



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Moving Beyond Friendly to Friendship
(*Friendship*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Practice of Christian Friendship
(*Friendship*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Moving Beyond Friendly to Friendship

Friendship is so much more than being friendly to one another. As friends are open to the workings of God's grace and share their lives according to certain demanding rules, their love links to the chain of God's love.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 18:24

Responsive Reading: Sirach 6:7-8, 11-12, 14-17

When you gain friends, gain them through testing,
and do not trust them hastily.

For there are friends who are such when it suits them,
but they will not stand by you in time of trouble.

**When you are prosperous, they become your second self,
and lord it over your servants;
but if you are brought low, they turn against you,
and hide themselves from you.**

Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter:
whoever finds one has found a treasure.

**Faithful friends are beyond price;
no amount can balance their worth.**

Faithful friends are life-saving medicine;
and those who fear the Lord will find them.

**Those who fear the Lord direct their friendship aright,
for as they are, so are their neighbors also.**

Reflection

Some people merely "play at friendship," Proverbs warns, but others stick to their friends closely. Finding a faithful friend is like discovering a priceless treasure—a "life-saving medicine," Jesus ben Sira observes. We should seek our friends carefully.

Where can we find such trustworthy people? Are they hiding? The sage's advice now takes a startling turn: it's not *where* we look, but *who* looks and *how*. "Those who fear the Lord direct their friendship aright" — under God's grace, we become the right sort of friends ourselves, and so we improve our friends — "for as they are, so are their neighbors also" (Sirach 6:17).

Fourth-century Christians, says Carolinne White, built a winsome ideal of friendship from pre-Christian as well as scriptural sources. With the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle they prized friendships based on virtue — on "a shared commitment to moral improvement, usually by means of the friends' encouraging, advising, and even criticizing each other, if it is done for the other's good" — rather than just pleasure or usefulness. But as Christians transposed this shared search for wisdom and goodness into a scriptural context, "the search became a focus on and a love of God, set against a conviction that true friendships are a gift from God." They drew the radical conclusion that friendship unites all who love God; and if this seems impossible to realize now, it will be true in a future life together with God.

Christians also gathered from Greek and Roman sources "advice about the day-to-day practice of friendship — the need for loyalty, the



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advisability of limiting the number of friends you had, the need to demonstrate your affection in practical terms, the ways of telling a flatterer from a true friend, and so on." To this body of practical wisdom they added their own insights drawn from living in intentional communities and reflecting on Scripture. For example, the following guidelines for friendship from Abba Joseph (which John Cassian presents in *The Conferences*) clearly echo Paul's teachings in Philippians 2:1-4:

- ▶ *Reject all the things of this world and give priority to your love for your friend.*
- ▶ *Restrain your own will, so that you do not think you always know better than your friend.*
- ▶ *Realize that nothing is as valuable as love and peace.*
- ▶ *Don't allow yourself to become angry.*
- ▶ *Try to alleviate resentment your friend is harboring against you.*
- ▶ *Live as though each day is your last, for this attitude will put all transitory feelings and minor irritations into perspective.*

Abba Joseph, a leader among the Desert Christians, is urging us to "maintain love by working hard at cultivating a spirit of humility, patience, and harmony of wills in all matters, by means of calm discussion and a shared desire for truth," White concludes.

Study Questions

1. How would you describe the difference between merely being friendly and gaining and maintaining a friendship?
2. Discuss how Abba Joseph's six rules for friendship reflect or extend Paul's teachings in Philippians 2:1-4. Do any of his rules seem strange or difficult from our perspective today?
3. Do you think true friendship is easier or more difficult to maintain today than in the fourth century, as described by Carolinne White? What barriers exist now to friendships based on virtue, or a shared striving for goodness?
4. What is the purpose of friendship? Discuss White's view that "the success of the friendship will be proved by the happiness and love emanating from the friends and this will inevitably have a positive impact on the world around them."

Departing Hymn: "Rest of the Weary" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

Rest of the weary, joy of the sad,
hope of the dreary, light of the glad;
home of the stranger, strength to the end,
refuge from danger, Savior and Friend!

When my feet stumble, to you I'll cry,
crown of the humble, cross of the high;
when my steps wander, over me bend
truer and fonder, Savior and Friend!

Ever confessing you, I will raise
unto you blessing, glory and praise:
all my endeavor, world without end,
yours to be ever, Savior and Friend!

John S. B. Monsel (1863), alt.

