

Today's Christian Woman

Series

LEADER'S GUIDE

Equal Opportunity Friendships

It's a joy to have all kinds of friends.

Where is it written that friends have to be carbon copies of us? When we were children the predominant factor in choosing friends was geographical location. Whoever lived nearby was a potential friend. But as we grew up, our worlds became larger. When we reached adulthood, we found we could become friends with people of different cultures and ages. Can we learn from those who are older than we are? Do we have anything to offer those who are younger than we are? Can we be friends with those who don't share our beliefs? This study will look at what these friendships can offer.

Scripture:

1 Samuel 18:3; John 15:5,15; Acts 10:1-33; James 2:23; Titus 2:3-5

Based on:

"Unexpected Friends," by Camerin J. Courtney, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, November 1996, No. 6, Page 66



INTERNATIONAL

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Unexpected Friends" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN (included at the end of this study).

As young children, we were often thrown together with other children because their parents were friends with our parents. If this mix happened when we were young enough, we learned to get along.

Another criteria we used to pick friends was their belongings. The child who had a swing set in his or her backyard did not lack friends, nor did the lucky one with a swimming pool.

As we grew older, we began to pick friends for different reasons. Many times we chose friends on the basis of our common interests. It made sense that we had friends that liked the same things we liked and hated the things we hated.

**Discussion starters:**

- [Q] Share what your first friend was like. How old were you and how long did the friendship last?
- [Q] What was the craze when you were growing up? Did you have toys that drew other kids to your house? What toys would cause you to feign friendship?
- [Q] What kinds of things did you enjoy doing with your friends when you were little?
- [Q] As a child, did you have any friends who were truly different than you? How did you meet them?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles**Teaching point one: Friendship is God's idea.**

Read James 2:23. Friendship was God's idea, as in this verse where he called Abraham his friend. Since he created it, he can provide it. Although our paths may sometimes have broken friendships along the way, we can also experience friendships that are fulfilling, significant, and long lasting.

Read 1 Samuel 18:3 about two friends. Having a relationship with Almighty God can teach us how to have a relationship with one another. In this case David and Jonathan were close friends. Jonathan would have done anything for David, and he proved it. Friendships can be close and fulfilling.



When Jesus came, he, too, had friends. They were a motley crew he chose one by one from different walks of life. Though each was different, Jesus loved them all. Read John 15:15. Jesus calls his disciples *friends*. The whole idea of friendship was God's idea.

- [Q] If you could choose one character from the Bible to be a friend, other than Jesus, share who it would be and why.
- [Q] What characteristics of a good friend do you think Abraham possessed? Why would God call him his friend?
- [Q] What is the difference between a friend and a servant? Why did Jesus make this distinction?

Teaching point two: Passing on life experiences can be enriching.

We are accustomed to sharing our life experiences with family members, but another gratifying opportunity is to share some of those same experiences with younger friends. Read Titus 2:3–5. God instructs older women to teach younger women. Who among us has not felt grateful when someone has taken the time to warn us about something she has experienced (if it's said in the right way)? Befriending a person, investing in their lives, and then sharing some of your journey can be a wonderful experience for both parties.

Having younger friends can also give us a perspective we wouldn't have otherwise. It lets us into a circle we had already moved out of. Sometimes being with people who do not possess the relationships you possess can create in you a newfound gratefulness at what God has given to you. It's easy to take for granted what we have had for a while. For instance, seeing the struggles of being single can make your spouse look better to you.

Camerin Courtney writes, "I realized how much I would have missed if I'd allowed myself to be paralyzed by the mistaken notion that young mothers don't have time for friends, or that older women have nothing to gain from friendship with someone half their age. God's blessings come in all shapes and sizes. Once we discover that, reaching out to people of different ages or stages in life becomes an adventure."

In some churches there are small groups who meet according to stages in life. There are other groups who are eclectic; people from all walks of life come together to study God's Word and share life experiences with one another. Attending one of these groups would afford you the opportunity to get out of your circle and merge with others.

- [Q] Is a mentorship the same thing as a friendship? What are the similarities, the differences?
- [Q] Share some advice someone older than you imparted that enriched your life. How did it impact you?
- [Q] Do you have an opportunity to form friendships with those who are younger than you are? What are some of the challenges this might present?
- [Q] Can you think of a person or couple younger than you who might benefit from a friendship with you? What practical things could you do to get this started?



Teaching point three: Cultural lines can be crossed for friendships.

