

Leader's Guide

Facilitation tips are provided throughout in green. These do not appear on the participant handout.

Study: Freeing Jesus

Week 2: July 2 - 8

Chapter: Friend

For the first few weeks of every new study, include time for welcome and introductions to ensure that newcomers have the opportunity to get to know everyone. Also, review your small group covenant or the shared expectations held within your group around confidentiality, valuing the wisdom and contributions of all participants, and providing a safe space.

Study Big Idea: Freeing Jesus is an invitation to meet Jesus again for the first time by encountering many Jesuses. Regardless of your religious (or non-religious background) you'll be inspired to get Jesus out of the unhelpful confines you (or the religious traditions you've experienced) constructed for him. Allow yourself to rediscover Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.

Chapter Big Idea: Jesus has a rich and long history of befriending people on the margins of society. The pages of the New Testament are filled with stories of Jesus befriending women, children, fishermen, tax collectors, and all sorts of sinners. Jesus is extending a hand to you and to me as a sign of openness to welcoming us as friends.

Icebreaker: Who was your best friend in elementary school? Share a meaningful memory of something you and your elementary school best friend did together.

Opening Prayer: Jesus, you are a complex person, unlike anyone else I call friend. Help me get to know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. And, remind me that friendship is a two-way street. This we pray in the name of Jesus our Friend. Amen.

Scripture Reading: "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done - kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love.

"I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature.

This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you.

I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father. (John 15:9-15, The Message)

Freeing Jesus Reading: The story of the New Testament is that the risk of friendship is the risk that frees us from fear and reshapes our lives – it is better to go together than to go alone. Jesus befriends us, opening our hearts to genuine love and the capacity to forgive each other, welcome all, and act justly in the world . . . Friendship makes us different from the person we would be if we were alone, and, I daresay, it makes Jesus different as well, for friendship is mutuality, shared vision, and affection p. 18).

Discussion Questions:

1. Making friends isn't always easy. Is making friends something that comes naturally to you or is it more of a struggle? What are some ways you try to develop new connections into friendships?

If your group has been meeting for multiple studies and a number of people have known each other for quite some time, encourage people to share how they've made a friendship within your group. Alternatively, if your group is new or comprised primarily of newcomers explore how people would like the group to be or become a place where friendships are encouraged and nurtured.

2. Friendships often have impact greater than the participants realize. Diana Butler Bass suggests, "Friendship is not just for friends. Friendship is for the good of the world" (p.21). In what ways have you found this to be true?
3. Diana Butler Bass writes, "Jesus calls us friends. God reaches toward us, not as a fearsome master or judge, but as a friend, beckoning us to reach back" (p.16). Do you view Jesus as a friend of yours? Why or why not? In recent years, has seeing Jesus as a friend become easier or more difficult for you?
4. There is an old hymn (1855) that has also been incorporated into contemporary Christian praise music that begins with these words: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!" When you think of Jesus as friend do these images resonate or feel dissonant? Without using any religious jargon or churchy words, explain your friendship with Jesus.

Jesus as friend has had an outsized role in some forms of American Christianity. For folks coming from that background, sharing present perspective without using religious language may be awkward. Encourage people to try to talk about their friendship with Jesus in ways

that include elements of how they talk about other friendships.

5. Good friendships often develop over time as both parties get to know and have opportunities to support each other. What is one way you are currently nurturing or even seeking to improve your friendship with Jesus?

Small groups are designed as growth groups. Everyone should be growing in their relationships – with one another and with God. Give some thought to how people can support one another as they continue developing their personal relationships with Jesus.

Reflection: The idea of Jesus as friend isn't new. The language of friendship between God and God's people can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). And, there are stories of Jesus befriending folks throughout the Gospels. Jesus' invitation to friendship extends to the present day and includes each of us.

Each lesson concludes with a reflection. Even if you don't have time to discuss all of the questions in the guide, be sure to end with the reflection to help people connect with the session's big idea.

Closing Prayer: Jesus, thank you for being my friend through the good and not so good times in my life. I pause now to observe some silence and to listen for your voice . . . *(30 seconds of silence may be observed)*. Amen.

If your group doesn't use silence regularly, this could be an easy way to introduce it. Let people know the prayer will end with a 30-second period of silence and that if this is new for them 30-seconds might feel like 3 minutes or even longer.