



Bible Study & Reader's Guide

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Letter to Readers

Thank you for reading *Messy Beautiful Friendship*!

My name is Christine Hoover. I'm a pastor's wife, a mom of three boys, and a writer who loves sharing gospel truths with other women. I'm originally from Texas but moved with my young family to Charlottesville, Virginia in 2008 in order to plant a church. I've written a few books, one of which you're going to use as a guide for your gatherings. You can find me on my blog (www.christinehoover.net), or on Twitter (@christinehoover), Instagram (@christinehoover98), and Facebook (facebook.com/authorchristinehoover).

Friendship is such an important topic but one that is rarely talked about among women. I wrote *Messy Beautiful Friendship* with the hope that women would discuss it together and, in doing so, find that they are not alone in the difficulties and complexities friendship inevitably brings. I also wrote with the hope that women might discover the profound joys available to them in friendship.

And so, this is my hope and prayer for you as you begin to study passages from the Bible and read *Messy Beautiful Friendship*. This process will be most beneficial for you as you learn to lay aside your expectations of what you think friendship ought to be, embrace how God designed friendship, and also share openly and honestly with the other women in your group.

I think you'll find what I've discovered in my own life: friendship isn't easy. At all. But it's worth our devotion and the risks we must take in order to give and receive it. God has a gift for us in friendship.

Love,
Christine

P.S. If you print this packet and need to find it again for the links I've included, find it here: <http://bit.ly/2yWUe98>. Also, share what you're discovering with others online using the hashtag #messybeautifulfriendship!

Gathering #1:

Shattering the Wish Dream of Friendship

(Note: If you're working through the Bible study individually, below are the passages and questions groups are working through in the first gathering as a group. It would be helpful to work through them before moving along in the workbook. If you're working through this study as a group, simply move to the next page and take notes from your discussion.)

Read Jeremiah 2:1-13 as a group and then discuss these questions:

- In verse 1, the Lord recalls Israel's love for him. What relational picture does he draw?
- In verses 4-7, the passage takes a turn. Something went wrong in Israel's relationship with the Lord. What was it?
- The Israelites were given good gifts by God and, in essence, then decided they wanted to keep the good gifts without keeping God. Vs. 13 describes what they've done. Dissect this verse. What have they turned away from and what have they turned toward? What images does God use to describe himself and describe what they've turned to in his place?
- How is the wish dream of friendship related to this passage? In other words, how do we often make friendship or relationships the ultimate thing above God? (Guide participants to understand that the wish dream of friendship takes the good gift of friendship, given by God to us, and makes people ultimate. We turn from a God who loves us perfectly and turn toward people, expecting they will love us as God does: with full understanding, with unconditional love, meeting all our needs, etc. God says this is like trying to drink from a broken cistern.)
- How does God respond when we try to put people before him? (He will not let us be satisfied, he will "shatter that wish dream" over and over.)

Friendship is a good gift, much as the fruit of the land mentioned in this passage. But we must not put the good gift above the Gift-giver. We must be careful to not have a visionary ideal of friendship, to keep people and friendship in their proper place. How can we do that?

Read John 3:22-30 and then discuss these questions:

- What were John's disciples concerned about? What were they trying to do?
- What was John's response?
- How does John's response ("I am not the Christ" and the opposite truth that others are not the Christ either) give us a framework for biblical friendship?

Notes from Gathering #1:

Homework for Gathering #2:

A Biblical Understanding of Friendship

Bible Study:

In the first gathering, you discussed your wish dreams of friendship, which are basically unrealistic and unbiblical ideas of friendship. *How does an unbiblical view of friendship end up hurting us and hurting others?*

What do you think is a right and biblical definition of friendship?

A biblical definition of friendship must start with God. Friendship began with God extending his hand toward humanity. In the very beginning, he sought out the company of those he'd created. Think about that: the Trinitarian God enjoyed perfect friendship, but he wanted others to share in that fellowship, so he created man and woman, and he walked with them as friends. He created friendship.

Of course, we know that sin marred that friendship. However, God didn't walk away from the people he'd created. He modeled the sacrificial nature of friendship by sending Jesus. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." And He did indeed lay down his life so that the hostility that had marred our intimacy with God could be restored.

Remember the wish dream? If ever we had a wish dream of being totally, unconditionally loved, of never being rejected or abandoned, of being valued and seen, of being known, of being secure—this is it! We have friendship with God through Christ.

