



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Living as the Friends of God
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 70-78)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Living as the Friends of God

James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life. This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

Prayer

O God, we want to have our cake and eat it, too: we want to be a friend of the world and still be your friend.

Yet, Jesus taught us: "No one can serve two masters."

Give us strength and courage to get our priorities straight: help us to seek your kingdom first. Help us to live faithfully and joyfully in the world, and to be friends with the people you call us to serve. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Scripture Reading: James 3:13-4:8a

Reflection

Just as Abraham was properly called a "friend of God" (2:23) because his works exemplified his faith, likewise James envisions the Church as "the community of the friends of God called to embrace, imitate, and re-present Christ to others by witnessing the ways of Christ in their everyday lives," Paul Wadell writes. "To enter into friendship with God, James assures us, is not to be introduced to a cozy and always reassuring life; rather, it is to become part of a community... characterized by mercy rather than judgment (2:13); deep concern for the poor (2:15-16); patience in suffering (5:7-11); solicitude for the sick (5:14-15); and fraternal correction (5:19-20)."

Wadell explores James's vision of the Church by examining how a life of friendship with God was understood by Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

- ▶ *Christian communities, like good friends, share "one heart and soul."* Augustine's rule of life for communities makes Christ the foundation and center of members' lives together. They might not agree on everything. But rooted in mutual love for God rather than competing with one another for "status, prestige, wealth, celebrity, and possessions," Wadell notes, they live with "love, kindness, truthfulness, patience, faithfulness, and compassion" rather than "deception and mistrust, harshness and animosity, and discord and negativity."
- ▶ *God's love calls us into friendship with God.* Thomas Aquinas taught that we are created for intimacy with God. Wadell explains, "We find joy when we seek and delight in God's good just as God seeks and delights in ours. That is the language of friendship, and for Aquinas it is the most fitting way to understand the Christian life. We who are the children of God are called to become the friends of God ... [in] a way of life in which all of us *together* come to love God and all that God loves." God has taken the initiative to incorporate us "into the very life of God so that we can participate in, and be transformed by, the love and goodness of God."
- ▶ *Friendship with God unfolds in love for others.* Friendship is always marked by mutual goodwill and sharing of life around common



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goods and purposes. "The very offer of friendship testifies that God is committed to our good; however, a true friend of God is someone who seeks God's good as well through a heartfelt commitment to forward God's plans and purposes in the world," Wadell notes. "And we do this, the letter of James suggests, in our care for the neglected members of society (James 1:27; 2:14-17); when we extend mercy rather than judgment (2:13); and when we are 'peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (3:17)."

- ▶ *Friendship with God leads to a distinctive and challenging way of life.* Aquinas identifies six "effects" in our lives of friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. These echo James's description of life together in a congregation. For instance, James says that *joy* characterizes God's friends even during adversity (1:2) when they need patient endurance (5:10-11). *Peace* or concord is a result of embracing "the wisdom from above" (3:13-18). With *kindness* and *almsgiving* they minister to one another's needs (cf. 1:27, 2:15-16). *Mercy*, another product of God's imparted wisdom (3:17), leads believers to show mercy, and because they reflect God's character in this way, they do not fear God's judgment (2:13). *Fraternal correction* reincorporates a member who "wanders from the truth" (5:16, 19).

Wadell concludes, "It is easier to be a friend of the world—and this is an abiding temptation for congregations—because such a friendship asks nothing of us. Friendship with God, however, asks everything of us."

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to be friends with God? Consider how the features of friendship illuminate our discipleship.
2. Should we have qualms about describing our relationship with God as "friendship"? Discuss how Wadell responds to some of these concerns.
3. What does it mean to be spiritual friends with one another in the Church? How do these relationships flow from our friendship with God?
4. What are the six "effects" of friendship with God, according to Aquinas? How are they reflected in the letter of James?

Departing Hymn: "The Master Has Come, and He Calls Us" (v. 3)

The Master has called us in life's early morning,
with spirits as fresh as the dew on the sod;
we turn from the world, with its smiles and its scorning,
to cast in our lot with the people of God:

the Master has called us, his sons and his daughters,
we plead for his blessing and trust in his love;
and through the green pastures, beside the still waters,
he'll lead us at last to his kingdom above.

