



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 I Have Called You Friends
(*Friendship*, pp. 20-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Love, Death, and
Friendship in the
Harry Potter Novels
(*Friendship*, pp. 59-62)

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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I Have Called You Friends

Jesus gave everything to his friends – his knowledge of God and his own life. Jesus is our model for friendship because he loved without limits, and he makes it possible for us to live a life of friendship because we have been transformed by everything he shared with us.

Prayer

Lord, in spite of our shortcomings, you were, are, and will be our faithful friend. You became human to identify with the life we live, knowing that we will never fully understand you. You gave your life for us even though you knew we would not want to risk ours for your sake, and you continue to walk alongside us even though we often succumb to pressures calling us to walk the opposite direction.

Continue to be with us, Lord. Grant us forgiveness and freedom from guilt. Amen.

Scripture Reading: John 15:12-17

Meditation†

[Christ] demands from us what he himself offers. If he strips himself before our eyes, he claims that we should do the same. As our God he knows every fiber of the being which he has made; as our Savior he knows every instant in the past in which we have swerved from his obedience; but, as our friend, he waits for us to tell him.

Robert Hugh Benson (1871-1914)

Reflection

With painful honesty the Gospel of John records that Jesus' first and closest disciples were on their best days easily distracted from their love of God, care for one another, and concern for their neighbors. Some, like Judas, even grew to be wayward, rebellious, and mean. Yet turning to all of these would-be followers, Jesus explained his and the Father's deep, sacrificial love for them in these words: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" and "I have called you *friends*" (15:15-16).

Today we rarely use "friendship" to describe what John calls "eternal life," the life of salvation that is made possible through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Yet in the Fourth Gospel, Gail O'Day claims, "friendship is the ultimate relationship with God and one another." Since in Greek the word for friend, *philos*, comes from a common verb for love, *phileō*, "in the New Testament a 'friend' is immediately understood as 'one who loves'" she notes. "This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians."

Two dimensions of the classical ideal of friendship are salient in the way Jesus defined his love for the disciples:

- ▶ *the gift of one's life for one's friends*. Friendship was such a key relationship in the ancient world – the glue binding free persons to one another and a community – that friends ideally might sacrifice their lives for one another and the common good. What is so remarkable is that Jesus fully lives out this cultural ideal.



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“What Jesus teaches, he is already living,” O’Day notes. “Jesus’ entire life and death is an act of friendship.”

- *the use of frank and open speech.* Some so-called “friends” are just manipulators. They are not honest with us; they flatter us in order to further their own ends. (The phrase “friend of the emperor” in John 19:12 nicely captures such political expediency.) But Jesus is a true friend who speaks honestly and raises us to friendship by his open speech. The dramatic shift from a conditional (“you are my friends *if* you do what I command you”) to an assertion (“I have called you friends”), O’Day notes, does not depend on something the disciples do, “because their enactment of Jesus’ commandments still remains in the future. No, it is something that Jesus has done: ‘I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father’ (John 15:15)... The disciples are Jesus’ friends because he has spoken to them openly; he has made known to them everything that he has heard from the Father.”

“Because Jesus, in his life and death, his words and deeds, showed and told his followers ‘everything’ about God’s love, his followers’ relationship to the world and to one another was forever changed,” O’Day concludes. “Jesus’ openness is a model of how we are to treat one another, but it also provides the wellspring that makes our acts of friendship possible.”

Study Questions

1. Why do we rarely use “friendship” today to describe the deep love that Jesus and the Father have for us? How has the meaning of the word changed from the ancient times?
2. How was Jesus’ entire life and death an act of friendship?
3. Discuss the meditation by Robert Hugh Benson in light of Jesus’ definition of friendship.
4. To ministers Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) wrote, “Let us reveal our bosom to [a friend], and let him reveal his to us.... A friend hides nothing, if he is true: he pours forth his mind, just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of his Father.” Discuss this application of Jesus’ model of friendship.
5. John Killinger says J. K. Rowling modeled her protagonist on Jesus’ friendship. How is Harry Potter a Christ-figure?

Departing Hymn: “Their Shoulders Bend as Low as Mine” (v. 4)

Let earthly friendships be redeemed
by Christ, both God and man,
who held our hand and God’s, it seemed,
in his, nailed to the span.
Be friends now, heaven, friends with earth
be friends now, thief with King.
Be friends now death, be friends with birth,
as friends, in chorus, sing.

Terry W. York, ASCAP (2007)

Tune: ROXIE, C. David Bolin (2007)

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† Robert Hugh Benson, *The Friendship of Christ* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 26.

