



Walking God's Way

*Biblical Encouragement
for Walking with Christ*

BIBLE STUDY

Unlikely Friends

Enrich your life by making friends with those who are different than you.



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One of the sweetest relationships we can experience is a close friendship. Typically, close friends are defined by their similarities, the common ties that bind or draw them together. Amy Nappa, in an article for TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, challenges us to look beyond similarities with others to find potential friendships all around us. This study encourages us to move outside our comfort zones to form unlikely, but enriching, friendships.

Scripture:

Exodus 33:11; Ruth 1:15-18; 1 Samuel 23:15-18;
John 4:1-42; Acts 15:36-41; 1 Peter 5:1-7

Based on:

"Different by Design," by Amy Nappa,
TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, January/February 2003

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note: Prior to the class, provide for each person a copy of the article "Different by Design" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine (included at the end of this study).

Some people easily make friends. Perhaps you are willing, even anxious, to form friendships, but there seems to be no one around with whom you have something in common. In your search for friends, does it seem difficult to find someone to share time with? Consider moving beyond looking for your carbon copy, and delve into the realm of the unfamiliar in search of your next friendship.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What close friendships have you experienced? What was especially fun about one of those relationships?
- [Q] Our society stresses individualism and independence. Do you feel that people are losing the ability to form friendships with one another? Why or why not?
- [Q] What qualities do you look for in a friend? Have you looked at a certain individual and thought, *I'd really like to be her friend*? What about the opposite; have you ever thought, *There's no way we'd ever have anything in common*?
- [Q] Are your friendships mostly within or outside of the body of Christ? Why? Have you given much thought to what God says about friendship?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Choosing to reach out to our opposites or even to our adversaries may be spiritually challenging but full of blessing and renewal.

Read Acts 15:36–41. This passage records Paul and Barnabas's split over John (also called Mark). Colossians and Philemon have accounts of Mark being included in Paul's group about twelve years later. Second Timothy tells us that Paul's admiration for Mark grew so much that he asked Mark to be with him during his final days.

The Bible tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is God-breathed. Every verse is intentionally placed in the Bible to teach and guide us on our journey. Through the stories of Paul, Barnabas, and Mark, we learn the importance of forgiveness and giving people a second chance. Most important, we are called to bless others and pray for them, even when we disagree with them.

Read 1 Samuel 23:15–18. David chose not to hate Jonathan because Jonathan was the son of King Saul, who was threatening David's life. David kept his mind open to a man who was strongly associated with his adversary. As a result, David's and Jonathan's lives were positively enriched by their friendship. By keeping open minds, we are able to grow spiritually, loving others as Christ does.

- [Q] In what way has God most revealed his love to you? How can you love others as Christ has loved you?
- [Q] Can you think of anyone who is different from you but sparks your interest? How might you reach out to her?
- [Q] Is there someone in your past with whom you've had a disagreement, who may turn out to be a friend after all? How might you take a first step toward healing that relationship?

Teaching point two: Friendships can flourish across generations.

Read Ruth 1:15–18 and 1 Peter 5:1–7. The Bible is full of stories of love and care for family members, including relationships among different generations. Some examples include Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi; Paul and his nephew; Abraham and his nephew Lot; and Paul and Timothy. Instructions on caring for each other in the body of Christ are also given in the Bible.

Not all of us will experience family members saving us from life-and-death situations as Abraham did for Lot (Genesis 14, 18–19) and Paul's nephew did for Paul (Acts 23). However, we can support one another by doing things together, sharing our lives and emotional needs with one another, and most importantly, praying for one another through different spiritual battles and milestones along life's journey. Ruth and Naomi journeyed together, supporting one another.

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We can also establish friendships with people from different generations outside of our families. We can follow the guidelines for caring given to the elders and young men in 1 Peter 5:1–7. We can physically, emotionally, and spiritually support and encourage the elderly in our communities and churches, or we can mentor someone younger than us.

Start praying today for 1) how God can use you as a friend to your extended family, and 2) the opportunity to establish a friendship outside of your generation and family. Your life will be changed while influencing others, and friendships will flourish.

- [Q] Does our society encourage caring for our family members? Explain your thoughts. Who in your family might need your friendship?
- [Q] We can be inspired by how the apostle Paul took Timothy under his care and mentored him, including leading him to Christ during his first visit to Lystra. Timothy traveled with Paul on many missionary journeys as well. How might God use your friendships to further his kingdom?
- [Q] Can you think of a person of a different generation with whom you'd like to be friends? How can you begin a relationship with this person?

Teaching point three: Our most enriching friendship is found in Jesus Christ, and we can gain wisdom from seeing how he loved his friends.

Read Exodus 33:11 and John 4:1–42. God created his children with a longing for fellowship. Throughout the Old Testament are stories demonstrating the relational attributes of God. Some examples of God's relational intentions include the three persons of the Trinity walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Abraham's covenant relationship with the Lord, and the Lord speaking face-to-face with Moses as a man would speak with his friend.