Why is it important that our understanding of friendship begin with knowing Christ's love for us?
Read the following passages to guide your thinking:

1 John 4:19

1 John 1:3b-7

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Biblical friendship is securing ourselves to the sure, steadfast anchor of Christ and, while holding to that anchor, giving and receiving the gift of friendship as we have opportunity. The goal is to enjoy God together with others and, as we move through life, to sharpen and allow ourselves to be sharpened by friends.

As we hold to him and look to him, we can extend love out to others in imitation of how he extended himself to us. Biblical friendship not only starts with God and is modeled for us by Christ, but it ends with him too. He is the object of our friendship toward others: we love because he first loved us.

This is the only way we can extend friendship without looking for something in return or having demanding expectations of others. We can *invite* friendship by how we love, serve, and honor others, yes, but we can't *guarantee* it for ourselves. The goal of biblical friendship is ultimately to love God by loving others.

What are the specific ways the Bible tells us to love others in imitation of Christ?

Romans 12:10

Galatians 5:13

Galatians 6:2

Ephesians 4:2

Ephesians 5:21

Philippians 2:3

Colossians 3:13

1 Thessalonians 5:11

James 5:16

1 Peter 4:9

Book Reading:

Read Chapters 1-4 (pgs. 15-48) of *Messy Beautiful Friendship*.

Homework for Gathering #3:

Overcoming What Hinders Us in Friendship

Bible Study:

Relationships are messy. Put any two imperfect, sinful people together and there will inevitably be misunderstandings, conflict, unintentional and intentional hurts, assumptions, and sometimes even what seems like an irreparable divide. Most of us could share specific stories of how we've been hurt in friendship or have hurt others. Even though we don't like to think about these things, it's important that we do, because many times we engage our current relationships from a place of self-protection or insecurity that we can link directly back to past hurts. We need to grieve how friendship can hurt and even learn to embrace the idea that friendship can be difficult.

Jesus said we'd have trouble in this world. **Read John 16:33a.** *What friendship troubles have you had?*

Why do you think embracing the idea that friendship can be difficult is an important step in developing deep friendships?

The Bible doesn't side-step the ways relationships can be difficult. Read the following passages and write down specific ways relationships can be challenging:

Proverbs 17:17; Galatians 6:2

Galatians 6:1; Proverbs 27:6

Proverbs 16:28; 17:9

Proverbs 27:17 (*hint: where is iron sharpened?*)

Philippians 2:3-4

Colossians 3:12-13

James 4:1

James 5:16

I wonder, did you only consider the way people have treated or responded to you? Or did you also consider how you have treated and responded to others? Sometimes we ourselves make a mess of things and wound others. It's important to acknowledge our own responsibility and sin in relationships. *Are there patterns of attitudes or behaviors in your life that tend to wound others?* If so, write them down below and then confess those to God.

Return to **John 16:33** and write the second part of the verse here:

God has made a way for us to navigate the messiness and imperfection of relationships. He modeled and demonstrated this way through Christ. **Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-19.** *What did Christ do for us that is also the framework for how we relate to others in imperfect relationships?*

Peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, bearing with one another. These are the responses for the Christian who calls Jesus Lord. What other options do we have? The Bible warns us away from the options we often choose, such as bitterness, isolation, anger, and disengagement. Read the following passages and note the warnings they give:

Proverbs 18:1

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Ephesians 4:26-27

Hebrews 12:14-15

As we seek to embrace the difficulty of friendship, what can we practically do to navigate and negate some of the ways we make friendship harder on ourselves? I believe there are two primary things: 1) releasing others of our expectations and 2) releasing others from our preconceived assumptions about them.

What are some of the expectations you consistently have for how women should respond to you?

Think about women who you consider to be “different” than you. What are assumptions you often make about these women when interacting with them? What assumptions do you think they are making of you?

Assumptions and expectations can be very limiting relationally. Have you ever struck up a conversation with someone you thought you knew and then realized that what you’d thought you’d known about them wasn’t true at all? And what happened after you “understood” them for the first time? You likely developed understanding and compassion for them, as well as a connection.

As I say in *Messy Beautiful Friendship*, “What we find when we set aside our expectations and assumptions is that no human being is a simple, linear creature. We are all complex, we all walk a hard road, and we all have stories about our fall and redemption. None of us are without our joys and our struggles, and each of us are deeply loved by the God who created us in His image. In other words, every person is fascinating.”

No one wants assumptions to be made about them, but everyone wants understanding. What does the Bible say about understanding others?

