

Closer Than a Brother

Building
Deeper
Friendships

Sven Eriksson

CLOSER THAN A BROTHER ≈ MEN'S SERIES

Closer Than a Brother

Building Deeper Friendships



by Sven Eriksson

Faith & Life
Resources



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CLOSER THAN A BROTHER:
by Sven Eriksson

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Welcome to this study!



*Two are better than one,
because they have a good reward for their toil.
—Ecclesiastes 4:9*

Garrison Keillor, the beloved American radio humorist, sports with how most men in North America relate with one another. In his *Book of Guys*, he notes that “guys don’t talk to each other. We paw up dirt, we bang antlers, we sometimes graze side by side, but we seldom talk.” Strong, silent types, in other words, seem to have come to control the herd.

At the same time, a number of writers and movements have challenged that reality and have given voice to how men feel about themselves and about each other. The book *Iron John* by poet Robert Bly got much of the movement going when it was published in 1990. This book has touched deep levels of pain among men, calling them to join together to explore their inner lives, and to affirm their common quest of strong manhood. Men are continuing to read this book because he addresses their inner needs and feelings from a strongly masculine perspective.

Movements like the evangelical Promise Keepers in the 1990s and the Million Man March

If you are the group leader ...

Please see the section, “How to use this booklet” and other notes in the “Leader’s Guide” on page 41.

of March 16, 1995, touched a deep nerve in the culture that Garrison Keillor describes. They revealed that there is a new interest among men in getting together for personal interaction in groups.

God evidently does not intend all of us to be rich, or powerful, or great, but He does intend us all to be friends.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

One place such interaction is happening is in the synagogue of Rabbi Steven Z. Leder of Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles . Leder has adapted the tradition of the *minyan*—a group of ten men who gather in the early morning or late afternoon to pray. In his book, *The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things*, he describes the group thus: “Sixty of us age 22 to 75, married, single, divorced, meet once every month for dinner and a discussion led by a facilitator about a predetermined topic. Tempting as it might be, we don’t talk about sports, business, or politics. Instead we’ve talked about our fathers, workaholism, marriage, women and sex. We have plunged into new uncharted waters for most of us. We are sharing our stories.”

Closer Than a Brother, along with the series that bears the same name, is also part of this movement. It is designed to help facilitate talk among men who get together in groups. The topic we will talk about is especially relevant to the whole movement, because it is: friendship. As we talk about friendship in the group and, if possible, in one-on-one discussions as well, we hope new and stronger friendships will emerge and multiply beyond the sessions.

“To live without friends is to live like a beast,” said Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century English Cistercian monk. How do men connect meaning-

fully in a culture where men, to use Keillor's image, just paw at the dirt and lock antlers from time to time? How can we move beyond being "buddies" on the hockey or basketball team to levels of trust and even the kind of accountability that belong to real friendship? We hope these sessions will be catalysts for sharing your stories—stories of where you come from and what has shaped you; stories of your faith journey; and of the shape your hopes and fears are taking today.

Session 1—Are We Friends or Just Buddies?

We begin with the nature of friendship between men. There is an ache for deeper experiences of friendship, yet there are also fears. The story of David's friendship with Jonathan will open the questions for us. To what extent are our golf games and our work-projects distractions from more significant friendships? How do differences in wealth and status figure into our friendships? What would an ideal friendship-covenant look like?

Session 2—I Need a Friend

Why do we need friends? We will explore how our need for friendship is not a weakness but a powerful gift with enormous potential that has been created within us and between us. Friendship is an issue of creation's design. We will explore how both David and Jesus needed a friend, and how their friendship flourished. Then, we will have opportunity to discuss the needs and motives that draw us together as friends.

Session 3—The Down and Dirty of True Friendships

This study explores the “how” of friendship between men. Friendship requires a well-honed set of skills. With the help of the book of Proverbs we will discuss important disciplines for friendship: commitment, communication, and grace. We will reflect together, from our various experiences, on the workings of healthy friendships and what makes a good friendship flourish.

Session 4—Friendship Meltdown

Friendship always includes experiences of success and failure. Sometimes the failures seem irreversible and leave us discouraged. We will explore reasons that friendships break down: neglect, misunderstanding, suffering, and betrayal. But sometimes friendships end for important reasons. When should some friendships fail? We will explore these questions in the context of Jesus’ restoration of friendship to his disciple Peter, who had betrayed him.

Session 5—Spiritual Companionship

God has designed our friendships to lead to spiritual growth. Our friendships are opportunities to mentor one another so that we will grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. In this session we will discover key components to nurturing a

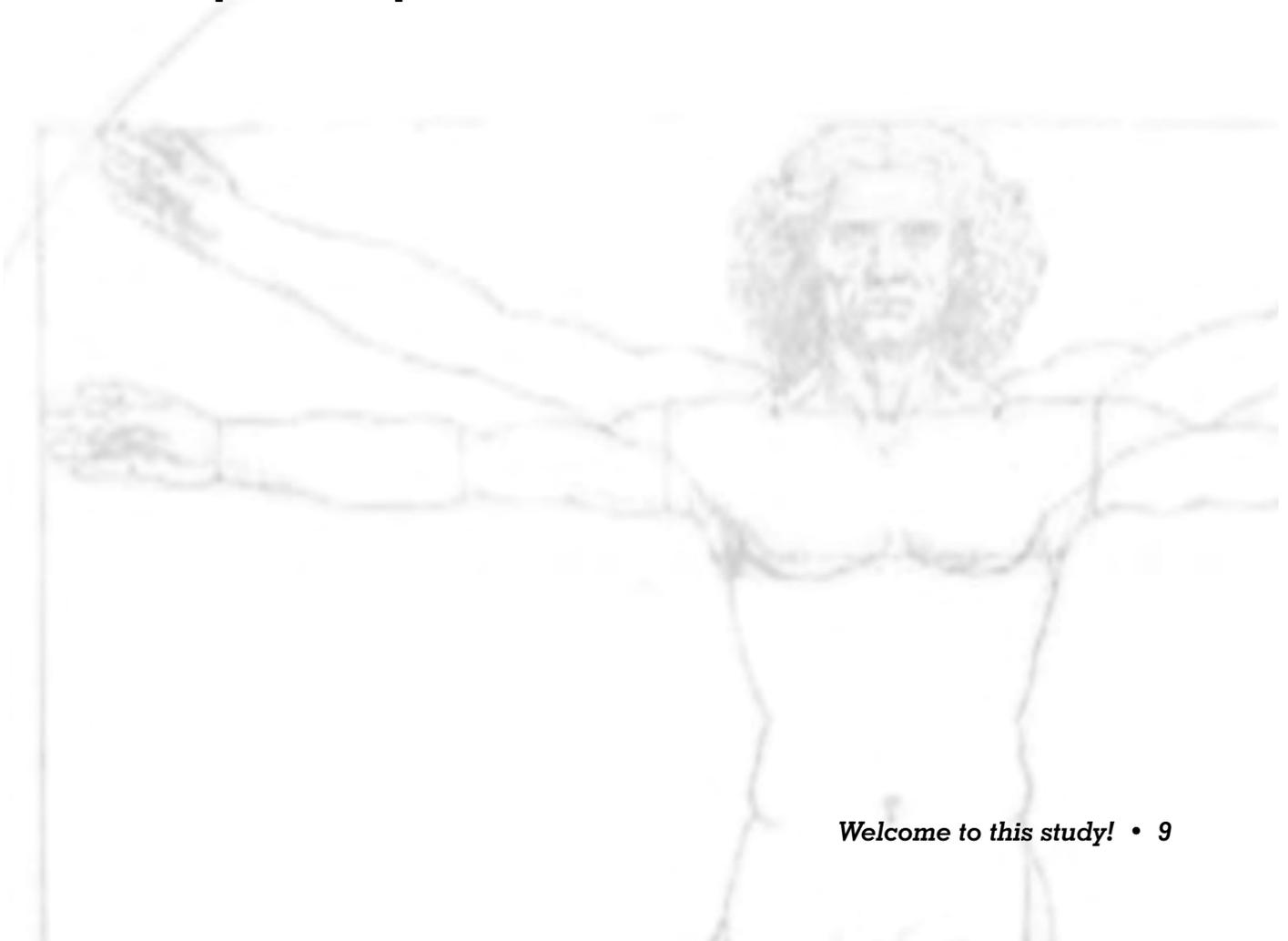
Sure we have friends: our racquetball partner, our poker buddies, our bar, our board room. But they’re not like the deep, whole friendship that women cultivate with ease. Our friendship with other men tend to be limited; intense in some areas—

sports, business, politics—and silent about most other. It’s no wonder I never thought of other men as people. How can we ever know each other, how can we ever be understood, in silence?

