## youthESource Bible Study

# What are Friends For? A Bible Study Series on Friendship

By Kristin Schmidt

"Friendship ... is born at the moment when one man says to another "What! You too? I thought that no one but myself..." -C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves

True friendship seems somewhat underrated in modern society, overshadowed by romantic infatuation or celebration of independence. Teens all too often define "friends" by the number of followers they can count on social media outlets. It is important to help adolescents understand how precious true friends are, as well as what it means to be a friend. This Bible study series provides four lessons on friendship. Each lesson features Biblical examples of friends, as well as specific verses for study and questions to contemplate. The order and format are of course adaptable, but the main themes are:

#### **Lesson one:** What is Friendship?

This lesson introduces the study topic with definitions and broad discussion of friendship. Qualities of friendship are explored, including loyalty, trust, care, and generosity. Examples of these traits will feature the story of the fiery furnace and the healing of a paralytic.

## Lesson two: Through Thick and Thin...

This lesson will focus on the characters of David and Jonathan, examining their friendship as a model of relational devotion. The characteristics of friendship will be applied to the story of David and Jonathan, as teens apply those traits to other areas of life as well.

#### **Lesson Three:** Mentors

Not all friendships are found on the playground. Some relationships are forged between a more senior role and a younger one. The relationships between Ruth and Naomi, Elijah and Elisha, and Paul and Timothy will serve to exemplify this type of friendship.

#### **Lesson Four:** The Group Dynamic

Friendship can be individual but can also exist between multiple people. This lesson examines how team friendship can develop our identity and joy. The interactions between Jesus and His disciples will highlight this friendship genre, as we see how love lays down its life for friends.

## Lesson One: What is Friendship? Closer than a Brother...

**Bible Focus:** Why does friendship matter? In this study, teens will look at several key verses and characters to explore elements of friendship. They will consider why God values friendship and what attributes define a friend. Students will discuss and plan cultivating relationships.

**Student application:** Teenagers are undergoing life changes and challenges constantly. Having quality friends, and knowing how to keep them, are things that will not only help survive middle and high school but will also influence quality adult relationships.

**Lesson Opener:** Does it match? Provide students with names or pictures of several great well-known friend "couples." Write or print out the individuals and scatter them about separately. Possible people to consider include historical friends (Mozart and Haydn, Jefferson and Adams), as well as literary companions like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Hamlet and Horatio (if the audience is Shakespeare-savvy), Androcles and the Lion, or even the Fox and the Hound or Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse. Have students match the pairs as best they can. If it's more entertaining as a competition, make this activity a game by having two groups vie for matches at the same time. Invite students to discuss things that make up a friendship, or even definitions of friendship. Throw a few questions out to kids:

- What different kinds of relationships are there?
- Are there different kinds of love?
- How do you get friends?
- How can you maintain friendships?
- What does God say about friends?
- How did you meet a good friend you have right now?

Talk about these questions briefly and remind students that *love* can mean a lot more than the Hollywood ideal of smooching and schmoozing (this is commonly known as "eros" in academic or psychological discussion). According to Greek words found in the Bible, there are other types of love: two important ones for our understanding are *agape* (unconditional love) and *philia*. The "philia," sometimes called brotherly love, is what characterizes friendships. It is a strong bond between people, a genuine care and concern that unites people with compassion and respect. Friendship is a gift of God, and one that anyone can embrace.

Not all people are able to be parents or have a significant partner, but everyone can be a friend...have teens brainstorm types of things that make someone a good friend. Write down concepts they come up with, and then invite them to read about more of these.

**Lesson and Verses:** Study the Scripture. Invite students to take a Bible (or print-out) and sit alone for a few minutes. Encourage them to pray over the passage and read it through at least three times. Give them quiet time to read Proverbs 18 and think about what it says regarding friendship. Emphasize the final verse of the passage:

there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24)

Go back to the characteristics of a friend that students came up with earlier. Make sure to include such elements as trust, loyalty, perseverance, care, and mercy. Divide students into groups and have them take a brief look at two Biblical friendships. After examining the passages in groups, have teens return and describe the stories they read. Invite one group (or half of the crowd, if kids are broken into smaller groups) to read Daniel 1 and the other half to look at Mark 2 (this can be further broken down into Mark 2:1-5 and 13-17).

