friends allow us to be ourselves.


At the time of this encounter, Jesus likely already knew these siblings; note how comfortable and honest they were with each other. Martha, for instance, was ticked off and she wasn’t afraid to show it, even to Jesus. If you had your pastor over for dinner, you’d be on your best behavior, but not Martha. She let her sister have it, and then she let Jesus have it. Martha was a no-nonsense woman, and she wasn’t afraid to be herself even in the company of Jesus. The same was true for Mary. It wasn’t a woman’s place to sit at the feet of a rabbi. In fact, that may be part of why Martha was so upset. Not only was she stuck in the kitchen doing all the work, Mary had abandoned her traditional role and was acting as if she were a disciple. But that’s what Mary was. She was devoted. She was passionate. She was a disciple, and she wasn’t afraid to be herself, especially in the company of Jesus.

Because these two women were so honest and so fully themselves, Jesus was able to speak powerfully into both of their lives. He was able to affirm Mary for her devotion to his teaching, and he was able to redirect Martha’s passion gently yet directly.

And that’s one of the ways spiritual friends help each other grow. They allow us to be our true selves. That’s important, because we can’t grow if we’re pretending. We can’t grow if we’re hiding. We can’t speak into each other’s lives unless we are being honest with each other. We can’t become who God wants us to be until we face who we are and do that in the company of other people.

[Q] Who are you more like in this story? Why?

- Martha: Let’s get to work.
- Mary: Let’s just hang out and talk.
Jesus: Let’s just get along.

Lazarus: Let’s eat! (I’m staying out of this.)

[Q] How would you best describe this story? (Prepare to defend your answer!)

☐ Sibling rivalry. Jesus liked Mary best and Martha didn’t like it.

☐ Works versus grace. Jesus was teaching Martha that her good works couldn’t earn his love.

☐ A lesson on worry. Jesus was teaching Martha to trust him and he’d provide.

☐ The priority of worship. Jesus was saying that worshiping him was better than work.

☐ Women’s lib. Mary was breaking male-female stereotypes. Why couldn’t Lazarus help Martha in the kitchen?

☐ Other: _____________________________________________

[Q] Why do you think it’s difficult for some people to be their true selves in a group of people?

Leader’s Note: While this question asks for generic responses (how “some people” have this difficulty), your aim is to help group members be honest even with this question. You know your group; if you think it will help, follow up with, “Do any of you have this difficulty? If so, how?”

[Q] Let’s discuss this group. What obstacles do you sense that might keep any of us from being ourselves?

Leader’s Note: This could be a very important discussion for your group. It could help you move past whatever issues may be keeping you from sharing honestly and therefore growing spiritually together. This question may take vulnerability as well as trust on everyone’s part. As the leader, you should be prepared to graciously listen to people’s opinions and ideas, especially if any of the barriers have to do with you and your leadership!

[Q] How do honesty and vulnerability help lead to spiritual growth in people?

Leader’s Note: You might follow up with a question such as, “What’s the connection between transparency and spiritual maturity?”

Teaching Point Two: Spiritual friends talk about difficult issues.


Again notice Martha’s brutal honesty with Jesus. She was not afraid to vent her feelings and frustrations. The conversation between them is remarkable. Right there by the side of
Fostering Faith-Shaping Friendships

The Life-Changing Impact of Spiritual Friendships

the road, they were talking about the deepest, most difficult things human beings can talk about: sickness, sorrow, suffering, loss, death, tragedy, and the life to come. Martha wasn’t afraid to ask Jesus a hard question, and Jesus didn’t hesitate to stretch Martha’s thinking or to invite her to take the next step of faith.

Spiritual friends are not afraid to face the big questions of life and death. They ask hard questions of themselves, each other, and God. They stretch each other’s thinking. They dare to think out loud with one another. They give each other opportunities to embrace a new truth or take another step of faith. Spiritual friends don’t just show up at the funeral, as important as that is; they find you a week, a month, a year later and they ask, “How are you doing, really, with God?”