—Steven Z. Leder, in *The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things*

spiritual relationship with another. Insights will be drawn from the remarkable story of Barnabas's mentoring of Saul, who later became Paul, the apostle.

In these sessions the goal will be to talk to one another and to tell our stories. We want to gain insight, feel a deeper sense of belonging and support, and to really enjoy being together. As we launch out, we can be confident that God is working in us and among us, showing us the way of wisdom as we discern matters of the heart together. Along the way we will find guidance in the authority of God's Word. We will base our trust in God's mercy and grace mediated to us through Jesus Christ. There may well be some "antler-banging" and "pawing the dirt together" but there should also be some real moves toward understanding and experiencing deeper friendship.





Session 1

Are We Friends or Just Buddies?

In our society men spend time together but often avoid talking about what really matters in their lives. Deep friendship and loyalty between men is not only possible, but also important for personal growth.

Opening worship

Hymn: "Heart with Loving Heart United." (HWB 420).

Prayer:

In a time of silence, take a few moments to: (1) name the friendship that has been the most important to you in your life; and (2) name the one thing you have most longed for in your connections with other men. Then pray the following:

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 43.

God, you have created us in your image. We have the capacity to know and to be known, to love and to be loved, to extend friendship and to accept friendship. Thank you for the gifts of friendship in our lives, and in this group. We also name the pain and the emptiness we sometimes feel when we see

that our friendships are not all that we want them to be. We acknowledge that we are sometimes fearful of deeper friendships. Grant us the wisdom and courage to learn and to grow in our friendships. We pray in the name of Jesus, who called his disciples friends and gave his life for them. Amen.

Exploring the topic

As a way of entering the topic, read and discuss the following quote from Rabbi Steven Z. Leder:

Most all-male environments in the western world are gone. Don't get me wrong—organizations that excluded women and denied them power they rightly deserved in society should be gone. But in the process men lost the opportunity to create something they need ...: times and places to talk and to be with each other.

There are a few places left—sports bars, strip joints, and hunting trips. But men don't really go to these places to be with other men in meaningful ways; they go there to get away from women. These few remaining arenas of male exclusivity are mostly places conducive to piggish oinking or passive spectating. We sit in stadiums by the hundreds and thousands, week after week, watching but not talking—at least not about anything that matters."

—from *The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things*

Do you agree that when men get together their interaction tends to be as superficial as Leder suggests? Why? Why not? In light of what Leder

Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods.

—C.S.Lewis

says, tell about what has drawn you to this study group. What are your hopes?

Read aloud 1 Samuel 17:50—18:1-4

A “friend,” according to *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, is “one attached to another by esteem, respect and affection.” Each of these qualities describes the remarkable friendship between Prince Jonathan and the young shepherd and future king, David. The first meeting between the two occurred just after David had accomplished a feat that seasoned generals had been afraid to try: killing Goliath, the military champion who had mocked and humiliated the forces of Israel.

Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin.

—*Proverbs 18:24*

We find the young shepherd, David, “before Saul.” The generals and the “who is who” of Saul’s court are gathered around, observing him in amazement. If CNN had been on location, a microphone would have been shoved in David’s face and an eager reporter would have begun to ask him to give a blow-by-blow account of how he did it. We can imagine Jonathan, too, watching David, a teenager like himself, standing before the court with Goliath’s head still hanging by the hair from his fist.

In the middle of this story of blood and war, the tone changes dramatically: “When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (v. 1). Strong feelings of admiration and affection welled up in Jonathan, as he observed David. It’s obvious in the circumstances that he was impressed with David’s qualities of courage, humility, and strength.

The storyteller thus puts the feeling of one man toward another at centre stage. Jonathan's response is not unusual among men. Haven't most of us felt awe and admiration when we have watched an athlete do the unbelievable, or observed a business partner trump our biggest competitor? Cheering for a great act of courage or skill is something we tend to do easily.

Jonathan's response, however, went deeper. This was not casual admiration mixed with envy. 'Jonathan loved him as his own soul' (v.1). Then Jonathan did two things: First, he made a covenant with David, then gave him his robe, armour, and weapons (vv.3-5). These actions were not just a spontaneous show of generosity; they carried great symbolic meaning. As the crown prince, Jonathan was acknowledging David's princely qualities.

What was going on in Jonathan's mind? We are not told, but the story goes on to show that this gesture was dangerous for both David and Jonathan. It was prophetic. This newfound friendship began to have far-reaching impact. David would eventually become king, and Jonathan would not. This is at least partly responsible for the rages of King Saul (see subsequent passages in 1 Samuel). Saul's dynasty was at risk. He may not have been as "mad" as some have suggested; he simply saw the shape of the future.

We see here the huge power differential between a crown prince and a rustic shepherd. What future could there be for a friendship between a prince and a shepherd from the country? As the story unfolds the power positions are reversed. It

begins with an unlikely shepherd hero who is befriended by the crown prince. And it will end with Jonathan as a captain in David's rebel army and David destined to become king.

Remarkably, their friendship never ended through these reversals. Assassination attempts, politics, and war all proved unequal to the strength of their friendship.

As David's success as a warrior drew the raves of the people, Saul's jealousy made life unsafe for David. Jonathan found himself in a precarious family triangle of conflicting feelings and interests. He responded to his father's plot to kill David by choosing to warn David(19:2). Remaining true to his covenant with David meant defying his father's authority.

This saga shows that true friendship is not something to enjoy just as long as it is to your advantage. Friendship involves a quality of covenant that is ready to make sacrifices. Covenant is not necessarily spoken or formal, but it is a necessary ingredient for true friendship. It involves the promise to remain true, to be faithful to the friend, even when it costs you.

Food for thought 1: God's loneliest creatures

"I never really thought of men as people. My father wasn't a person—he was a set of standards I could never meet, and he was almost always at the office. My male classmates were to be outdone and my male congregants to be served. Most of the men in my life were either competitors, clients or strangers. Like most men, I never really left the junior high locker room where the main thing was to

measure up. For me and for so many others, to be a man among men meant to talk around things and to keep my guard up; to carry the unique weight of manhood in mighty silence. Men are God's loneliest creatures."

—Steven Z. Leder in *The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things*

As we will see in Session 2, the drama of Saul's jealousy takes further twists and turns. The initial covenant of friendship is reconfirmed and deepened to include their descendants and the promise of each protecting the other's families in the future (1 Samuel 20:14-16, 42).

The emotional cost of this friendship is immense. You can feel the fear and danger in reading this story. In 1 Samuel 20:8, for example, David expresses great anguish when he says, "If there is guilt in me, kill me yourself; why should you bring me to your father?" Jonathan reaffirms his determination to protect David. Later, Jonathan experiences the wrath of his father, who tells him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established" (20:30, 31).

The final meeting between Jonathan and David also ends with deep emotion: "[David]...bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more" (20:41).

Talking it through

In dyads or in smaller groups, discuss or do one or more of the following:

1. At the heart of Jonathan and David's friendship is deep affection. Talk about your reactions to the way Jonathan and David relate to each other. What longings, fears, and ques-

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

—*John 15:13*

tions does it arouse in you? What in your experience or in your culture makes you react that way?

2. What role do wealth and power play in male friendships? Tell stories from your own experience. To what extent do they compromise friendship? What does the story of Jonathan and David tell you about how those challenges might be overcome.
3. Faithfulness was the central strength of Jonathan's friendship with David. Talk about someone (a male) who has been your faithful friend, and to whom you look for modeling in friendship.
4. In pairs, draft a written covenant of friendship that expresses what you would like to experience in an ideal male friendship, based on what you have seen in the friendship between Jonathan and David. The covenant should not be a covenant that you would actually commit

Food for thought 2: No agenda

Each of us has contact with hundreds of people who never look beyond our surface appearance. We have dealings with hundreds of people who the moment they set eyes on us begin to calculate what we can be to them, what they can get out of us. We meet hundreds of people who take one look at us, make a snap judgment, and then slot us into category so that they won't have to deal with us as persons. They treat us as something less than what we are, and if we're in constant association with, we become less.

And then someone enters our life who isn't looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what's really going on in us is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what's deepest within us. A friend.

—Eugene H. Peterson in *Leap Over a Wall*

to with your partner (unless you are already in a strong, trusting relationship). Then, in the larger group, share these covenants as you are able. Set these covenants aside for review and revision at the end of Session 5.