Today, whether you live in the United States or in Europe, there exists the opportunity to meet and get to know people from other cultures. Those in the military are mixed together, often finding long-lasting friendships with people from different backgrounds. William Cowper said, "Variety is the spice of life that gives it all its flavor."

What an opportunity we have to learn about other cultures with our colleges full of international students. How interesting it is to learn the different traditions and beliefs each culture holds. How fun to experience different foods from other cultures. Though differences exist, there are similarities as well. Smiles are universal. They convey much to a person who is far away from anything familiar.

Cultivating a friendship with someone from another culture can be rewarding. There are friendships formed here in the United States which blossom into lifelong interactions. E-mail and snail mail are anticipated month after month. Getting a Christmas card from another country is exciting. It's the grown-up version of a pen pal.

Courtney said, "Though people from other walks of life may be less convenient to get to know and even a bit intimidating, I've learned they make wonderful friends." Perhaps we need to rethink the idea that friendship should be comfortable all the time. Who knows what could be waiting for us on the other side of a cultural line?

Read Acts 10:1–23.

- [Q] What cultural line did Peter have to cross to go see Cornelius?
- [Q] Have you ever had a friendship with someone from another culture? What did you find most interesting about it?
- [Q] What culture are you drawn to? What is a practical way you could meet someone in that culture who could become a potential friend?
- [Q] What would be the greatest challenges in cultivating a cross-cultural friendship? Brainstorm how you could overcome those challenges.

Teaching point four: It's okay if some friends don't share your beliefs.

It's one thing to have a friend from a different culture, or a friend who is at a different stage in life, but sometimes our friends don't share our religious beliefs. Is it possible for two friends with opposing views about God to remain friends? Sadly, some friends part ways over the issue of God. It's funny how we all start out the same, not knowing about God, but then cut off those who don't know him when we do.

Granted, there are times that we change lifestyles and therefore lose friends. Still, it is possible to have friends that do not have the same beliefs. And when we do stand on opposite sides, we can be the one to lift them in prayer. If we listen to their struggles, laugh with them, and take part in their lives, we may be invited to share our stories with them. We are simply blind people who now see, and that's what we want to convey.



Sometimes we who find God feel it is our sole responsibility to drag our friend to a saving knowledge of Christ, forgetting for a moment that is not how we came. Others have come to know about God and kept it a secret for fear of disapproval. The story was told about one such conversion. When a young woman (I'll call her Betty) heard about salvation and accepted it for herself, she immediately ran to tell her friend next door. Upon hearing the news her friend replied, "Oh, I'm a Christian too." To which Betty gently responded, "Why didn't you ever tell me?" Being friends with someone with different beliefs is possible; Jesus did it.

Bill Hybels and Lee Strobel said in *Becoming a Contagious Christian*:

A person's coming to Christ is like a chain with many links. There is the first link, middle links, and a last link. There are many influences and conversations that precede a person's decision to convert to Christ God has not called me to only be the last link. He has called me to be faithful and to love all people. We don't know where someone is as far as hearing about God and his son Jesus Christ. We can be obedient by sharing our story when God leads us to. We can be one of those links to our friends.

Continue reading about Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:24–33.

- [Q] How did Cornelius reach out to his friends (v.24)? How might you follow his example?
- [Q] Do you have friends who do not share your religious beliefs? What challenges has this presented in your friendship?
- [Q] Was one of your friends instrumental to your hearing about Jesus? In what way?
- [Q] Share about an unsuccessful attempt to share your faith with a friend. What was the final outcome? Did your friendship survive?
- [Q] Have you had the privilege of sharing your faith with someone who accepted Christ? Share your experience.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

We have looked at this thing called friendship thoroughly. We have talked about how our friends don't have to be duplicates of us. We can have friends who are older and wiser, younger and not as experienced, from another culture, and we can even have friends who do not share our beliefs. The Lord can show us how to be friends to those he brings into our lives. Not everyone we meet will be a friend, but we can be instrumental in introducing her to the friend of sinners.

Read John 15:5. It has been said that there are friends for reasons, for seasons, and for life. Jesus is our friend for life. Maybe God has someone in your life that needs a friend like you. We can actually ask the Holy Spirit to guide us toward future friends. Friendship is an equal opportunity for all.

- [Q] Friends enjoy each other. What does Jesus enjoy about you?



[Q] What is one area from our study that has stretched your thinking?