The New Testament documents the greatest demonstration of love: God sending his Son, Jesus, to minister for thirty-three years on earth. Jesus, having gone through everything we would experience, continually set an example of how to care for others. Most importantly, Jesus was the one and only perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins. Through a relationship with Christ, we enter into relationship with God the Father.

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus spending time with people. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, blessed the children, befriended sinners, and spent time developing close friendships with the disciples, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus was a selfless friend.

Jesus didn't have an agenda for befriending others. He showed love to those he met. We can be encouraged by Jesus' example of making friends with an assortment of people. Perhaps we will be motivated to befriend our neighbor across the street that we hardly know, the parent sitting on the bleachers with us game after game, or the woman on the same committee at church. Maybe it is time to reach beyond our comfort zones. We can love and care for people, growing friendships along the way in a selfless, Christ-like manner.

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- [Q] List three things you have in common with the Samaritan woman found in John 4.
- [Q] Who might be the “Samaritan woman” God has placed in your life? How might you initiate a friendship with her?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

We are created to be relational. Sometimes relationships can be spiritually challenging, but they also help us grow. We want to focus on the selflessness of Christ and his love and care for others. By doing so, we are better able to see clear examples of how to befriend others by aligning with people we have previously found difficult or different than us. We can care more deeply for others by forming prayer relationships with older or younger family members, by volunteering our time serving the elderly, or by mentoring young people. There are many ways to reach beyond our comfort zones. By being willing to initiate friendships, we will grow in Christ and will almost always experience a truly enriching relationship in return.

- [Q] As a group, brainstorm the following ideas for relational and service activities that can be done as a group or as individuals. How might they work for you?

Ideas for Relational Activities:

- *Group.* Plan to host a ladies' tea at your church or the place where your small group meets. Encourage each member in this study to invite someone new to attend the tea.
- *Individual.* Invite someone new to your home for a meal. If it is close to a holiday, share your holiday dinner with someone spending that day away from his or her family.
- *Group or Individual.* Write a note of encouragement to someone elderly in a local nursing home, someone ill in the hospital or recovering at home, a new mom, or someone who is grieving a loss.

Ideas for Service Activities:

- *Group.* Plan to volunteer at a local soup kitchen, wrap presents in the mall during the holidays, or plan a fundraiser for a local charity.
- *Individual.* Invite a junior or senior high school teen in your church or community to meet weekly with you for fifteen minutes of prayer and encouragement. Pursue this relationship throughout the teen's school years. (You may also want to reverse this concept and select someone older than you to meet with and to serve as your mentor.)

—Study prepared by Chandelle Claassen

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Additional Resources

-  *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, Bill Hybels, Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan, 1996)
-  *Friendship: The Key to Spiritual Growth*, John W. Crossin (Paulist Press, 1997)
-  *The Friendship Crisis: Finding, Making, and Keeping Friends When You're Not a Kid Anymore*, Marla Paul (St. Martin Press, 2005)
-  *The Friendship Factor: How to Get Closer to the People You Care for, 25th Anniversary Edition*, Alan Loy McGinnis (Augsburg/Fortress, 2004)
-  *Relationships: How to Make Bad Relationships Better and Good Relationships Great*, Dr. Les Parrott III, Dr. Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2002)
-  *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction*, David G. Benner (Inter-Varsity Press, 2004)
-  *Virtues of Friendship and Loyalty*, William J. Bennett (Thomas Nelson, 2001)
-  ChristianBibleStudies.com
 - Friendships that Benefit Parenting
 - Developing True Accountability
 - Successful Relationships Course
 - Like the Ones You Love Course

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Different by Design

How cultivating an assortment of unlikely friendships can enrich your life.

by Amy Nappa

When I first met Marie, I never would have imagined we would become friends. It was my first day in martial arts class. My son, Tony, had been taking *tae kwon do* for several months, and I decided joining him would be good exercise and a neat way to bond. As I stepped onto the mat-covered floor, a small, dark-haired woman wearing a black belt approached me. She smiled warmly, extended her hand, and said, “Hi! I’m Something Something Something.” At least that’s what I heard. She had a thick accent. German? French? I responded nervously, “Excuse me?” Without losing her temper (or giving me a karate chop), she patiently repeated, “I’m Marie Something Something.” “Marie?” I asked. “Close enough,” she responded. Within a few minutes she had me doing push-ups and wild kicks.

Over the course of the next few months, I learned her name was actually Marie-Paule Leonhardt, her accent was French, and she and I had just about nothing in common. True, we were both mothers, but her kids were grown while my son, Tony, was still in grade school. She enjoyed hobbies such as hunting (as in shooting elk), fishing (as in standing around in cold water), and camping (as in sleeping on the hard ground thirty miles from a decent restroom).

One day I said to Marie that it might be nice if we got together for lunch sometime. I was testing the waters to see if she had any interest in getting better acquainted. After all, we were the only mothers in the class, and Marie seemed friendly. She agreed to lunch, and we soon met at a local sandwich shop. That became the first of many lunches we’ve shared together. From these times, I’ve learned about Marie’s rich European history and the whirlwind romance that brought her to America. I’ve discovered she is incredibly hospitable, goes out of her way to show friends she cares about them, and is a talented

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cook. Despite my initial skepticism, God brought Marie into my life and allowed us to form a friendship that has enriched my life.