Closing

Our inner journey in this chapter may have given us conflicted feelings. The outgoing part of us spurs us to open up and join in. But another part of us resists. Vulnerability and a sense of inadequacy betray us as unworthy. So, the lone-wolf and the pack-runner that live inside battle it out. Who will win?

As a group spend a brief period in silent meditation.

Pray together:

O Lord, give us courage to trust.
To trust our inner voice that calls for openness and friendship,
To trust one another with our strengths and our weaknesses,
To trust you, O Lord, whose spirit is transforming us into a community of healing and hope.



Session 2

I Need a Friend

Most of us are trained to be self-reliant and independent. True friendship means being vulnerable enough to admit our need and to allow others to complete our lives through mutual sharing of gifts.

Opening worship

Hymn: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"
(HWB 573).

Prayer

Take a moment to reflect on the following two questions in silence:

1. What are some of the reasons you get together with guy-friends?
2. Do you have to work at your friendships, or do they just seem to happen naturally?

Then read Psalm 139:1-10 together, responsively, if possible.

Take a few moments of silence to meditate on these verses. Ruminant over the word or the phrase to which you felt the most drawn. Then allow time for anyone to offer short prayers of response.

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 43.

Exploring the topic

To have friends and to be a friend involve facing our inner needs for personal companionship. Here is where a lot of us get stuck. We just do not like feeling vulnerable. We don't want to appear weak or needy. So we tend to choose to talk about work, sports, and politics rather than disclose what we are really thinking about or feeling.

If we want to cultivate meaningful and lasting friendships with other men, however, we'll need to learn to be vulnerable. According to the Bible's creation accounts, men and women were created in "the image of God" (Genesis 1:27). Love in relationship is at the very center of our Creator's character. As the New Testament declares, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). If that is true, our capacities and our needs for this level of friendship are creations of God, and therefore positive signs of wellness.

Read aloud Genesis 2:18-23

The first man is described in the creation account with this striking comment from God: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The fact that these words introduce the entry of a woman on the scene does not mean that our only need is for humans of the opposite gender. In fact, between God's comment and the creation of Eve, the text tells us that God presented Adam with animals for companionship, instructing him to name them. Yet none of them was an adequate partner. Adam needed human companionship! This story speaks to our need for one another, for friendship, both female and male.

No man is an island
—John Donne

Friendship, therefore, is our creation birthright. The ongoing drama of the Bible illustrates over and over that we were created for relationships, and that our lives flourish or break around the health of our relationships.

I have called you
friends.

—Jesus

The third chapter of the Bible is a drama about the breaking of relationship. Adam and Eve's relationship with God is broken when they turn from God in defiance of his declared intention for them. We see their response to the presence of God turn into fear and shame. They hide. They cover themselves when they become aware of the presence of God (Genesis 3:8-10). Their relationship to one another is also broken. Blaming and off-loading responsibility onto others begins as Adam blames Eve for his taking the forbidden fruit. (Genesis 3:12). This fall also sets off an imbalance in power in relationships; God foretells how man will "rule over" woman (Genesis 3:16b).

A psychiatrist friend once remarked to me that Genesis 3 contains all the elements that she encounters in her work with broken people. As a pastor, I understood. I too was seeing those who were hiding from God and others because of shame. I counseled many whose lives have been distorted by the abuse of power. How often I saw folks "passing the buck" to others about the choices that they had made? Because of broken relationships many were isolating themselves rather than finding healing and restoration in relationships.

These texts, along with the wisdom of the great religions and human experience in general, give us a clear message: we need others. Without

friends we are not ourselves; we are not what we were meant to be. Meaningful relationships are part of God's fundamental design for us. As the seventeenth-century poet John Donne wrote: "No man (sic) is an island."

Still, we sometimes have conflicted feelings about our need for others. We resent this need because it stings our pride. We have been more shaped by John Wayne's macho independence than by the spirit of Jesus or the example of David. These both modeled the giving and receiving of close friendship with other men.

Food for thought 1: Why do you need friends?

Two well-known Christian writers offer two different ideas of why we need friends. Which one do you agree with most?

C. S. Lewis

Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure. The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."

—*The Four Loves*

Friends are not primarily absorbed in each other. It is when we are doing something together that friendship springs up—painting, sailing, praying.... Friends look in the same direction. Lovers look at each other: that is in the opposite direction.

—*Essays by C. S. Lewis, edited by Walter Hooper*

Frederick Buechner

Friends are people you make part of your life, just because you feel like it.... Basically your friends are not your friends for any particular reason. They are your friends for no particular reason. The job you do, the family you have, the way you vote, the major achievements and blunders of your life, your religious convictions or lack of them, are all somehow set off to one side when the two of you are together.

—*Listening to your*

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools

—*Martin Luther King*

As we reflect on the friendship of Jonathan and David (see Session 1), we observe a number of rewards from the interdependence of true friendship. Jonathan served David as a protective patron, bringing him into the royal household, with all its comforts and privileges. Through Jonathan's friendship David received strategic intelligence that saved his life more than once. As the descriptions of their friendship clearly show, the mutual bond between them was important for their well-being

It is true that friendships bring risks of breakdown and misunderstanding (which we will touch on Session 4). David experienced the best and the worst of friendships. One disappointment was the mutual friendship he enjoyed with King Nahash of Ammon. When this king died, David chose to show kindness to Nahash's son Hanum.

The son responded to David's overtures of kindness with suspicion and hostility and war broke out between the two nations (see 2 Samuel 10:2-3). Thus, even the best intention to offer friendship was misunderstood. There were other, even more painful, disappointments in David's career, including the uprising of his own son, Absalom. Such betrayals show up in the Psalms, often attributed to David (see Psalm 55:12-14, for example).

The only way to avoid pain is to never have a friend, because, in friendship we risk trusting one another, and there will be some who will break that trust. Yet it is that vulnerability to risk that also makes for personal growth. Like David, we are human. We need help. We have hearts

that call us to give and to share. We are called to do great things that we cannot do on our own.

Read John 15:12-15

Jesus himself needed friends. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, we are told that our Lord called the twelve disciples not only to be sent to proclaim the good news but also "to be with him" (Mark 3:14). As the Son of God, he was whole, untainted by the brokenness of sin—yet he was also human. He needed his friends for companionship and support. He carried on his rounds of teaching and healing surrounded by his disciples and an inner circle of intimate friends, including Peter, James, and John. In addition, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were special friends in whose home he would find a place to retreat from the crowds.

On the last evening before his crucifixion, Jesus shared a time of intimate self-disclosure with his disciples, in which he declared his friendship. "I

Food for thought 2: Finding friends

From the "get-go" men approach other men as potential friends with a built-in handicap. We are not supposed to look like we need a friend or that we are looking for one. In contrast, women tend to have less difficulty articulating their needs and finding connectedness.

As we move into a new city, job, or church, we tend to want to appear strong and invincible. Naturally we "put our best foot forward." Consequently, we look for friends in a way that no one will know that we are looking. We become masters of indirection. We hope to end up meeting someone with whom we will click.

Sometimes we even depend on our wives to take the leadership in the social department, and we take a more passive role.

Allowing our needs to show feels awkward. The result of our indirection can be loneliness and social isolation.

Finding a new friend requires a start. Each start requires one person to take a step as simple as asking someone his name at the queue for the potluck dinner.

have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father”(John 15:15). As we see from the story of Jesus’ passion, these same disciples would betray, deny, and abandon him, but Jesus was willing to be vulnerable enough to risk such disappointments. He knew that friendship was too valuable not to accept the risks as well as the benefits.

Talking it through

In dyads or in smaller groups, discuss one or more of the following:

1. In “Food for thought 1” C.S. Lewis says that friendship is about something—common interests and commitments. Frederick Buechner says that friendship is not about anything; you are friends just because you

Food for thought: 3 Highlights in low moments

There have been crisis moments in my life that have been redeemed by friendship. Early in my seminary studies, an eruption of doubt with my sense of calling to ministry was threatening to become a crisis. What was I doing at seminary? I felt profoundly unqualified. Then my friend listened to my questions, confusion, and turmoil. His listening gave me renewed perspective and hope. The doubts and struggles were redeemed. As a result, instead of being defeated, I was able to persevere.

My friend gave me two simple gifts. First was the gift of availability, of simply being there. It’s of course

possible to be with another, yet, on another level not to be available at all. Sue Monk Kidd calls this “attention deficit disorder of the soul” (*Weavings* Sept./Oct., 1997 p. 9). My friend was able to offer me the gift of being present and attentive.