[Q] As you look back on your friendships, share one in which you especially saw God's leading. What made this friendship so special?

Alternate Activity: Ask each participant to write the word FRIEND vertically on a piece of paper. Ask them to write a word for each letter depicting a characteristic they would like their friends to see in them. We are all a work in progress, but this is something we can pray for each other when everyone is finished.

—Study prepared by Anne Peterson, published poet, speaker, ongoing student of God's word, and regular contributor to Christian Bible Studies.

Additional Resources



ChristianBibleStudies.com
-Developing True Accountability
-Friendships That Benefit Parenting
-Authentic Fellowship



Celebrating Friendship: Women of Faith Series, Traci Mullins (Zondervan Corp., 1998; ISBN: 031021338X)



Friends: How to Maintain a Healthy Relationship, Ade Adesina (Destiny Image, 2004; ISBN: 8890058889)



The Friendships of Women, 10th Anniversary Edition, Dee Brestin (Cook Communications, 1997; ISBN 1564766322)



Join me For Tea: Infusing Friendships with Love and Laughter, Emilie Barnes (Harvest House Gifts, 2001; ISBN: 0736906681)



Virtues of Friendship and Loyalty, William J. Bennett (Thomas Nelson, 2001; ISBN: 0849917255)



Today's Christian Woman

Series

ARTICLE

Unexpected Friends

Don't let age, marital status, or other differences rob you of a great friendship.

By Camerin J. Courtney, for the study, "Equal Opportunity Friendships"

Three years ago, nearly all my friends resembled me: twenty something, never married, career minded, childless. Yet, when I moved from my college town of Des Moines, Iowa, to Chicago for my first job, this changed dramatically. Suddenly I was dining out with mothers of toddlers, going to antique fairs with women in their 40s, and attending aerobics classes with stay-at-home moms. It was great, but strange.



To be honest, women who wield diaper bags intimidated me. They knew this whole other lingo (nuks and sippy cups) and lived by a completely different schedule (4:00 a.m. feedings!). And I'd just assumed women who were old enough to have birthed me wouldn't want to hang out with me. But I was wrong. And as women of other ages and stages in life got to know me, they revealed similar fears: Would a young single woman find a mom of teens interesting? I would, and I do. When we all got past our fears and reservations, some great friendships developed.

Though people from other walks of life may be less convenient to get to know and even a bit intimidating, I've learned they make wonderful friends. Whether you're in your twenties or forties, married or single, childfree, a mother, or a grandmother, here's why it's worth pursuing friendships with women outside your comfort zone.

They know stuff you don't.

One of the first people I got to know at my new job was Jan. She was a single, forty-year-old woman who worked in the office next to mine. I learned she was into gardening, interior design, and Color Me Beautiful. And, more importantly, she was willing to share all this information with me, her twenty-two-year-old coworker.

Within months Jan had me pegged as an "autumn," and told me which colors looked best on me in my slowly expanding work wardrobe. A year later, she helped me move into a new apartment and even stayed around to help arrange the furniture and



decorations. As a young woman establishing my career and setting up my first “home,” I soaked in every ounce of advice and wisdom.

But probably my most valuable conversations with Jan were about dating. It was great to have a friend who offered both the wisdom of years of dating experience and the current knowledge of what it’s like to be single. Just as valuable as Jan’s advice was her example. After dating for a couple decades, she was still surviving—in fact, thriving—in a full, active life. On several occasions I simply needed to know this was possible.

They help dispel stereotypes.

The evening news, movies, and magazines would have us believe all Generation Xers are whiny slackers who are short on personal hygiene and long on contempt for the world. I’ve met more than one woman who’s bought into this stereotype and expressed surprise when she discovered I’m a normal, functioning human being who falls into this age bracket.

As frustrated as the Gen-X stereotype makes me, I must admit I’ve bought into a few stereotypes of my own. For example, I used to think when you grow older, you slow down and life becomes a bit boring. That was until I met Gloria, a sixty-three-year-old woman in the exercise class I lead. She’s one of my most dedicated students. And when she does miss a class, it’s usually because she’s learning about painting, pottery-making, bread-baking, or ballroom dancing in a class somewhere else.

And there’s Barb, my fifty-something coworker who, along with her sixty-something husband, is constantly flying overseas for vacations in places like the Holy Lands and Bermuda.