In the first passage (Daniel 1), we see four friends (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) who have been taken into captivity and forced to work for a foreign government. The key element of note is that they remain loyal to God and to one another. The friends are tested and refuse to yield to the ways of the king. This solidarity allows them to be encouraged to continue in their faith and resolve for righteousness. Eventually (in chapter 3), we see them threatened to the point of death in a furnace of fire, and still they hold fast. In a strange and unfamiliar land, friendship helped these friends remain dedicated to the most important tenets of their lives.

In Mark, we see four friends who had tremendous faith which was used to help a friend. Not only did they make efforts to bring their paralyzed comrade to meet Jesus, they went so far as to carry him up and through the roof of the house when it was over-crowded (clearly they were not friends with the home owners, but, oh well...). Jesus rewarded and commended this faith, healing their friend and promising forgiveness of sins.

Later in the chapter, Jesus is criticized for His practice of table fellowship as He joins sinners in their homes. This was a big deal to people in the times of Christ, but He did not let it dissuade Him from visiting those who needed Him. This reminds us that friendship is not (or should not, at least) based on popularity or potential personal gain, but on love and care for the other. We also note that Christ is willing to befriend all types of people—including us!

## Break-out Questions (Depending on the size of your group, these can be done as a whole or with kids split into smaller clusters):

- How well do you know your best friend? Can you describe their interests, identify
  their fears, name their favorite food? Are these things important to know, and why?
- Why does God value friendship? How can it further His kingdom?
- Listening well...how can being a good listener help in being a good friend? What are some qualities and habits of a good listener?
- What other Biblical characters or verses can you think of that might relate to the topic of friendships?

• What should we do if we encounter conflict in a friendship? Can you describe a time when this has happened to you?

Weekly Challenge Take-Away: Thank you for being a friend... Give kids a challenge to carry out in the week ahead. This week, work hard to practice selfless friendship. Identify one friend in your life who may need extra support or encouragement, and pray for them. Write them a short note or email, or even doodle a picture, to let them know how much they are loved and appreciated. If possible, make an effort to daily communicate, whether in person or through text/phone call/etc., just to let them know you are there.

**Close** the study with prayer, and invite students back for more friendly lessons as next week delves into the Biblical friendship of David and Jonathan.

# Lesson Two: Through Thick and Thin...Examining the Friendship of David and Jonathan

**Bible Focus:** What does friendship look like? While there are plenty of different types and manifestations of quality friendship, a good friend is not something to take lightly, and the relationship requires effort and sacrifice on both sides. This study considers the characteristics of a classic Biblical friendship, as an example of what it means to be and have a true friend.

**Student application:** By examining the stories of David and Jonathan, teenagers will see and describe the attributes and actions evident in a genuine friendship. They will envision ways of implementing some of those elements in their own relationships.

**Lesson Opener:** Teamwork! Have students pair up, and seat them side by side. Create "Siamese twins" with each pair by placing one arm (the inside arm) behind them and tying (gently) together. Seated like that, invite students to collaborate in an activity or two, making sure tasks require the use of both hands. They might be asked to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, write a letter on paper, wrap a present, or change a doll's clothes...to make it extra challenging, do not make all materials readily available, forcing students to work together to look around the room and find elements needed. After the silly activities, gather students back together to discuss what happened:

- What was challenging about only having one hand of your own to use?
- How did this activity force you to rely on others? How did it force cooperation?
- How do you get friends?
- How can you maintain friendships?
- What does God say about friends?
- Is it easy or hard to be a good friend?

As much as solitude can be an important element of our walk with God, we are created to live in relationship with one another, and God has provided a tremendous blessing with the gift of friendship. Explain to students that today we will look at two very close friends from the Bible, David and Jonathan.