Proverbs 13:15

Proverbs 18:2

As you wrap up this week’s study, are there actions you need to take in your friendships? Do you need to ask forgiveness from a friend? Do you need to have a difficult conversation with someone who has hurt you? Or do you need to confess your expectations and assumptions to God and ask for His help in developing compassion toward others?

Book Reading:

Read Chapters 5-8 (pgs 51-85).

Homework for Gathering #4:

Practical Ways to Engage Others in Friendship

Bible Study:

In the chapters of the book you'll read before your next gathering, you'll read about practical ways you can invite friendship. In our Bible study time, let's undergird those practices with an understanding of the mindset and attitude with which we must engage others in friendship. We'll look at two words that we want to characterize our relationships: *others-focused* and *devoted*.

Others-focused

The Bible is much more concerned with how we befriend others than how they befriend us. Read the following passages and make note of how and why this is the case:

Matthew 20:26-28

Acts 20:35

Philippians 2:1-11

It's interesting to me that Jesus said it's more blessed to give rather than receive. I'd much rather receive, if I'm honest, but Jesus said that it will be better, more satisfying, more joyful for us in our friendships if we focus not on what people are doing for us but what we are doing for them.

Why would it be better to be others-focused? **Read Proverbs 11:25** and rewrite or paraphrase what you think the author means and how it relates to friendship:

Have you found the principle of this proverb to be true? Describe a time of joy at having met someone's need or giving an encouraging word.

Do you think the proverb means that we will get back exactly what we've been given?

What do you feel or experience when you find yourself thinking of yourself and wanting others to serve you in some way?

It's more natural to think of ourselves than to think of others. It's supernatural to think of others before ourselves. *How can we cultivate a focus on others?*

Devoted

Read **Acts 2:42**. To what were the people in the early church devoted?

Read **1 Thessalonians 2:8**. To what was Paul devoted?

Read **Matthew 22:36-40**. To what is the Christian to be devoted?

Devoted means, "zealous or ardent in attachment, loyalty, or affection." In other words, being devoted means we're committed to others. Many times we think of the early church as an emotional or experiential wish-dream, imagining that they had no responsibilities outside of meeting together, nor any struggles with one another relationally. However, they were real people, just as we are, and they were people who were devoted to one another. They made choices to prioritize relationships and they persevered in those relationships. Friendship doesn't develop through convenience; it develops through commitment.

Would you say your life is characterized by a devotion to God? Would you say your life is characterized by a devotion to people and/or relationships?

Who are the people to whom God has specifically called you to be devoted? Think about family, women you are mentoring, church, neighbors, and friends. Write their names down below. Are you showing them through your time, energy, and resources that you are committed to them?

Is there anything that you are choosing that is hindering your devotion to friendship?

Book Reading:

Read Chapters 9-14 (pgs 89-119).

Homework for Gathering #5:

Going Deeper in Friendship

Bible Study:

So far in your study, book reading, and gatherings, you've discovered the attitudes and actions that invite friendship. This week, let's go deeper. Let's uncover together what takes friendship to a deeper, more intimate level.

Read Mark 10:28-31 and consider the questions below.

Who is Jesus speaking to in this passage?

What has characterized these disciples of his?

What is Jesus trying to tell them?

First, you may have noticed that Jesus is saying to his disciples that there are **costs** to those who leave all and follow him. These costs are present and ongoing: notice the phrases "in this time" and "with persecutions." Jesus is saying to them and to us that following him doesn't make life easy. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Following Jesus comes with difficulty, because it involves, as Jesus puts it in another teaching moment, a "taking up of one's cross." In other words, for the Christian, there is a daily death to self and aliveness to God.

This daily death is the crucifixion of the flesh with its cravings and desires, and so the cross is absolutely relentless in the life of the believer. It acts as a knife, continuously and persistently cutting away all over idolatrous loves. The cross pursues us and crucifies all of our claims on self-rule or self-glory.

This can be excruciating and painful, especially in light of the sparkly riches of this world that are so tangible and real.

What have been the costs of following Jesus for you?

The gospel lays claim to us all. Christ lays claim to our ambitions, our money, our minds, our work, our children, our sexual activity. *Everything*. We become no longer our own; everything we are and do must be submitted to someone else—namely Christ.

Why would he call us to something that can be so difficult and painful?

Did you also notice in the passage you read that Jesus says he *gives* to those who leave all and follow him? There are costs, but there are also **rewards**!