He also gave me the gift of listening. Not counseling. Not advising. Not quoting verses or wisdom, but simply listening.

Listening, on another level, is not so simple. It requires mighty concentration. Jan Johnson said, “To even begin to listen to another person forces us to die to ourselves. A whole committee in our head has to be quelled” (*Weavings* Sept./Oct, 1997, p. 31).

feel like it. Period. Which writer best describes your experience?

3. Tell about a vulnerable moment in a friendship.
2. How comfortable are you in admitting to your needs among your male friends? Is expressing your needs in a friendship a sign of wellness or a sign of weakness?

Closing

Go around the larger circle and, if you feel free, express in a sentence one thing you need from your friendships—whether a personal quality you want to develop in yourself, or a quality that you need from another. Begin by saying, “As a man learning how to be a friend, I need _____.”

Then pray together the prayer of St. Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
where there is injury pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope, Where there is
darkness, light, Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so
much seek to be consoled as to console,
Not so much to be understood as to
understand,
Not so much to be loved, as to love;
For it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying, that we wake to eternal life.”*



Session 3

The Down and Dirty of True Friendship

Friendship does not happen by itself. It calls us to the hard work of commitment, communication and grace. Working at friendship pays off in personal wholeness, even when the risks seem high.

Opening worship

Hymn: "We are one in the Spirit" Do we take for granted that people will know this song? I'm not sure what source to suggest.

Prayer:

Begin with silent reflection or brief one-on-one conversation on the following:

- How good are you in the skill of building friendship? Does it come naturally to you, or does it need deliberate work?

Then say the following in unison, or have one person lead with it. End with a time of silence.

O, Lord, our Creator, you understand our hearts and you know the secrets that we carry. You know our deep longings. We confess that we sometimes feel unwilling to risk

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 43.

becoming open with one another. We sometimes do not know what to say. We need help in friendship-building skills. Come, Spirit of God, give us courage, grant us wisdom to serve each other through the work of true friendship. Amen.

Exploring the topic

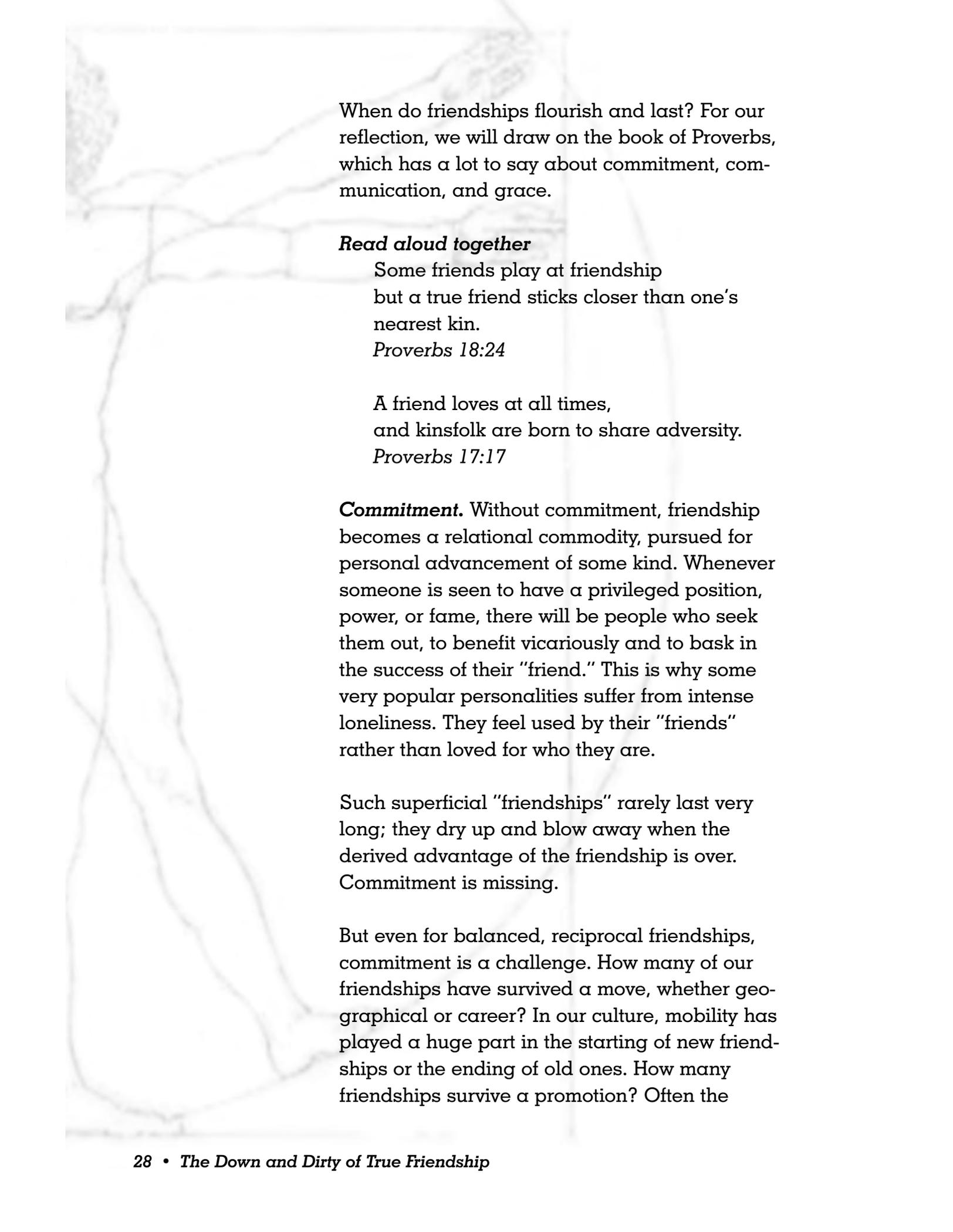
As I think back on friendships that I no longer have, I ask myself what happened? Some friendships did not survive geographical moves that one or both of us have made. We did not mean for that to happen, but the distance combined with the intense demands of a new job took their toll. Other friendships ended because one of us quit communicating. The explanations that come to mind include “overload,” or the drift that happens in friendship because interests and beliefs change. Still other friendships have ended because of misunderstanding.

Time and distance, whether geographical or emotional, do not cancel the significance of meaningful friendships. We feel great joy when friendships continue to flourish, and we grieve when they fail. This is as it should be, because friendship is one of our “design features.” We were created for friendship.

But it doesn't always come naturally. It is a challenge to build lasting friendships. Ironically, our society does not give us many resources. We have manuals and “how to” books on gardening, golf, sex—you name it. We even have manuals on “how to win friends and influence people.” But when was the last time you read something on how to have a good mutual friendship with another man?

Friendship forms. Friendship is a much-underestimated aspect of spirituality. It's every bit as significant as prayer and fasting. Like the sacramental use of bread and wine, friendship takes what's common in human experience and turns it into something holy.

—Eugene Peterson in
Leap Over a Wall



When do friendships flourish and last? For our reflection, we will draw on the book of Proverbs, which has a lot to say about commitment, communication, and grace.

Read aloud together

Some friends play at friendship
but a true friend sticks closer than one's
nearest kin.

Proverbs 18:24

A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

Proverbs 17:17

Commitment. Without commitment, friendship becomes a relational commodity, pursued for personal advancement of some kind. Whenever someone is seen to have a privileged position, power, or fame, there will be people who seek them out, to benefit vicariously and to bask in the success of their "friend." This is why some very popular personalities suffer from intense loneliness. They feel used by their "friends" rather than loved for who they are.

Such superficial "friendships" rarely last very long; they dry up and blow away when the derived advantage of the friendship is over. Commitment is missing.

But even for balanced, reciprocal friendships, commitment is a challenge. How many of our friendships have survived a move, whether geographical or career? In our culture, mobility has played a huge part in the starting of new friendships or the ending of old ones. How many friendships survive a promotion? Often the

added demands on our vocations add fatal stress on our friendships.

Commitment is about “being there” for one another on a regular basis. A committed friend gives time and place to connect and communicate. Without these basic building blocks, friendships get lost. For busy lives, friendships are maintained on our day-timers and palm pilots. Commitment thrives through intentionality and planning.

Read aloud

Iron sharpens iron,
and one person sharpens the wits of
another.”