It's nice to have friends we can talk to about the weather, the stock market, and the local sports team, but sometimes we need to talk about big things, deep things, hard things. Many folks in our society have no one to have those kinds of conversations with, and that's where spiritual friends come in. They invite us to talk about those things. And that's one of the ways that the TV friends failed each other. They were there for each other through all kinds of life experiences, but they rarely stretched and confronted and challenged one another to become their better selves. They rarely asked the big questions of life, and they never pointed each other toward God.

[Q] How would you characterize the tone of Martha’s comments to Jesus when he first arrived?

- Angry: He should have been there earlier.
- Blaming: If he hadn’t lollygagged, her brother would still be alive.
- Confused: Why did God allow this?
- Joy: Glad Jesus had finally arrived.
- Hopeful: Confident Jesus still could do something.
- Other: ________________________________

[Q] Do you think Martha’s reaction would have been different if she had sat at Jesus’ feet more often, like her sister Mary? Why or why not?

Leader’s Note: There is no correct answer for this; ask people who respond to explain why they feel the way they do. You may want to point out verse 32, in which Mary repeats Martha’s initial statement to Jesus.

[Q] How did Jesus stretch Martha’s thinking and bolster her faith?

[Q] How did Jesus invite Martha to take a next step of faith?

Leader’s Note: Jesus invited her to take a step of faith when he asked a simple question: “Do you believe this?” He gave her an opportunity to respond in faith.
[Q] Why do you think it is important to have people to talk to about the big things, the deep things, the hard things in life?

Teaching Point Three: Spiritual friends are attentive and responsive.
Read John 12:1–8.

Mary was sensitive to what was happening spiritually in this moment. She had been listening when Jesus spoke about his suffering and his death. Her eyes were on Jesus that night, and she detected something in his countenance—a burden, a preoccupation. And when the Spirit prompted her to do something, something risky, she didn’t hesitate. Jesus needed a friend that night. He needed someone in the room to understand the burden he was carrying. He needed someone to remind him of his Father’s presence and the sovereignty of his plan. And Mary of Bethany was there for Jesus that night.

Friends are attentive and responsive spiritually. Sometimes we are so deep in the weeds we can’t even see where we are or where we’re going—but friends can, if they’re paying attention, listening to us and to God, and responsive to the promptings of the Spirit. When we are there for one another, we create a space for God to be present and to do what only God can do—to raise someone to new life or to minister to our deep need. Friends do that.

Spiritual friends pay attention to us and for us. They help us hear God’s voice, feel his touch, and know his will. Do you have a friend like that? Are you that kind of friend to someone?

[Q] In what ways did Mary make a sacrifice for Jesus?

Leader’s Note: An obvious answer is that Mary sacrificed financially for him. The perfume was expensive (v. 3), worth a year’s wages (v. 5). But she also sacrificed her dignity—what people thought or might say about her. Another thing she sacrificed was her glory. Good Jewish women did not let their hair down in public, much less use it to wipe a man’s dirty feet. A woman’s hair was her glory (1 Cor. 11:15).

[Q] If you were Mary, how would you have felt after the criticism of Judas and the other apostles (see Matt. 26:8)?

[Q] Again, if you were Mary, how would you be feeling after Jesus affirmed you and your actions?

[Q] Mary paid attention to what was going on in Jesus’ life and took action. Then Jesus did the same for her. He was paying attention to how she might feel after Judas’s criticism, and he responded. When, recently, did someone show you they were paying attention to you? How did it feel?
Optional Activity

Think of the friends in your life and the people God has put around you, including the people in your small group and church. Consider who among them may need someone to pay attention this upcoming week. List one to three of their names down the left side of a blank page. Now think about ways you might be able to pay attention this week, i.e., a phone call, a visit to pray with them, an invitation to lunch, an act of service, a generous gift. For each person, jot down an idea for how you will pay attention this week. Use this list as a “to do” list for the week.

PART THREE
Apply Your Findings

One small group of friends has been together for only a couple of years, but they have been there for each other through funerals, weddings, new babies, military deployment, job loss, relational breakdowns, and sickness. They’ve also helped each other grow through those experiences. Listen to some of their comments:

“We’ve been sharing our life stories with each other, and it’s helped me to hear other people affirm how God is working in my life.”