These women are more than just stereotype-defying models of older age; they’re my friends. And through our conversations I’ve learned older women have a lot more spunk than I’ve ever given them credit for. I’ve often told Barb, “I can’t wait until I grow up and can jet-set around the world like you.” She just smiles and replies, “I’ve earned it.” And through our friendship I’ve come to view aging with anticipation instead of anxiety. I’d better rest up—it sounds like my most active years are yet to come!

They offer joy from the past and hope for the future.

I’m one of two single women on my immediate staff of eighteen people. Consequently, whenever I mention a man’s name or talk about an outing that remotely resembles a date, I’m met with many raised eyebrows from my female friends in the office. When I receive flowers, I don’t know who’s more excited, my married coworkers or me.



Some singles might cringe at this “nosiness,” but I don’t mind much. These are the same women who let me sit in their offices and overanalyze every movement, word, and expression of my current flame, or bemoan the fact that there aren’t enough decent single Christian men in this world.

And I realize there are certain advantages to being single that married people can no longer enjoy—like the rush of a new relationship. While some days I’d love to trade in my singleness for the mature love of marriage, I let these married friends share in my current excitement.

“We’re just reliving our single years through you, you know,” Louise, a thirty-four-year-old coworker, told me one day after I’d answered a barrage of questions from her and several others about a special date. I know, and I kind of enjoy it. Letting my married friends vicariously enjoy the best of being single is the least I can do to show my appreciation for their relationship advice. And besides, that’s what friends are for.

On the flip side, being around so many married friends gives me a clear-cut vision of how great marriage can be. Recently I traveled to North Carolina to spend a four-day weekend with my friend, Christa, and her new husband, Mark. Christa and I had been friends in Chicago for a little over a year before she married and moved out east. While she lived here and was dating Mark long distance, Christa and I spent many hours sitting around her dining room table talking about her dreams of marrying him.

My trip gave me the chance to see up close the fulfillment of her seven-year dream. Over four days of gabbing, shopping, and hanging out at the beach, I was bowled over by contagious newlywed love. They called each other “babe” and “hon” and kissed every time they’d been apart—even if it was only for a half hour. Having a front-row seat to this blossoming marriage gave me a renewed hope that sometimes dreams do come true, and it really is worth the wait for God’s perfect timing.

They remind you that the grass is pretty green on your side of the fence, too.

A few weeks ago on a Saturday morning, Louise and I set out on a search for a cheesecake outlet store. We’d read about it in a local guidebook and our common love of cheesecake united us on a mission: to find, to buy, to indulge.

Louise’s two sons—Scott, eight, and Alex, two—went with us. I’d almost forgotten how much fun being around kids can be. As Scott told me about what he was learning in school and Alex played peekaboo with me, I could hear my biological clock ticking louder and louder.

But as the morning wore on, I was also reminded of how much work little ones can be. When we got out of the car to go into the store, we had to locate mittens and boots that had been flung in the back of the minivan in an act of two-year-old defiance. We



lugged out the stroller ... and a blanket ... and a favorite toy. As I watched Louise mediate sibling warfare, the ticking got fainter and fainter.

Later that afternoon, when I ran a few errands by myself, I noticed the ease with which I whizzed in and out of the car. The only thing I had to lug around was my purse. And there in the middle of the grocery store parking lot, I silently thanked God for this child-free time in my life. Perhaps someday I'll enjoy the special title "Mommy" and all the blessings that go along with it—but for now I need to appreciate the blessings of freedom and ease.

I'm afraid I've done my share of making others appreciate their lot in life as well. Over dinner recently, I rehashed my single struggles to my married friend Annette. "He's a wonderful guy, but what is being in love really supposed to feel like? My head's telling me one thing and my heart another."

Following some helpful insights, Annette sighed and said, "Boy, am I glad I'm married." To anyone else this might have sounded insensitive, but I knew Annette was communicating that she understood the depth of my struggles. And, besides, I couldn't blame her. I'd painted such a dismal picture of dating, what married person wouldn't be relieved her dating days were done? I knew that if nothing else productive came out of this conversation (other than some great venting!), at least Annette's husband would be greeted by a very appreciative wife that evening.

When I think back over the past three years, I realize how much I would have missed if I'd allowed myself to remain paralyzed by the mistaken notion that young mothers don't have time for friends, or that older women have nothing to gain from friendship with someone half their age. God's blessings come in all shapes and sizes. Once we discover that, reaching out to people of different ages or stages in life becomes an adventure. Stepping outside my comfort zone has never been more rewarding.

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