Proverbs 27:17

Communication. If we don't hear from one another, how can we be sure of where we are in our friendship? Without communication, friendships are starved and die. In good friendships, we are able to talk about matters that are close

Food for thought 1: Materials list for good friendships

Sense of need. A significant ache for satisfying relationship is the beginning. It motivates us to look around for friendship.

God. It is God who stirs us to enter positive relationships. When we respond to this stirring, there is always something going on that is bigger than “our needs” or “my needs.”

A sense of awe at the mystery of the other. Our friend is a unique person, created in the image of God, whose life story is like no other.

Willingness to risk. Some of us will need the faith to imagine that someone wants to be our friend. Others will need the courage to tell their story. All of us will be challenged to take risks in opening ourselves to one another.

Willingness to sacrifice for the good of the other. Without sacrifice, friendship ends up being a kind of bartering exercise in which our friendship is measured out according to the scruples of fairness and the primacy of one's rights.

to the heart. We are able both to encourage and to challenge each other with truthful words. Reliable feedback and honest interaction builds security, emotional stability, and inner wellness in our relationships.

David's life was actually saved because he heard from Jonathan during a very dangerous time when he was hiding in the desert, a fugitive from Saul's murderous rage: "Jonathan set out and came to David at Horesh," writes the storyteller. "There he strengthened his hand through the Lord. He said to him, 'Do not be afraid; for the hand of my father Saul shall not find you; you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you; My father Saul also knows that this is so'" (1 Samuel 23:16-17). Jonathan helped David find strength in God. It is a wonderful example of commitment expressed in brave words that signify great personal sacrifice and

Food for thought 2: Jesus and his friends

In study 2, we saw how David was a model of friendship. His openness in his need for friends and his pursuit of these friendships were central to his life. He was an Olympian in friendship, both in celebrating the joy of true friendships and in grieving the failed ones.

Jesus, however, filled out the potential dimensions of human friendship like no other. He pursued his ministry and service entirely in the context of his relationship with the twelve disciples. Wherever he went, whatever he did, his friends were with him. He constantly talked with them, encouraged them and taught them. They accompanied him through storms, both physical and spiritual.

At the conclusion of their time together, Jesus described his remarkable relationship with them: "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). In the long good-bye that took place in the upper room before his passion and suffering, Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you; abide in my love.... Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:9, 11). Jesus continues to invite his followers into the love that he enjoyed with God. He offers us the gift of loving relationships to receive and to pass on to others.

cost. Friendship's great gift is the privilege of being present with each other in our crucible moments, days, or years.

However, not all of such communication is easy to deliver or easy to receive. Caring for our brother involves being willing to address difficult and sensitive areas, even finding ways to talk about struggles with temptations and failures. The wise man of Proverbs epitomizes these realities: "Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but, profuse are the kisses of an enemy" Proverbs 27:6.

This kind of directness in accountability was practiced freely among the early Anabaptist Christians of the sixteenth century. In their attempt to recover the radical faith of the New Testament, Anabaptists cared enough about each other that they would confront each other when they strayed from their baptismal vows. When this was done in self-righteousness or in a high-handed manner, it led to a splintering of community. When it was done with love and sensitivity, however, it became a source of strength and safety. The measure of the depth and maturity of the friendship in our own lives lies also in the level and quality of the accountability that we practice. When we combine grace and honest accountability, we open the doors to significant personal growth.

Read aloud

Whoever rebukes a person will afterward
find more favor
than one who flatters with the tongue.
Proverbs 28:23

Grace. Grace is the capacity to give, the central heart reflex of the Christian. I have found in my ministry as a pastor that the most generous people are those whose life attitude has been altered by deep gratitude. They give because they have been given to. So it is in friendship; grace is central. We give, not to keep an even balance sheet in the friendship, but because our lives have been graced.

Perhaps the most telling sign of grace is the capacity and willingness to listen. We give our time, energy, and attention to our brother when he needs to be listened to and heard on a deep level. Sometimes friendship means a call late at night, and a long visit over coffee when we would rather be sleeping. There is no friendship without sacrifice.

Grace is expressed in tact. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary describes tact as "...discernment of what is appropriate to do or to say in dealing with others without giving offence." It is the lubricant that keeps friendship running smoothly. Without tact, friendship runs rough and sometimes seizes up and stops.

The book of Proverbs offers several verbal cartoons that teach tact by illustrating its absence:

"Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." (25:20)

"Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing" (27:14).

Gracious, tactful communication pays attention to the art of timing and is sensitive to the needs and circumstances of the other.

Talking it through

Take some time individually to reflect on the qualities of your most significant male friendships. Make a rough chart with three columns labeled: Commitment, Communication, and Grace. Under each, record one or more of the following: a) a time when I messed up; b) a time when I aced this quality; and c) one action I'd like to take to strengthen a friendship (give specifics of people, time, and place).

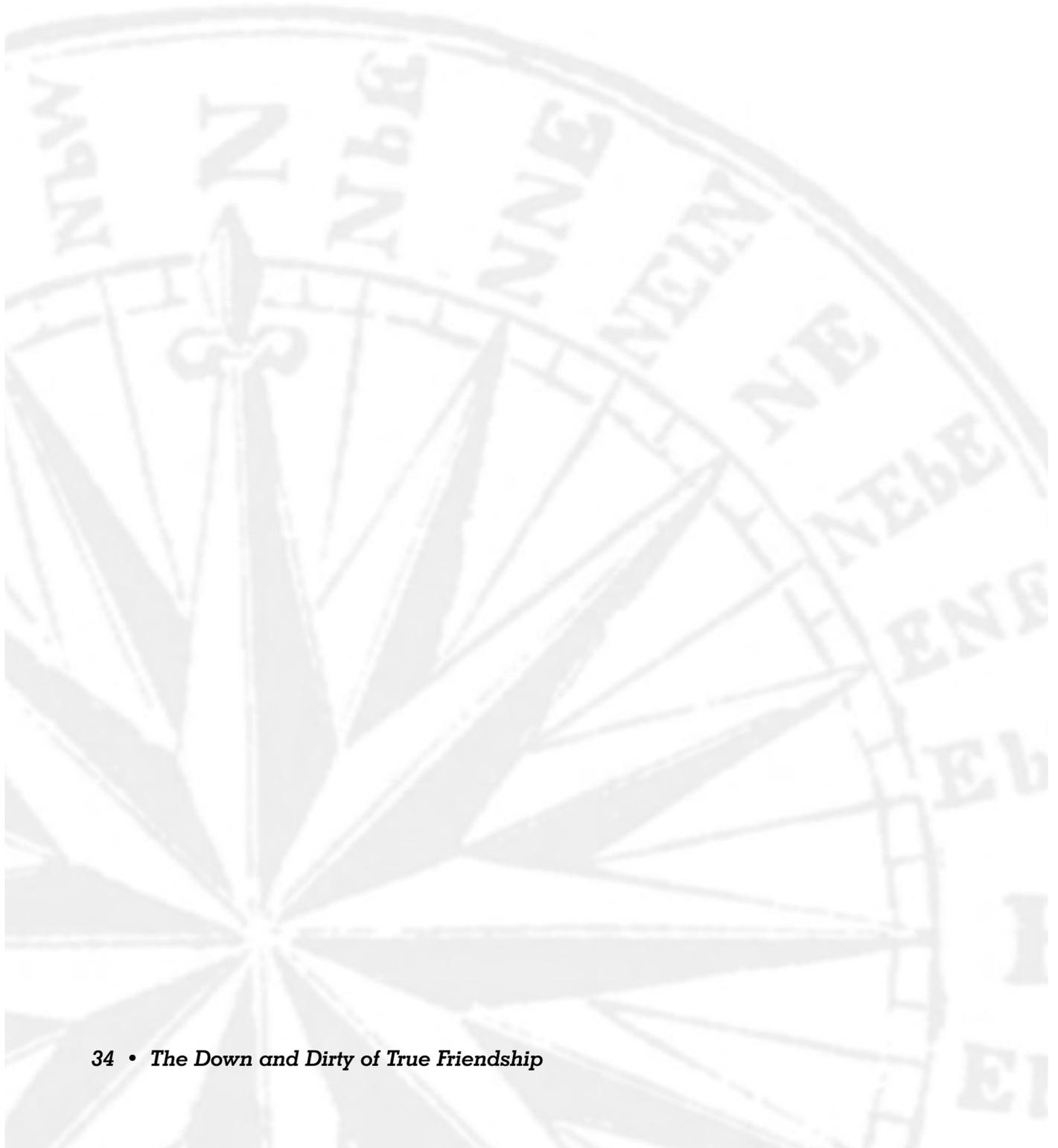
In pairs or smaller groups, do one or more of the following, based on your charts:

1. Name the qualities of friendship you observe in your dyad, and in your study group—whether or not you consider yourselves close friends.
2. Describe who have been the brightest models of friendship in your life.
3. Tell about a memorable bungle in one of your friendships. How did it turn out? What did you learn from it?
4. Tell about a success story in your friendships. What do you think was the key in making it successful?
5. Share any goals you listed in the chart you made.