“I have never been so confident that a group is praying for me, and they’re always careful to follow up and ask how I’m doing.”

“We talk about how God is part of our lives.”

They compiled a list of all the hard questions that they and their friends are struggling with, and week by week they try to find biblical answers to those questions. Recently they studied the Prodigal Son and discovered, to their disappointment, that most of them are like the older brother. One of them said, “I’ve been challenged to grow beyond an obedience based on fear to an obedience springing from love.” One of the older women in the group has become kind of a mentor to some of the others. She says, “At a time when our youngest will be leaving for college, God has given us a whole new family to encourage, listen to, pray for, and feed.”

Isn’t this what we’re all asking for—for friends? And that’s why the show Friends was so popular. It wasn’t Joey’s jokes about Rachel’s hair. It was the friendships. We all want people who will be there for us. We want people who will let us be our true selves. We want people with whom we can talk about the important issues of life, friends who will pay attention to what God is doing in and around us. We want people who will be there for us in a way that allows God to be there for us as well.
**Action Point:** These kinds of relationships can’t be programmed. They’re found by people who are seeking them, by people who take some initiative, by people who join a group or serve on a team, who introduce themselves to somebody. So if you are saying to yourself, *I wish I had friends like that,* don’t sit around waiting for someone to call you and don’t wait for the church to start a new program. Look around you. This week, ask God to direct you and then take a risk. Introduce yourself to someone. Invite someone for coffee. Open your home. Make yourself available. Make a phone call. Pay attention to the people around you.

Consider how well you allow your friends to be themselves. Brainstorm ways you can better empower them to be themselves and drop any masks they may be holding up. And take the risk to be authentic in front of your friends, too.

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Michael C. Mack
For the past five sessions, we’ve been talking about how God uses spiritual friendships to form our faith, to shape us spiritually. We’ve talked about the things spiritual friends do for each other: we pray for and with each other; we speak God’s Word into each other’s lives; we serve alongside one another; we hold each other accountable. Those are wonderful things, but they sound like things that Christians do for one another. What about all the people in our lives who aren’t Christians—people of other faiths or no faith at all? Is it possible to be spiritual friends with them?

Scripture: John 1:43–51

Based On: The PreachingToday.com sermon series “Living Close,” by Bryan Wilkerson
PART ONE
Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

David Benner says, “Spiritual friends nurture the growth of each other’s inner self and help each other become whole people.” In other words, spiritual friends care for each other’s souls. They take an interest in each other’s spiritual well-being. That may seem obvious, but it’s an important place to start, because it’s the spiritual dimension that sets these kinds of friendships apart from ordinary friendships. It’s this dimension that makes this kind of friendship deep and long-lasting.

Spiritual friendships with people of other faiths or no faith are not only possible, they’re powerful. God uses them to shape us and to accomplish his purposes in our lives and theirs.

That doesn’t mean that friendships with people of other faiths are always easy. Unfortunately, relationships can go sour because of religious differences. Sometimes people get pushy. Sometimes people get offended and feel judged. Religious differences lead to fights as often as they lead to friendships. So how do we cultivate spiritual friendships that lead to growth in both of our lives?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Who are one or two of your friends who are from other faiths or have no faith at all?

[Q] How would you characterize those friendships?

- Cordial, surface-level
- Awkward, tense
- Difficult, judgmental, or in conflict
- Friendly, but non-religious
- Deep, spiritually nurturing
- Other: ______________________________

[Q] If you’ve ever had an opportunity to discuss spiritual beliefs, how did those conversations go?
PART TWO
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Spiritual friends care for each other’s souls.

Read John 1:43–51.

Chances are Philip and Nathaniel grew up together in the same town of Bethsaida. People didn’t move around a lot in those days, so they may have been friends since childhood. They probably went to synagogue together every Sabbath, went to school together, and skipped stones on the Sea of Galilee.

Somewhere along the way, Philip had a personal encounter with Jesus, and he came to believe that Jesus was the one they’d been looking for, the Messiah. What’s the first thing Philip did? He told Nathanael.