Sarah Doudney (1871)

Tune: ASH GROVE

Living as the Friends of God

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To highlight the distinction in the letter of James between friendship with the world and friendship with God.
2. To consider how Augustine and Aquinas develop the idea of friendship with God to describe our discipleship.
3. To relate Aquinas's list of six "effects" of friendship with God to James's vision of the Church.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "The Master Has Come, and He Calls Us" locate the familiar tune ASH GROVE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Soon after his baptism on Easter in 387, Augustine created a small community in which to grow in the Christian life. It included his mother, his closest friend, his brother, his son, two of his cousins, and two of his students. "Like any real community (or any real congregation), Augustine and his cohorts hardly agreed on everything," Wadell notes. "But they were able to live together well because they were joined as one in what they took to be the fundamental calling of their lives, namely, to love God and to grow together in Christ."

"Ten years after his baptism, Augustine wrote a rule of life for Christian communities.... Augustine believed that Christians in their lives together were to love God and be of 'one heart and soul' on their journey to God. Like any good friends, they were to support and encourage one another, seek the best for each other, challenge and sometimes correct one another, and in everything to help one another grow in the way of love. In many respects, Augustine sees Christian community like a choir singing in harmony. Each voice brings its own distinctive gift to the choir; each voice makes its unique but indispensable contribution. And all those voices blending together create something beautiful. As a community of the friends of God, the Church is a choir of varied voices bonded together in love to create something beautiful and rich and hopeful not only among themselves, but also for the world" (*The Letter of James*, 71-72).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 3:13-4:8a from a modern translation.

Reflection

One of the most arresting images in the letter of James is the contrast between the friendship with the world that is a constant temptation for congregations and the friendship with God that is exemplified by Abraham. In this study Paul Wadell sketches how Augustine and Aquinas developed this rich theme of friendship with God in their writings. This is an opportunity to explore the rich interrelationship of historical theology with the biblical text of James.

Study Questions

1. Divide into two groups—one to review James 2:23 and 3:13-4:8a, and the other to review Aquinas's account of friendship with God—and then compare the results of their research.

James says Abraham was rightly called a friend of God (cf. 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8) because he was chosen by God, believed God, and responded in faithful actions. This stands in contrast to the "friendship with the world" which makes one "an enemy of God." To characterize friendship with God, James 3:13-4:8a describes those who receive "the wisdom from above" and the opposing traits of the friends of the world.

Paul Wadell writes, "Aquinas described the theological virtue of charity as friendship with God, a way of life in which all of us together come to love God and all that God loves." He explains that this means God communicates, or shares, the divine life with us, taking us up into the life of the Trinitarian love. Our relationships with one another and the creation are transformed as "friendship with God links us to every man and woman who, like us, is loved by God and called to communion with God; as Aquinas insists, charity makes neighbors of us all. It calls us out of ourselves in love and service to others."

2. Encourage members to identify their concerns. Wadell mentions three: (1) that friendship with God might seem so "abstract" and "impossibly spiritual" that it has "no practical consequences for one's everyday life"; (2) it involves no more than "being thoughtful, nice, or congenial toward others"; and (3) it is a "purely private and exclusively spiritual relationship with God that comfortingly insulates us from the needs of others." He responds by fleshing out the connection between friendship with God and loving involvement in others' lives, especially through the six "effects" of friendship with God.
3. Wadell writes that James suggests we exhibit spiritual friendship "in our care for the neglected members of society (1:27; 2:14-17); when we extend mercy rather than judgment (2:13); and when we are 'peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (3:17)." Furthermore, the list of the traits of friends of God in 3:13-4:8a suggest the quality of relationships in the Church. Wadell notes these transformed relationships with others pivot on our identification with God's gracious activity: "a true friend of God is someone who seeks God's good as well through a heartfelt commitment to forward God's plans and purposes in the world. In a life of friendship with God, we return to God the love, affection, and goodwill that God has shown us by seeking God's will and living faithfully according to the ways of God."
4. "Both James and Aquinas argue that friendship with God, if it is more than vacuous piety, has to be visibly displayed. It must be seen not as an escape from the world and the responsibilities we have for others, but as a distinctive and challenging way of life—indeed, a new kind of existence—identified through particular habits and practices," Wadell writes. Assign to small groups the task of researching the passages in James that are related to the six effects or characteristics of a life of friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. Wadell writes in regard to the first effect, joy: "A community of the friends of God...should always be characterized by joy because God, who is the fullness of our joy, has befriended us in Christ and the Spirit." He suggests peace or concord flows from the believers' focusing on what binds them in common: "As a community of the friends of God, Christian congregations should exude peace because none of their members loves or desires anything more than they love and desire God." On the importance of fraternal correction, Wadell notes, "Fraternal correction reminds us that sometimes love must take the form of challenge, confrontation, and correction. This is done not to deride or diminish a person, but to remind them of who they are called to be as a beloved friend of God."

Departing Hymn

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