Closing

Spend some time in silent prayer; then conclude with audible prayers. Feel free to confess areas of need and give thanks for the riches you have received from friendships.

Close by singing "Will You Let Me Be Your Servant" (HWB 307).



Session 4

Friendship Meltdown



When friendships break down through neglect, suffering, misunderstanding, or betrayal, we must seek God's discernment in knowing whether to seek restoration or to lay the friendship to rest. Both can be opportunities for spiritual growth.

Opening worship

Hymn: "Amazing Grace!" (HWB 143).

Prayer:

Some of us have a closet containing hidden memories of people who once were friends; what they are now, we are not sure. In a time of silence, bring out one of these memories and give it some attention in your mind and heart. Are these former friendships failures? If there has been failure, who is responsible for it? How has the friendship breakdown affected you?

Then pray the following:

Lord Jesus, you have known the pain of lost friendships. You know how some friendships flourish, and others disappear from our lives. Teach us the way of healing and hope where reconciliation is possible. Teach us to forgive those who have failed us in friendship. Give grace to those we have failed.

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 43.

Grant us wisdom to recognize and to let go of friendships that are no longer life giving to us. Amen.

Exploring the topic

Deep within, we expect that our friends will remain loyal and not fail us. We want our friends to be true through thick and thin. We also want to be good friends and to be as consistent and loving as we wish our friends would be toward us. But the track record of even the best friendships is a mixture of loyalty and joy, along with blind spots and failings.

Behind our expectations of friendship may well be our deep need for God. Only God is capable of the consistent lovingkindness that we sometimes idealize as normal in our closest friends. If this is so, it is important that we cultivate a realistic and merciful set of expectations about each other and ourselves when it comes to friendship, and that we look to our heavenly Father for the deep security that only God can provide.

As we explore our friendship patterns, we need to consider the stress on friendship caused by our hectic lifestyles. In previous generations, the "givens" of time and availability for friendship may be far from givens for us. We can't assume that someone will stay around long enough to continue a significant friendship. Nor can we assume that there will be the leisure of time to spend together. Lunch with a friend will compete with a whole list of other demands in his and your Day-timers. Friendship fights for survival among our other important priorities.

Quick, God, I need
your helping hand!

The last decent person
just went down,

All the friends I
depended on gone.

—*Psalms 12:1*, The
Message

With so many competing demands, it is easy for friendships to break down, leading to loss and disappointment. Why does this happen? When is it time to sign off from a friendship? How can broken friendships be restored? These are the questions we will explore.

Why do friendships break down?

To begin, however, we should recognize that some friendships don't break down; they just fade out. Maybe the reasons that brought friends together have changed. Maybe you—or they—are just no longer interested in rodeos or American literature. People change, and along with them, so do their friendships. Such changes and transitions are a natural part of living..

But breakdown in meaningful friendships is another matter, causing us to feel loss and grief. Neglect is perhaps the most common culprit. Laziness and indifference can kill a good friendship. Friendships are living things that need feeding and nurturing to stay alive. A simple

Food for thought 1: When to let go of a friendship

When is it appropriate to let go of a friendship? Is a "friendship recall" okay? Those who follow Christ submit their friendships to the call to "love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...strength. . . and mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). These are the priorities that Jesus taught his disciples; and these are the superseding values that guide our friendships. Therefore, friendships are not an end in themselves.

The following are some excellent reasons to let go of a friendship:

1. When the other is using you or exploiting you for his own purposes, and he is unwilling to change
2. When the other is violating the boundaries that protect the integrity of you, your family, or your other friends.
3. When the other is undermining your relationship with God or distracting you from your commitment to follow Jesus.
4. When you feel as if you are being dominated and are feeling powerless.

thing like scheduling regular times for coffee or lunch can mean the difference between a growing friendship and a dying friendship.

Misunderstandings also contribute to alienation. They occur when the meanings of words and conversations are missed or misconstrued, or when a third person casts us in a poor light. Our "stock goes down" and friendship is undermined. Friends protect one another from being verbally put down.

Suffering can lead to either greater closeness or greater distance. When pain is shared it becomes lighter, and it deepens intimacy between friends. But when pain is covered over and kept a secret, it can become an invisible wall that divides. A committed friend welcomes a brother when he is in pain and makes time to listen and to support.

Betrayal assassinates friendship. It is the rupturing of covenant, which is the heart of true friendship. In Psalm 55, David laments friendships lost by devastating betrayal:

Food for thought 2: Preventing fade-outs or meltdowns

Use shock. Amaze your friend by staying in touch when least expected. Defy the conventions of the calendar. Don't wait for Christmas or a birthday to write or call. Follow your intuitions. Pick up the phone if your friend is on your mind.

Share books, magazines, and movies; then talk about them into the small hours.

Join together in service projects.

Take courses together. One of my most cherished friendship-memory is when a friend and I took a wood-working class together. We treasure the objects that we made, but the friendship that flourished, even more.

Compete on the golf course, but then leave the competition behind.

It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. . . (*Psalm 55:12-13*).

Jesus also experienced the pain of betrayal by two of his disciples, Judas and Peter. Judas very quickly committed suicide, so there was left no opportunity for any redemptive work to be done in his life. But for Peter we have a record of his process of restoration.

Read John 21:1-17

Peter betrayed Jesus three times during Jesus' trial (John 18:15-27). While trying to play it safe by being an incognito observer, he was asked three times whether he knew Jesus and had been with him. Three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus.

Now, following his resurrection, Jesus sets out to restore the brokenness that pained Peter's relationship with him. In the dialogue that Jesus has with Peter, we observe the following steps in restoring broken friendships.

1. Calling on the alienated friend. Jesus chooses to look up Peter on his own home turf, the seashore. With the aroma of roasted fish on the open fire giving comfort and enjoyment, he speaks to Peter, opening up the issues that stood between them. What an example of sensitive timing and graciousness Jesus was!

Simply to be called, and spoken to, opens the way for healing and restoration. How often have we missed the opportunity to mend a

It is easier to forgive an enemy than a friend.

—*Madame Dorothee Deluzy*



friendship, simply because we neglected to pick up the phone or go out of our way to drop by?

Contact is the lifeline for a friendship at risk. To simply connect, even though issues may be confused and feelings taut, gives time and openness to restoration and newness in a friendship. How helpful e-mail has been in making it easy to maintain contact!

2. Naming the unresolved issue. Jesus brought up Peter's betrayal both indirectly and directly. Indirectly, his three questions echoed the three times that his friend had denied him. Directly, Jesus named the hurt and the sense of failure that separated them by repeating the question, "Do you love me?"

John tells us that Peter felt "hurt" by Jesus' repetition of the question. Peter's response indicates the level of pain that was between them, but also the depth of healing that was taking place. To name the alienating failure or pain is to take away its power over you and to open up the possibility of dialogue, change, and restoration.

3. Re-affirming the value of the friend. Paralleling his burning question to Peter, Jesus repeated three times his words of affirmation and commissioning: "Feed my sheep." Jesus' words would have burned into Peter's soul, replacing shame and guilt with grace, affirmation, and love. As we know from the story of Acts, Peter would never turn from the renewed love which these words restored. When we speak words of release and affir-

mation to those who have sinned against us or with whom we have suffered a misunderstanding—then healing and restoration can flow.

Talking it through

In dyads or in smaller groups, do one or more of the following:

1. Tell about an experience of friendship meltdown that you have experienced (or perhaps are experiencing). The study identifies neglect, misunderstanding, suffering, betrayal as primary causes. Which one(s) do you think were at work in the breakdown?
2. Tell about an experience of restoration that you have been a part of. In what ways was it similar to or different from the process of restoration between Peter and Jesus in John 21?
3. Develop a plan for initiating contact with a friend who has become distant through a breakdown in friendship, whether by neglect, misunderstanding, suffering, or betrayal. List steps you would like to take, based on what you saw happening between Jesus and Peter.

Closing

Spend some moments in silent meditation and prayer, followed by an opportunity for prayers of confession or intercession for one another.