**Lesson and Verses:** Teamwork.... illustrate it! Divide students into 4 or 5 groups, and give each group a few verses to study. Provide time for them to separate and read over their given passages of Scripture. Give each group several pieces of paper, or one long paper or paper broken into comic strip-like distinctions. Invite them to read and illustrate the passage given. Note this is not a masterpiece Caldecott award contender, just a creative outlet to communicate the story with peers. The break-down of passages and groups is, of course, dependent on the group numbers, temperaments, time limits, etc....suggested division of chapters:

- 1 Samuel 18:1-4 (David and Jonathan form a sacred bond with one another)
- 1 Samuel 19:1-7 (Jonathan talks Saul out of killing David)
- 1 Samuel 20:1-17 (Escaping the palace, part one: a plan is formed)
- 1 Samuel 20: 18-42 (Arrows in a field...saving David's life in a banishment code).
- 2 Samuel 1:17-27 (David's lament for Jonathan).

After a designated time period, bring students back to discuss the passages they read and share illustrations. Invite them to also identify elements of the David/Jonathan partnership that were especially representative of friendship.

Go back to the characteristics of a friend that students came up with in previous lessons—or if not previously discussed, have students come up with friend qualities that are important. See what qualities can be applied to the stories explored in 1 Samuel. If not mentioned, make sure students observe things like:

- Acknowledgement of God's sovereignty
- Loyalty and firm allegiance
- Sacrifice and support
- Love and concern

Don't forget to point out the significance of Jonathan's position... in essence, David was overtaking Jonathan's rightful claim as heir to the throne. If he had been power hungry, that may easily have been a cause of enmity and strife. Instead, Jonathan repeatedly saved his friend's life, argued for him against his father's madness, and felt united with him. The two were open in their commitment to and love for one another. It is important to note, though, that while their love for each other was very great, it was not sexualized in any way. It was an authentic friendship.

# Break-out Questions (Depending on the size of your group, these can be done as a whole or with kids split into smaller clusters):

- How far would you go to help a friend?
- Are friends more or less valuable than blood-related family members? (This can have multiple potential answer....)
- Why does God value friendship? How can it further His kingdom?
- What are some situations in modern culture when we might have to defend someone we know? What are we potentially "up against"?
- How would you feel if a good friend was given something you wanted? If envious (be honest), how would you deal with such emotions?

**Weekly Challenge Take-Away: A Sacrifice of time..** For this week's challenge, invite students to pursue a relationship, perhaps with someone they have neglected recently.

Take an hour or two in the week and arrange to do something with a friend, whether it's having coffee, shopping for a new outfit, serving, or just chatting after school. Pray for the person before and after the encounter.

**Close** the study with prayer, and invite students back for more friendly lessons as next week peeks at the role of mentors.

# Lesson Three: Beyond Playground Pals...Mentors as Friends

**Bible Focus:** It is wonderful to have friends who were in the same kindergarten class, or went with you on the Girl Scout trip, or came to all of your birthday parties. But there are also friendships that span ages. Some say that friendship is timeless and age is just a number. To a certain extent, this is accurate, but there is a specific genre of relationship that develops when an older person engages with a younger one. They help one another in ways, and the words of wisdom and experience offered by elders should be valued and remembered.

**Student application**: Students will look at the relationships of a few Biblical mentor-student bonds, in order to recognize the God-directed importance of such friendships and how they can be appreciated and used.

Lesson Opener: Following instructions, start with a game that requires some careful listening skills. Pair students up (or bring in older leaders, if available), and have one give directions for the other to follow. The directions may involve drawing a simple picture, putting some items away on shelves, or navigating through a crowded room.... the catch is that the one following instructions is blindfolded, while the other can see. Mentors can intervene if the blindfolded friend is near danger, but otherwise must stand aloof from the situation and rely on vocal commands. After playing (switch roles, if numbers dictate), gather for questions to consider the activity and prepare for the lesson on mentors.

- Was it difficult to do the task with only vocal directions? What surrounding elements were distracting to you?
- How did this activity force you to rely on others? How did it force obedience?
- Are friendships only for kids?
- Is there any sort of age gap limitation when it comes to friends?
- Who is an older person in your life that you respect and admire?
- Do young people have anything to offer adults? What?
- What is a "mentor"?

Explain to students that we will peruse a couple of Biblical friendships that existed between varied generations and taught from one person to another. Whether or not your family ties are strong, it's important to have adults and parent-figures in life who can offer guidance and model Godly living.