This unlikely friendship, and others like it, got me thinking: Why do I look for friends who are exactly like me? Why do I think only women my age, married to husbands who like the same sports as mine, with kids the same age as mine, who volunteer in the same places I do, and who have the same beliefs as I have, can be my friends? When I examined my closed-minded ways, I realized I was ignoring potential friendships all over the place!

I asked around and found I wasn't alone. My friend, Cassie, told me about her first impressions of an acquaintance, Joelle, and how she was sure they'd never be friends. "Joelle has a blunt way of speaking; she's loud and freely shares her opinions," Cassie explained. "I thought she might find a better friend in someone else—not quiet, shy me!" Yet after being thrown together in a variety of church-related situations, Cassie saw deeper into Joelle's heart. She learned Joelle was firm when it came to standing up for her faith, had a great sense of humor, and sincerely listened when Cassie had concerns. Soon Cassie realized she had found a friend.

Another friend of mine, Monica, reached out to a developmentally disabled adult, Annette, whom she met at church. While others might have thought they couldn't relate to someone with a disability, Monica put aside those differences. She offered Annette rides to and from church functions, invited her to family events, and remembered her with other gestures of kindness. Annette radiates joy every time she speaks of Monica and her children. She knows she has a friend!

These unlikely friendships shouldn't surprise me. After all, the Bible is full of them. And what great examples these friendships are for us today.

Family Ties

The Old Testament women Ruth and Naomi never should have been friends. After all, they were in-laws! Ruth married Naomi's son, and when both of their husbands died, Ruth stuck with Naomi instead of returning to her own family. She said, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me" (Ruth 1:16,17). The Bible shows how these women trusted each other, cared for each other, and stuck it out through thick and thin.

Like Ruth and Naomi, we can find friends within our family. Many women overlook potential friendships with their parents, in-laws, grandparents, and children. My family members are my dearest friends of all. My son, Tony, is a bunch of years younger than I am and is into all kinds of things I'm not, such as sports, video games, and frogs. But Tony and I love to hang out together, whether

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we're reading books, taste-testing cinnamon rolls at local breakfast spots, or dancing around the living room pretending to be rock stars. He offers me a new perspective on things and reminds me it's more important to have fun than to do the laundry. (We all could use friends like that!)

Adversaries into Allies

The Bible also tells of the unlikely friendship between David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18–23). David clearly was God's choice to be the next king of Israel. Jonathan was the son of the current king, Saul, and was expected to be the next king. Add to that Saul's hatred of David, and you've definitely got an unlikely friendship. Yet these two men loved each other as brothers. When Jonathan was killed, David went to the trouble of finding and caring for Jonathan's only heir. Now that's friendship!

David and Jonathan's relationship reminds us we can find friends among those we consider our enemies. You might not think you have adversaries, but you probably have some strong feelings about certain issues and may avoid people with opposing views. What about someone from a different political party? Can you put those differences aside for the sake of a friendship? I have several friends with whom I don't agree on many ethical points. Yet we've been able to agree to disagree and move on with our friendships. Whether it's political parties or Harry Potter, set it aside and look deeper into the loving heart beneath.

The Best Friend of All

Maybe the most unlikely friendship of all is the one between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, which started at the village well (John 4). To begin with, the woman was a Samaritan, and Jesus was a Jew. During Bible times, these groups despised each other. In addition, this woman had an unfavorable reputation and apparently didn't have a lot of friends, since she was at the well when other women weren't.

Most Jews would have snubbed this woman. But not Jesus. He invited her to be one of his followers. That was an unlikely friendship indeed. Still, it's rather unlikely any of us would find a friend in our Lord. We're imperfect, unholy, and have nothing in common with the Master of the universe. Yet he still wants us as friends.

From this unlikely friendship, we're reminded of two things. First, Jesus wants to have a relationship with us. He's willing to put aside all of our differences and enter into our lives. We should welcome Jesus as quickly as we would welcome a friend who brought over steaming lattes and a plate of brownies!

Second, Jesus didn't look only for friends who were like him. We should follow his example. Can you think of any possibilities? I thought of a group of college girls who stop by my house for snacks and a few hours of chitchat every now and then. I first met them when I was one of their high school church leaders. Who would

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have thought that over time I'd come to know these young women as dear friends? They remind me there are still new things to discover and new paths to explore in life. And I hope my touch on their lives encourages them with an older, wiser perspective.

Ever since I opened my eyes to unlikely friendships, I've found friends everywhere! Friends of all kinds enrich my life as I enrich theirs. Who is God nudging your way? With his help, you're bound to find a friend sooner than you think!

—*"Different by Design,"* by Amy Nappa, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, July/August 1998. Amy, best-selling author, whose latest book is *The Low-Fat Lifestyle* (WaterBrook, 2002), lives with her family in Colorado.

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