Suggested Tune: ADELAIDE

Moving Beyond Friendly to Friendship

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the nature and value of true friendship based on virtue (or, a shared commitment to advance in goodness) in light of early Christian writings.
2. To examine how such friendship places practical demands on the friends.
3. To weigh the prospects for and barriers to true friendship today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Friendship (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Rest of the Weary” locate the familiar tune ADELAIDE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

The fourth-century Desert Christians believed true friendship requires us to grow in humility, obedience, and renunciation of our willfulness. They told this story to illustrate the winsome gentleness of true friends: “One [monk] said to the other, ‘Let’s have a quarrel with each other, as other men do.’ The other answered, ‘I don’t know how a quarrel happens.’ The first said, ‘Look here, I put a brick between us, and I say, “That’s mine.” Then you say, “No, it’s mine.” That is how you begin a quarrel.’ So they put a brick between them, and one of them said, ‘That’s mine.’ The other said, ‘No; it’s mine.’ He answered, ‘Yes, it’s yours. Take it away.’ They were unable to argue with each other” (*The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, 17.22, translated by Benedicta Ward).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for guiding us to true friends and leading us to mature spiritually with them.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Proverbs 18:24 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This discussion is the first in a series of study guides on the nature of true friendship and its role in Christian discipleship. In this study Carolinne White, a noted translator and interpreter of early Christian writings in Latin, explores the meaning of true friendship in two ways: after she reflects on how today we typically distinguish “being friendly” to strangers or acquaintances from “being a true friend” in a deep and lasting relationship, she throws light on our understanding of friendship by comparing it to a rich ideal of friendship developed by Christian writers in the fourth century.

In late antiquity when the empire was fading and the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome were in restless turmoil, Christians enjoyed new religious freedoms, access to education in ancient scholarship, and opportunities to network with one another and reflect on their heritage. During this formative period of Christian thinking, they wove a new theory of friendship from pre-Christian resources, reflection on Scripture, and their personal experiences in forming intentional communities to resist the corrosive power of the empire. Their account of true friendship is a good place for us to start our thinking together.

Study Questions

1. Carolinne White suggests that we can be friendly toward “each person we meet, whether or not we know him or her. Such behavior would involve showing a degree of kindness, concern, and cheerfulness in our interactions with others – in short, making other people feel that we were pleased to have dealings with them, however fleetingly.” Friendship, on the other hand, is a lasting “relationship between two or a few people who appreciate something special and different in each other, who enjoy each other’s company, and generally see eye-to-eye about a variety of matters.” Friendliness can be “a superficial kind of human solidarity,” she writes. “If, however, friendliness is open to God’s grace and does develop into friendship, it will be transformed into a relationship of continuity, stability, and trust. It will also be distinguished by the fact that it is a mutual relationship, and I suspect that this is a key feature of the special value of friendship, a feature that enriches the relationship immeasurably, miraculously.”
2. Rules two through four reflect Paul’s teaching that we live together “without selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility” (Philippians 2:3). The first rule extends the instruction to “look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:4). The sixth rule – that we should live as though each day were our last – is not drawn from Philippians 2:1-4, but is commonplace Christian thought in late antiquity. We are to measure persons and events by their eternal significance and to live in light of God’s judgment – as Christ (e.g., Matthew 25:1-13) and Paul (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5:9-10) teach us.

In our more individualist, rights-oriented era, what can we learn from Abba Joseph’s restatement of Paul’s teaching on humility? Is there value to living each day as if it were our last? Pastoral instruction must be tailored to the spiritual condition of hearers. How would you restate Joseph’s rules for Christians today?

3. Ask one group to brainstorm how true friendship is more difficult today than in the fourth century. We have a more consumerist, competitive, and envious stance toward colleagues. We desire independence from our families and communities, and so on. Many of us leave friends to pursue education, maintain a career, seek medical care, or live in a more desirable place. We dwell in more isolated houses and live in larger, more impersonal cities. Friendships based on virtue are more difficult because our religious, ideological, and ethnic differences push us toward different ideas about the common good.

Ask a second group to think about how true friendship is easier today. New technologies help us to meet people with a common vision and maintain friendship across the miles. We can afford to travel great distances to be with friends. Many of us work on common projects closely with other people who have similar interests.

4. We make friends for various reasons – to have a bridge partner, help us master new tasks at work, be our spouse, etc. Ancient writers thought friendships based on a shared striving for goodness were more lasting and enriching relationships. In each case we love our friends in themselves and not just because they help us, give us pleasure, or spur us to moral growth. Some friendships are more abounding in care for other people and a needful world. But can love and happiness emanate from every friendship to have a positive impact on the world?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.