I Have Called You Friends

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	John 15:12-17	John 10:1-21; 13:1-20; and 18:1-14
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Jesus' definition of friendship	Discuss how Jesus' model of friendship in his life and death
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 3, and 4	Questions 2 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand Jesus' commandment and definition of love in John 15:12-15 in light of the ancient ideal of friendship.
2. To see how the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus' entire life and death as an act of friendship.
3. To consider how Jesus' frank and open speech enables us to be honest and open with God and one another.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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.

Begin with a Comment

"Contemporary Christian piety tends to place words like 'sin,' 'redemption,' 'atonement,' 'justification,' 'repentance,' and 'born again' at the center of conversations about what it means to live out the offer of salvation made available through the life and death of Jesus Christ," observes Gail O'Day. "'Friendship' does not figure prominently in such a theological world, since friendship is normally relegated to the secular realm, as exemplified by the prominence of friends as the pivot of plots in television shows and movies. Yet as...the Gospel of John shows, nothing could be farther from the truth. For Jesus, friendship is the ultimate relationship with God and one another."

How is our appreciation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection transformed when we realize this is God's ultimate act of friendship on our behalf?

Prayer

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

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 15:12-17 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study guide—like the next one, "The Beloved Disciple"—explores Jesus' friendship with his disciples as portrayed in the Gospel of John. Here the focus is on Jesus' definition of his own love and friendship in John 15:12-15, where he commands us to love one another "as I have loved you." In the next study guide we will

discuss how the Fourth Gospel understands our response—our discipleship of Jesus and love for one another—as friendship with Jesus.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, review Jesus' definition of friendship in John 15:12-15. In the other session, review three passages in the Gospel of John that present Jesus' entire life and death as an act of friendship. You might enrich the second session with John Killinger's discussion of Harry Potter as a Christ-figure.

Study Questions

1. Gail O'Day notes that we already use other words like "sin," "redemption," "atonement," "justification," "repentance," and "born again" ...[to describe] what it means to live out the offer of salvation made available through the life and death of Jesus Christ." It is difficult for us to see how "friendship" fits into this list of biblical metaphors and theological concepts. One source of this difficulty is that we have emptied "friendship" of its classical meaning. In the ancient world friendship was a key social relationship that could define one's love for intimate companions who are striving for a common good (a life of virtue, or communion with God), as well as one's obligations to fellow citizens in a small community. Sacrificing one's life for one's friends and being completely transparent with them were part of the ideal of friendship. Today we have reduced friendship to relationships of pleasure ("We celebrate our friends, we eat and drink with friends, we take vacations with friends") or usefulness ("we are there when a friend is in need").
2. O'Day focuses on three key passages in the Gospel of John (10:1-21; 13:1-20; and 18:1-14) that show how Jesus' entire life and death is an act of friendship for his disciples. You might assign three groups to study these passages and summarize O'Day's commentary on them.
In John 10:1-21, Jesus tells the parable of the sheepfold and identifies himself with both the shepherd and the gate. "The contrast between the shepherd and the hireling is like that between the true and the false friend—the false friend will not be around in a time of crisis, but the true friend will be," O'Day writes. "But Jesus is not simply telling a story about shepherds and hirelings, about true and false friends. Jesus is talking about himself, about the love that animates everything he does." Next, she identifies interesting echoes of John 10 in the scene of Jesus' arrest in the garden in John 18:1-14. Finally, O'Day describes Jesus' washing the disciples' feet in John 13:1-20 as "a sacrament of friendship," an act of friendship that also points beyond itself to his laying down his life for them.
3. Benson relates Jesus' love command (John 15:12-17) to his washing the disciples' feet (13:1-20). Jesus' stripping himself to become a humble servant becomes an image of our being honest and open with Jesus about the most intimate aspects of our lives—our sinful disobedience. Jesus' friendship calls out our openness but does not coerce it.
4. Ambrose encourages ministers to love their congregants as Christ loves all men and women. The minister is to lead others by being vulnerable, open, and transparent, and by sharing his or her own pilgrimage with God. We might apply Ambrose's advice to all Christians who must guide others through their public roles, in their workplace, in their friendships, or in their own families. How would leaders be different if they modeled leadership on Christ's friendship rather than business, military, or professional models in our culture?
5. John Killinger focuses on the general theme—Harry laying down his life to evil Lord Voldemort in order to overcome the evil that threatens his friends and all humans—and several specific scenes in the final novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. He mentions that Harry is called "the Chosen One," he sees a vision of himself and his parents in Godric Hollow as the Holy Family, presents himself to Voldemort for execution, and sees a grand ceiling painting in the home of Xenophilus Lovegood of himself bound in friendship to his classmates/followers. Encourage (if you dare!) the Harry Potter aficionados in the group to brainstorm scenes in the first six novels that present Harry as a Christ-figure.

Departing Hymn

"Their Shoulders Bend as Low as Mine" is on pp. 37-39 of *Friendship*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.