Isn’t that what friends do? If you see a good movie, if you get a new job, you call your friends and tell them. You want to share the news with them. You want them to share your experience. It’s natural for friends to do that. Maybe we shouldn’t be so afraid to share our spiritual lives with others. Maybe we need to remind ourselves that it is the ultimate expression of love and concern for another person.

[Q] What evidence do you see in this passage that Philip and Nathaniel were spiritual friends who nurtured one another’s souls?

[Q] Why do you think Philip went to tell Nathaniel that he had just met Jesus?

[Q] How did Philip describe Jesus to Nathaniel? Why do you think he described him this way?

[Q] We would naturally tell a friend about something good that we found. So why does it get so weird when it comes to spiritual things?

[Q] Penn Jillette is a famous magician and also an avid and militant atheist. A fan once gave him a Bible, and Penn appreciated the fact that someone was concerned enough to share that with him. He wrote, “How much would you have to hate someone to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them about it?” How would you respond to that question?

Teaching Point Two: Spiritual friends are honest and invite each other to explore their questions and doubts.

Nathanael was skeptical. He had some difficulties with what Philip was telling him, and he wasn’t afraid to express them out loud. Friends give each other freedom to express their doubts and differences. One Christian wrote,
Over the past five years “M” and I have logged hundreds of miles running together, and in the course of doing so, we have gotten to know each other well. I’d never had a close friend who wasn’t a believer. And consequently, I’ve been asked some of the genuine questions that nonbelievers have. Because our friendship has such a solid foundation, we can think about those things without resentment, hostility, or disrespect. She occasionally attends church with me. We go running after the service and discuss our thoughts and questions about the sermon. My faith is stronger than it was six years ago, and I’m certain my friendship with “M” has played a big role in my growth.

Spiritual friends are honest about their doubts and differences, and that honesty, those differences, help them to explore and seek and discover truth.

Spiritual friends also invite each other to take a closer look: “Come and see.” When it comes to matters of faith, you can only explain so much. Sooner or later, a person has to encounter God personally to make a decision. Spiritual friends simply try to facilitate that encounter.

**[Q]** Why was Nathaniel skeptical about Philip’s discovery?

**Leader’s Note:** The Jews may have looked down on Nazareth because a Roman army garrison was located there. It may have had a bad reputation because of the morals and religion practiced there. Being a true Israelite (v. 47), perhaps Nathaniel was just repeating what he’d always heard about people from that city.

**[Q]** What are some alternative ways Philip could have responded to Nathaniel’s objection?

**Leader’s Note:** Notice what Philip did not say or do. He didn’t take it personally when his friend pushed back. He didn’t get offended. He didn’t get into an argument about the merits of Nazareth as the birthplace of the Messiah. He just told Nathaniel to come and see for himself.

**[Q]** What are some specific ideas for ways you could say “Come and see” to any of your skeptical friends?

**[Q]** Let’s say you have a friend who is skeptical about Jesus and Christianity. Let’s do a brief role play. First, what is one objection this person might have?

**Leader’s Note:** Give the group an opportunity to come up with one objection that a skeptical friend might have. But be sure to keep it to just one objection. If they can’t come up with anything else, suggest that the friend’s objection is this: “I can’t understand how Jesus could be both divine and human. How could he be both at the same time?”

**[Q]** Pretend you are in a discussion with this skeptical friend. How would you handle this without entering into a big debate or long explanations? In other words, how would you invite this person to “Come and see”? 
Leader’s Note: Keep digging with other follow-up questions to help them invite their skeptical friend to keep exploring without providing all the answers. Could they invite him to church, for instance? Could they invite him to read a book with them? Could they invite him to your small group, where these kinds of topics can be openly discussed? What other things can they do to take a “Come and see” attitude?

Teaching Point Three: Spiritual friends know how to trust God.

Spiritual friends know when to get out of the way and leave matters to God. At a certain point, Philip recognized that he was never going to convince his friend to believe in Jesus. Nathanael was going to have to meet Jesus for himself. When they reached Jesus, Philip wisely shut up and got out of the way. And soon Nathanael became a believer.