**Lesson and Verses:** Use a little peer-teaching process to further celebrate mentorship...break students into three groups, and assign each a series of Bible verses pertaining to their character. Encourage them to look at details and be prepared to share

more depth with fellow students. Inform groups that, upon coming back together, each cluster will be responsible for sharing with the whole assembly:

- -Who the mentor and student were in the situation
- -What was instructed and learned on each side
- -A brief charade or picture clue to try to get the rest of the group to identify the characters.

Of course, more examples can certainly be added, but don't forget to include...

#### Ruth 1:6-18 (Ruth refuses to leave Naomi)

Note: Ruth opts to remain with her mother-in-law, rather than returning to her native home. In ensuing chapters, Naomi uses her cultural knowledge to coach Ruth and lead her to success. They help one another, and ultimately serve as part of God's plan for salvation.

2 Kings 2:1-18 (Elisha receives Elijah's spirit and sees him taken up to Heaven)

Like Ruth, Elisha refuses to leave his mentor's side, but demands a portion of Elijah's spirit. When Elisha sees his mentor taken up in the fiery chariot, he knows that he will be able to follow in Elijah's footsteps. Those are rather large to fill, but Elisha knows he is in for a challenge and is up for the task.

*Acts 16:1-5 (introduction of Timothy)* 

- 1 Corinthians 4:14-17 (Paul sends Timothy)
- 1 Timothy 1:12-19 (Paul encourages Timothy)

Timothy meant a lot to Paul. In fact, he joined Paul in a lot of his work, and many epistles are written "from Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus." Paul clearly cared very much for the younger man, and gave him plenty of aid and insight into how best to deal with people and serve the church (for example, take the books of 1 and 2 Timothy!)

After a designated time period, bring students back to discuss the passages they read and share their clues and insights. Looking at a reference book, "mentor" is often associated with definitions like "tutor," "coach," "trusted counselor/guide"...

Go back to the characteristics of a friend that students came up with in previous lessons—or if not previously discussed, have students come up with friend qualities that are important. See what qualities can be applied to mentorship situations, and discuss whether there are other traits that define a mentor friendship. These might be things like:

- Greater knowledge or experience on one side of the friendship
- Willingness to offer patient advice
- Respect for an elder's authority

Mentors can span all sorts of ages. They might be people close in age, but more likely exist between an older and a younger person. With that in mind, remind students to be willing to

accept relationships and take suggestions from any around them, whether at the same school, slightly older, or even elderly enough to be considered a grandparent.

## Break-out Questions (Depending on the size of your group, these can be done as a whole or with kids split into smaller clusters):

- What mentors can you identify in your life? What qualities made them special or helpful?
- Have you ever felt like a mentor to someone else? How can you work to develop leadership skills that would help you become a mentor?
- Why does God value mentoring? How can it further His kingdom?
- If you have an older friend, in what ways can they learn from YOU?

Weekly Challenge Take-Away: Old school style... Whether or not youth can identify an older mentor, everyone enjoys getting letters, and old-fashioned cards and letters can be a dying art. Invite students to write a note of thanks to someone, near or far, older or younger. Let them know they are appreciated and offer thanks for their help. Throughout the week, thank God for your mentor. Pray for them and for future people you might aid, as well.

**Close** the study with prayer for one another and their relationships, and invite students back for the last in the lesson series, when we will meet the greatest friend of all.

# Lesson Four: The Group Dynamic...A Cord of Many Strands

**Bible Focus:** One-on-one relationships are highly important, and can be used by God in wonderful ways. However, there is also something to be said for friendships that occur in community. Group friendships provide extra support and additional perspectives. They allow for each individual to contribute and gain something special. This lesson will explore how to enjoy and participate in friendship with more than one individual at a time.

**Student application:** Students will describe and look forward to participation in a friendship that happens with more than two people working together at once. They will consider their own relationships and acquaintances, and will look at the example of Jesus and His disciples to identify elements of quality group friendships.