True pain coming out of a person belongs primarily to God, it seems to me. I try and take it humbly to my heart just as it is. I endeavour to make it mine—to love it.

—George Bernanos,
in *The Diary of a Country Priest*



Session 5

Spiritual Companionship

Friendship among Christian men can reach new depths as they allow their mutual commitment to Christ to feed their friendship. Spiritual companionship requires generosity and commitment as we attend to God's work in our brother's life.

Opening worship

Hymn: "For We Are Strangers No More"
(HWB 322).

Prayer:

Begin with silent reflection or brief one-on-one conversation on the following:

Which men have been key spiritual companions and guides in your life? What qualities did you appreciate most about them? What gifts did you receive from them?

Then pray the following:

O Lord, Redeemer and Friend, we are here because someone has loved us. We believe because someone has taken the time to nurture our faith. Each of us stands on someone's shoulders. We give you thanks for those who have loved and mentored us. We praise you for your sovereign work through

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 43.

the friendships that have blessed our lives. Come, Spirit of God, open our lives to the possibilities of blessing others and being blessed through friendships. Amen.

Exploring the topic

Our need for friendship rises out of our spirituality. We are people created in the image of a God who values relationships, so relationships are core to who we are as spiritual beings. Central to genuine friendship is covenant loyalty, a spiritual quality that reflects the character of God.

Good friends may play golf, go hiking, and see movies together; but they will also connect on deeper, personal levels. They will take interest in matters of faith and spiritual growth. They will offer each other encouragement to make wholesome choices, and they will warn each other when they consider destructive choices.

In this study, we will discuss the spiritual friendship of equals, recognizing that each of us has attributes or qualities not shared by our friend, and vice versa. We therefore withhold judgment on issues of who has more and who has less and who may be above or who may be below. Each of us has different experiences and different gifts, so let's agree that we can all learn from one another.

In speaking of such companionship, we will use the language of *mentoring*. While the term can suggest a senior-junior relationship, we will use it in the context of equals, where each friend intentionally seeks to build the other and encourage him to grow to his spiritual potential in all the areas of his life.

The greatest thing any person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing in him...to take the time and have the discernment to see what's most deeply there, most fully that person, and then confirm it by recognizing and encouraging it."

—Martin Buber, quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*

One of the most significant spiritual companionships described in the Bible is that of the New Testament personalities, Paul and Barnabas. The apostle Paul is without doubt the dominant leader of the emerging church in the book of Acts. By comparison, Barnabas has very little of the spotlight. Yet, without Barnabas, there would be no Paul, so crucial was Barnabas's role as Paul's spiritual mentor.

Read aloud Acts 4:34-37

A mentoring friendship begins with a desire to give. Barnabas is briefly introduced as one who helps the new church by donating proceeds from the sale of his land. He is a giver. Our text goes on to give the origin of his name, which is actually a nickname. His real name is Joseph, but the apostles call him Barnabas, which means "the son of encouragement," or "one who comes alongside."

Later, Barnabas is described as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (Acts 11:24). The Holy Spirit's presence is evident in the life-energy that flows out of him. In Barnabas we

Food for thought 1: A preparedness test

We are ready for a genuine spiritual companionship:

- a. When our own needs for power or success recede far enough into the background that we can promote our brother's successes with joy.
- b. When we are able to do more listening to understand than speaking to be understood.

- c. When we are willing and able to commit a regular gift of time to a friend.
- d. When we are willing to enter new levels of mutual accountability.
- e. When we are willing to recognize and affirm a friend's uniqueness and gifts.
- f. When we are willing to pray for and with our friend, recognizing the active presence of God in our lives.

see how God's Spirit gently helps us release our tight-fisted hold on what we have, instilling in us a desire to give and to see our resources used to build the other.

A busy professor, who was a leader in his field of research at a large secular university, would regularly give of his valuable time to drink coffee with Christian students. He would listen to their struggles and encourage them in their faith. Over the years, many students were encouraged and strengthened in their spiritual journey. I was one of them. Such giving of time and friendship to another's spiritual encouragement is a high call, given by God to people in all walks of life.

Read Acts 9:26-30

Mentoring friendship requires the capacity to see the other's potential. The church in Jerusalem was in crisis. Saul of Tarsus, the zealous opponent, had become a Christian. But no one believed it. They were all too afraid of him—all except Barnabas.

What would have become of Paul if Barnabas had not risked his own reputation to believe in and to mentor the dangerous, untried Saul? Being open to another's potential, without being naïve or out of touch, requires perceptive insight and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Barnabas seemed to have both in large measure.

When I have stood on the threshold of daunting new opportunities for ministry, how critically important the encouragement of mentors has been to me! They were the friends who knew me well, yet said to me "You can do it!" Such words

are empowering! They lead us to take risks and start new adventures.

Read Acts 11:19-26

Mentoring friendship seeks to empower the other. When the church of Jerusalem heard about the needs of the church in Antioch, they must have wondered who would be gifted to pastor a wild and woolly multiethnic church, with its mixture of Jews steeped in Old Testament law and history and Gentiles from pagan backgrounds. They sent Barnabas. This “son of encouragement” recognized the work of God’s grace, and empowered the new believers to “remain faithful to the Lord” (Acts 11: 23).

For a Christian, there are, strictly speaking, no chances. A secret Master of Ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples “ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” can truly say to every group of Christian friends “You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.”

—C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

Barnabas then did something that changed the nature of church history. He brought Saul to Antioch. Barnabas put two things together: the enormous potential of the church’s mission to the Greek world, and the raw potential of Saul of Tarsus, a brilliant Jewish scholar steeped in the philosophy of the day, and now a committed follower of Jesus. The rest is history.

A subtle witness to the quiet significance of Barnabas’s spiritual companionship is found in the text of Acts. Halfway through the book, Luke the historian reverses the order of their names. “Barnabas and Paul” becomes “Paul and Barnabas.” There seems to have been no power struggle—just a subtle shift in leadership that signaled Barnabas’s success as Paul’s mentor. The story shows how spiritual maturity lets go of a need to be in charge, and to be seen to be in charge, but instead is ready to empower the other with abandon and joy.

Read Acts 15:36-41

A spiritual companion sticks with his friend when he is down. John Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their previous missionary journey. But he had got cold feet and returned home when the journey became difficult. So Paul refuses to consider giving him another chance. True to his character, however, Barnabas takes up the young apostle's cause and insists that he be included. As a result of the ensuing conflict, Paul goes one way and Barnabas, with John Mark, the other.

Again we see Barnabas recognizing the potential of the other and taking a costly stand with him, just as he had with Saul. (Did Paul have a memory lapse here?) As a result of Barnabas's intervention, John Mark is mobilized again as an apostle. Would we have the Gospel of Mark, authored by John Mark, if Barnabas had not stuck up for him?

Food for thought 2. Accountability

Bob entered the cafe and sat down. His shoulders were bent. His eyes were down. As he spoke, his voice was heavy with pain. "I am addicted to pornography. My wife has asked me to leave."

So began our visits to the cafe. Every week we met, Wednesdays at five. Each week more of his story came out. I listened to his self-loathing struggle and despair. He gave me the privilege of asking about his pornographic activities, of holding him accountable.

Over the weeks and months Bob gained control of his addiction. He moved back to his family. His body language began to communicate energy and confidence.

Our weekly exercise of accountability in our friendship helped us both. It served to give Bob a framework for repentance and change in his life as a husband and father, and for us both, the stakes of our covenant-commitment were driven deeper.

Talking it through

In dyads or in smaller groups, discuss one or more of the following:

Tell about a spiritual mentor/companion that has been important to you in your journey of faith. Tell specifically about how they exhibited the qualities mentioned in the study above:

- Gives of himself and his resources.
- Sees potential in the other.
- Seeks to empower the other.
- Sticks with the other when he's down.

How have you been able to mentor others as a result of your own experience of spiritual companionship?

What would you still like to see in your life in the way of spiritual companionship? Take time to draw up a covenant that you would be prepared to enter into with another man (either with your conversation partner or someone else). Spell out what you imagine would be your responsibilities to each other (when to meet; what kinds of questions to ask each other; what issues for which you would like to hold yourselves accountable, etc.). Then settle on a plan to meet with your friend to discuss this covenant.

Closing

As you conclude this series of studies, share together the most important ideas or insights that you have gleaned from these sessions. What goals have you made? What changes do you want to experience in your friendships?