Sooner or later every person has to come to his or her own decision about God, and that decision cannot be forced. Friends don’t pressure each other. They simply get the conversation started, bringing their friend as close to Jesus as possible, and then get out of the way and trust God to do his work.

“We don’t take God to anybody,” says Jerry Root, a widely-known leader and author. “He’s already there and already more interested in that person than we are. We’re just there to listen, to ask questions, and watch for God to show up.” There’s something liberating about that. We don’t have to make things happen. In fact, we can’t make things happen. That’s God’s responsibility. All we have to do is befriend people, care for their souls, share good news when we have it, be honest about our differences, invite them to take a closer look, and then get out of the way and leave them in God’s hands.

[Q] If you were in Nathaniel’s shoes, how would you have reacted to Jesus’ statements when you first met him?

- Shock: How does he know?
- Violated: Has he been stalking me?
- Surprise: Maybe Philip was right about this guy.
- Curiosity: I want to know more.
- Intimacy: He knows *everything* about me, and he still seems to like me!
- Other: __________________________________________________________

[Q] If you were in Philip’s shoes, what would you be thinking as Jesus and Nathaniel talked?

[Q] How does it feel to know that you don’t have to save people, that you *can’t* save people, that that’s God’s job?
[Q] What are some things you can do to help a friend meet Jesus?

**Leader’s Note:** To keep the discussion moving, ask members to consider other things you’ve been learning in this study about being a spiritual friend.

### Optional Activity

One of the main things we can do as Christ followers to help our friends come to know Jesus is to pray for them. Rather than pushing and pressuring, we can wisely shut up and get out of the way—but we can keep on praying, allowing God to do what only he can do in our friend’s life. With that in mind, take a moment and write out a prayer for a friend who does not yet know Jesus. In your prayer, turn your friend’s salvation over to God. Ask him to do specific things in the life of your friend. Ask the Holy Spirit to change your friend’s heart. Ask God to give you opportunities to minister to your friend.

### PART THREE

**Apply Your Findings**

Lisa and Hal are spiritual friends who met at an interfaith dialogue between a church and a nearby synagogue. People from both congregations gathered together for six weeks and discussed a variety of spiritual topics. Lisa talked about meeting Hal:

When he walked into the room, he brought joy and laughter with him. Hal was 74, and I really enjoyed hearing about his Jewish heritage and their traditions. I became fast friends with him and his wife Mary Danna. We got together often and talked for hours about food and travel and spiritual topics. Hal was honest; he didn’t believe in Jesus, but he loved to study the Bible. He knew what I believed, and he respected my views.

One day I got a call from Hal. He told me that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Though he didn’t believe in God, he asked if we could pray for him, and I said, “Of course.” When I visited, Hal was the same mischievous, joyful, funny guy, and he seemed resigned to his fate.

One Sunday Hal and Mary Danna attended Lisa’s church. At the time, Lisa said, he seemed strong. Soon after, however, when Lisa was out of town on business, Hal called her at six in the morning. He said, “I miss you. I want to visit as soon as possible.” So they arranged a visit when she returned home. When she saw Hal, he looked frail but still joyful. Lisa says about this experience,
We spent most of the day talking about spiritual things, and Hal said he had experienced God’s love through me, through many in his family, and through many of the friends he met at our church. We talked about death, and we talked about Jesus. He was oddly excited to tell me all the plans for his funeral. And he talked passionately about the causes he believed in. He said he wanted people’s money to go to those causes; he didn’t want them to buy flowers.

Hal died two days later. I miss him terribly, even today. Hal made me a better person through our friendship. He gave me a greater love and respect for those who come from different cultures and backgrounds and those who believe differently than I do. Knowing Hal changed the way I follow Christ.

**Action Point:** Think about the friends God has placed in your life, maybe friends who still are far from God. This week, be especially attentive to what he might be doing in their lives, to which friends might need to hear some good news or get an invitation to come and see. Identify at least three ways to invite people to come and see. How might you invite a friend to come and see this week?

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Michael C. Mack