**Lesson Opener:** Puzzle it out together...before starting, divide a few puzzles up and place pieces in separate bags. Depending on the size of your group, you may take more or less than 3 or 4 jigsaw puzzles, and then give each person a few pieces of one puzzle. Instruct the students to find the other individuals who have pieces of the same puzzle, and have them work together to put the puzzle together and identify the bigger picture. Note: to make this activity easier, have pictures of what each puzzle is, and try to select distinct images. Multiple 500-piece pictures of sunflowers in a field is probably better suited to an all-nighter activity...

Once students have completed their puzzles, ask them to stay in their groups, ideally of around 4-8 individuals per cluster. Give each group a paper and writing instrument, and ask them to come up with as many commonalities as they can. Have them identify things within their group that all students share—and avoid the obvious factors of being in the same room or having ten toes…encourage them to dig deep and find things they may not know about their fellow group-mates.

After several minutes, provide another sheet of paper (or have them use the back), and have kids come up with things that are unique to one person within the group. Figure out special features or facts that other kids do not have in common. If time permits, read off some of the unique elements, and have the remainder of the group guess who they refer to. Explain to students that friendships can often take place within groups of people. Sometimes this is due to common interests, or merely shared space or work place. Regardless, God brings groups together to share what they have alike and contribute things that might be different. Invite students to take a look at how Jesus demonstrated the importance of group relationships, and how he also demonstrated the greatest friendship of all.

Lesson and Verses: Start out by inviting students to consider who they think of as friends. Invite them to brainstorm and/or write down who might be in the inner circle of "best friend;" who they would call with exciting news; who they would send a Christmas letter to; who they would send a wedding invitation to; and who they might recognize in the grocery store. Think about how the closeness of relationships can fade as numbers grow, but that having people who share a like interest or goal can build camaraderie. For the disciples, this common goal was learning from Jesus and following Him more closely. After the Ascension, the goal was building His church. Read through several passages from Matthew and John to see how Jesus invited and treated his disciples. (Note: other gospels contain similar stories, as well...feel free to use preferred versions and verses).

Matthew 4:18-22 (The original disciples are called)

Note: When Christ calls, the disciples immediately leave what they are doing and move to follow Him.

Matthew 8:18-27 (Jesus calms a storm and amazes disciples)

Matthew 9:9-13 (Calling of Matthew)

Matthew 10:1-8 (Jesus sends out disciples with warning and instructions)

The disciples listened to and followed the instructions Jesus gave, but it was not easy going. They had to trust Him and to get along with one another in order to fulfill His instructions.

John 13:1-17 (Jesus washes feet)

John 14:1-14 (Jesus explains who He is)

John 15:13-15 (Jesus lays down His life for His friends)

Matthew 28:16-20 (Commission to carry on Christ's work)

Note the elements involved here...with exception to the betrayal by Judas and the garden naptime abandonment (well, Peter's denial as well...), the disciples remained loyal and trustworthy followers.

The disciples came from differing walks of life, and they had different skills and specialties to contribute. Jesus called each one with reason and purpose (even Judas). He did have His close friends within the circle, but He loved each and every one of the twelve men. This was not just the Galilee fisherman's club...it was a dedicated group of men brought together in one team to serve God. When we find ourselves in groups, whether clubs, scouts, athletic teams, youth groups, or dreaded group projects, it's important to remember that we have things in common and things unique. We can value and get along with fellow group members, while celebrating what we can contribute as well.

# Break-out Questions (Depending on the size of your group, these can be done as a whole or with kids split into smaller clusters):

- Can you identify groups that you are part of right now? Do you know all of the people in your group?
- Do you think there was anything special about having twelve people as disciples???

- What unique traits or skills do you think God can use to further His plan with you or your group?
- What are benefits of group relationships and communal teamwork? Are there costs?
- Is there a limited number recommended when it comes to group friendships?

Weekly Challenge Take-Away: The Care and Keeping of Friends... As a group, have students come up with ways of developing friendships or being a quality friend. Examples include listening well, having empathy for others, admitting faults, recognizing shortcomings (on both sides of the relationship), being present, and being willing to sacrifice for others. Provide writing materials for students to copy down their favorite reminders, and encourage them to pray over ways to be a solid friend and grow spiritually through friendship.

**Close** the study with prayer for one another and for friendships. Ask the Lord to strengthen the bonds we have with one another and to unite us in spirit and purpose for Him and for His glory.