What are the rewards Jesus tells the disciples they receive? Are they present rewards, future rewards, or both?

We can catch a glimpse of what Jesus meant here by peering in on the crucifixion scene. **Read John 19:25-27.** *How is this an example of Mark 10:29?*

Do you see what Jesus is saying here? For the Christian, the present reward is our relationships, specifically the Church. Through the cost and the grief comes the reward of relationships. We leave all to follow Christ, and then we are brought into the family of God.

The Church doesn't always feel like a reward or blessing to us. *Why is the Church our reward? Why are relationships our reward?*

What has encouraged me when I'm faced with the call of the cross in a newly exposed area of my life is when I look around at the beloved people in my church and see that the cross is just as

relentless in their lives. I'm running a race of faith, but I'm not running alone, and I am challenged and encouraged when I see how they are responding to the costs of following Jesus with faith. I see the power and truth of the gospel in how they confess and repent, how they respond in obedience even when it's painful, how they in their singleness place their hope in Jesus, how they've experienced reconciliation in their broken marriages, and on and on.

Hopefully you're starting to see it: the Church is a reward because it helps us bear the costs of following Jesus and because the Church provides a tangible reminder that there is an ultimate reward waiting for us.

Which leads to an important question: are we giving and receiving the reward? We must be talking with one another about the costs and rewards of following Jesus!

Are you in deep relationship with fellow followers doing the intentional and active work of encouraging others through the costs and reminding others of the rewards?

Why is this so difficult to actually practice in real life?

The costs and demands of the gospel are some of the most vulnerable stories we hold, because they are sensitive and they are difficult and we're not always sure we're getting it right. These are the stories where our doubt and wrestling reside. And so this is going to require risk and grace and being willing to enter into the adversity of others. Above all, this requires vulnerability, and not vulnerability simply for its own sake, but so that we can know and be known in a way that helps us endure in truth and grace. If we don't do this, everyone stands apart as individuals, either not realizing how the gospel lays claim to them or believing they're the only ones having to give something up and, therefore, counting the cost as too great.

Where does this type of vulnerability begin?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. *How has God comforted you in the costs of being a human and a Christian? What story might he want you to share with others so that they too can experience his comfort?*

Book Reading:

Read Chapters 15-22 (pgs. 123-174).

Homework for Gathering #6:

Receiving the Gift of Friendship

Bible Study:

For me, receiving the gift of friendship from God and from others is in some ways more difficult than giving it. I find it difficult to be in a needy position, to receive loving correction from a friend, and sometimes even to turn to God with thankfulness for the specific women he's placed in my life.

This week's Bible study is primarily application, and it hinges on three verses. Read them and then write them out in your own words below.

Hebrews 10:24-25

1 Thessalonians 5:18, Colossians 3:15

In preparation for your next gathering, spend time considering the women in your life and the women in your group. Write their names in the given space and beside each one write your answers to the questions below. If the woman is in your book study group, prepare to share a few of your answers aloud at your next gathering. If she is not but is a special friend to you, consider writing her a letter or telling her your thoughts in person.

1) How do you see God using her? What specific gifts has he given her that she may need a little "nudge" to use? How would you like to "spur her on"?

2) Why are you thankful for this woman? Be as specific as possible about how she is a gift to you.

You may be wondering, “How is this learning to receive the gift of friendship?” For one, you may receive specific words of encouragement in your gathering time. Be prepared to receive them as encouragement from the Lord. Second, receiving friendship means having a noticing, thankful heart. We must be intentional about thanking God for the specific people he’s placed in our lives and also intentional about encouraging those friends as often as we have opportunity.

Book Reading:

Read chapters 23-Conclusion (pgs. 177-201).

Additional Resources

Listen to the season of my podcast on By Faith devoted to friendship, beginning here:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/kelly-needham-on-healthy-and-unhealthy-friendship/id1341513188?i=1000419079416>

Other Books by Christine:

The Church Planting Wife: Help and Hope for Her Heart

From Good to Grace: Letting Go of the Goodness Gospel

Searching For Spring: How God Makes All Things Beautiful in Time

With All Your Heart: Living Joyfully Through Allegiance to King Jesus

How to Thrive as a Pastor's Wife

You are Not Forgotten: Discovering the God Who Sees the Overlooked and Disregarded

Bible Studies by Christine:

Seek First the Kingdom of God: God's Invitation to Life and Joy in the Book of Matthew

More Than Enough: God's Strength in Our Weakness in 2 Corinthians