Pray together:

O Lord Jesus, your purpose took shape in the lives of your disciples through your mentoring-friendship. To whom would you like us to demonstrate grace, affirmation, and empowering friendship?

Give us the courage, the commitment and the grace to be spiritual friends to one another and to those you give to us as friends. Amen.



Leader's Guide

One of the aims of the Closer Than a Brother series is to encourage men to find "spiritual companions." Some of this work may already have been done, and the men in your group may already have a partner with whom to pair up when dyads are called for. If you have not yet dealt with this issue, you may wish to review pages 10 to 12 in the first booklet of the series, *What Really Matters: Conversation Starters for Men* by J. Lorne Peachey and Everett J. Thomas. If your group, or members in it, have not been exposed to that study, you may wish to start with it, or at least use its suggestions for starting a spiritual companion relationship.

How to use this booklet

This booklet is designed so that each participant can have his own copy. The book should be used for participation in the group (for example, the responsive readings and discussion questions), and for personal reflection and growth between sessions. As leader, encourage the men to read the session articles ahead of time, and to bring their books to the sessions.

Be sure to check the individual session notes that follow. But for conducting each session, the following hints on the flow of the sessions may be helpful:

Opening and closing worship

You will likely want to adapt the opening worship and closing exercises to fit the needs of your group. If you are not a singing group, you may want to use the words of the hymns in some other way, or use other appropriate openings. Have hymnals available as appropriate.

Exploring the topic

If the men do not read the material ahead of time, you should be prepared to present the content of the articles to the men as a lead-in to the section, “Talking it through.” The articles are short enough that you may read them aloud together. Ideally, however, the material should be read ahead of time, or should be presented more informally than simply reading it.

Thinking it through: dyads and close-to-home conversation

The sessions often call the group to break into dyads for sharing. We also encourage men to remain in the same dyad through all the sessions, so that they can begin to experience the benefits of spiritual companionship. However, you must discern how far your group is ready to go with the use of dyads. If your group does not know each other well, dyads may feel threatening to some when they are asked to talk more personally about themselves.

You are encouraged to push out the group’s comfort zones, but don’t force it. If your group does not feel ready to try dyads, ask them to meet in groups of three or four and/or to talk less personally about the same issues. This is better than no discussion at all. However, as the sessions continue, you may challenge them to be bolder in their sharing. Also, if some want to meet in dyads and others do not, consider having a “two-track” system, with some dyads, and some larger groups.

Notes for individual sessions

Before you begin

Take some time to reflect on the nature of your group. Who are the men who will be joining you? What are their needs? Pray for each member of the group in light of the goals for these sessions:

1. To explore friendship among men in a time when there are many forces pulling for our attention and energy.
2. To engage the challenges and joys of spiritual companionship—friendships where men encourage one another in their Christian

walk. This dimension of friendship can be experienced in the context of the group as well as in individual friendships.

3. To develop an atmosphere of trust and openness, where there is a freedom to talk about meaningful personal issues and struggles.
4. To have a really good time together.

Session 1: Getting Our Bearings

Take time to get acquainted. Ask each man to talk a little about his work, his interests, and what has brought him to this group. Briefly review the goals of these sessions, referring to the "Introduction." Give time for questions and the surfacing of any concerns before you begin.

For the silent prayer time at the beginning, you may wish to invite men to write down what they name as their best friendships and/or their longings. Have them limit each one to one or two words. Then collect them all in a bowl or a hat, and lift them to God during the spoken prayer.

At the beginning of "Exploring the topic" use the opening questions to begin exploring some of the experiences of male friendship in your group. Use the questions flexibly, substituting others as you see fit. Don't allow this discussion to go very long. There is more to come!

As you discuss the affection in Jonathan's friendship with David, some in your group may feel awkward or threatened. It shouldn't come as a surprise. We live in a society where many men associate close friendships with homosexuality. If they do not bring it up, you may want to ask whether that perception is behind the unease about the topic. Put them at ease by acknowledging the awkwardness, and emphasize that you are committed to respecting comfort zones in the discussions. Some humor can also go a long way in diffusing the tension.

Session 2: I Need a Friend

As you welcome the group together, take time to visit and feel relaxed together. Ask if last week's topic had become a topic for further reflection and discussion this week.

For the opening worship, choose which question for reflection is the most appropriate for your group.

To read Psalm 139:1-10 responsively, you will need to arrange for each man to have a copy of the psalm in the same version before him.

Should the men in your group feel more ready to write their prayers rather than to speak them out, have them write them on pieces of paper, as in Session 1; then collect them in a bowl and lift them to God in prayer.

One of the most significant ideas to explore in this session is that the desire and need for friendship is a sign of wellness and strength, rather than weakness and shame. Many of us are stuck at the point of being ashamed of our feelings of need for male friendship. There may well be opportunity to further differentiate this need from homo-erotic impulses.

Take care to assure the group that no one will be pressured to share. It is perfectly okay to be silent. Should your group be larger than eight, break it into groups of three or four for the sharing session during the closing. Some men would certainly find it difficult to share about their own needs for friendship except in a small group.

Session 3: The Down and Dirty of True Friendships

Prepare an opening prayer that expresses thanks for the men who have joined your group, and lifts up the hopes and fears that have already been shared.

The opening question is designed simply to open a connection between theme and life-experience. Try to keep it short.

This session aims at getting closer in to the "nuts and bolts" of friendship and should lead to some good open discussion, based both on experiences of being befriended and of being friends.

In "Talking it through," the questions for sharing and discussion are designed to provide a lot of comfort-room, especially for any men who are feeling on the edge.

Session 4: Friendship Meltdown

The Opening worship, calls for individual reflection, rather than group discussion, because of the potentially threatening nature of the theme: friendship failure. There may well be some deep levels of woundedness around this topic. Before this session, spend time praying for your group, asking God's Spirit to come alongside any who have wounds and vulnerabilities.

As you work through "Exploring the topic," invite sharing to illustrate the causes of breakdown.

During "Talking it through," be prepared to lead a discussion around question 3, if the dyads or small groups are not able to do the sharing about friendship meltdowns.

During the Closing, after an opportunity for sharing and individual prayers is offered, be prepared to lead the group in a closing prayer.

Session 5: Spiritual Companionship

This session distinguishes between men of the past, men of the present, and men of the future. The opening sharing is designed to open up the amazing and encouraging variety of mentor relationship that are present in the collective experience of a group of men.

Be aware that some in your group may think that "spiritual companionship" is only for the "spiritually elite." At the heart of this session is the notion that every one of us can become a spiritual companion to another, and can be a great blessing to a friend.

"Exploring the topic" involves some exploration in the book of Acts. To simplify this, hand out the texts ahead of time, to be read when called upon.

Since this is the final session, you may wish to take some time, either at the end of this session or in an extra session, to share and summarize what you have learned and to plan the next steps.

Resources

Bly, Robert. *Iron John*. New York: Addison Wesley, 1990.

A widely read and highly influential analysis of the role of contemporary man.

Keillor, Garrison. *The Book of Guys*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Leder, Steven Z. *The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things*.

Springfield: Behrman House, 1999.

Levinson, Daniel J. *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

A developmental perspective on adulthood in men.

Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1971.

A classic on love and friendship.

McGinnis, Alan Loy. *The Friendship Factor: How to Get Closer to the People You Care For*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979.

Miller, Stuart. *Men and Friendship*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.

The state of friendship between men is explored in light of the pressures of balancing marriages and careers.

Peterson, Eugene. *Leap Over a Wall*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997.

A study of the life of David with an illuminating chapter on friendship.

Trobisch, Walter. *All a Man Can Be and What a Woman Should Know*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1986.

An in-depth exploration of the male temperament.

Notes



Many Christian men today are looking for opportunities to walk with peers as they ponder key life issues. Macho talk in the locker room or political discussions at lunch just aren't nurturing their souls. The study series, *Closer Than a Brother*, helps men go deeper in their life with God through men's groups and accountable relationships in the church family.

Closer Than a Brother

Building Deeper Friendships

Many men desire deeper friendships, but they don't know where to begin. They might build a deck, talk politics, watch sports, or go golfing together—but discussing matters of the heart is a challenge. They may have buddies, but their culture hasn't taught them the value of vulnerable, open friendship. The five sessions of this study help men to be honest about their need for friendship; learn practical strategies for commitment, communication, and grace; deal with friendships that fail; and work toward spiritual companionship built on a common loyalty to Christ. Men will find good company along the way in such biblical characters as Jonathan and David, Paul and Barnabas, and Jesus and his disciples.

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