

One

From Girlhood On, Gifted for Intimacy

I cannot count the number of times my heart has been lifted by a woman friend. A heartfelt hug, an e-mail telling me why I am special, a surprise gift of a bracelet I admired when I was with her...

My husband rarely was loved that way by his male friends. *Newsweek* columnist Elliot Engel reflected, "It seems, in our society, that you've got to have a bosom to be a buddy." It certainly comes more naturally to women than to men to confide, console, and connect. When God knit us together in our mother's womb, He created us to be female. Even science today concedes that our differences are much deeper than physical—etched in our very DNA is a gift for intimacy.

When God gives you a gift, He expects you to use it well. Every single one of God's gifts: food, sex, and yes, friendship—has been misused. In our depravity we turn gifts into gods, clinging to them too tightly, abusing them, turning what was intended to be a blessing into bondage. God in His mercy has given us instructions on how to use His gifts well, according to the Manufacturer's instructions. His good gift of food is to be eaten in moderation. His delightful gift of sex is to be kept within marriage. What about friendship? Are there instructions there as well?

Absolutely. In this guide you will study three generations of friendship:

Ruth and Naomi
David and Jonathan
Mary and Elizabeth

The Friendships of Women

I include a male model in this guide because, first, David and Jonathan, as two rare right-brained males, can teach even women a few things about friendship. I also want to include them because, as we study three models, a pattern begins to emerge. If you have ever knit a scarf or worked a weaving loom, you know the delight you feel when the same design begins to repeat. But when it happens in God's Word, you know God is saying something important to you. In the case of friendship, the principles emerging, if applied, will increase the power and reduce the pain of your wonderful gift for intimacy.

Pass around an e-mail, address, and phone sign-up. The facilitator should make copies of the list to hand out next week. Tape or staple the list in your book when you get it, as you'll need it!

DAY I

Getting to Know You

WARMUP

(If a woman is uncomfortable being "put on the spot," she can simply say "Pass," and go to the next woman.)

Tell your name and a sentence about yourself. What do the friendships of women mean to you? What are you looking forward to in this group?

The opening introductions are vital. Read them carefully.

1. Comment on what stood out to you from the:

A. Introduction (p. 6)

B. Special instructions for preparation and discussion (p. 7)

C. This week's opening (above)

2. The principles in God's Word can transform your friendships. Before you begin (for you will look back at this question at the close), in what ways are your friendships with women painful? In what ways have you also experienced comfort, strength, and genuine help?

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DAY 2

Appreciating the Power

This year I lost my fifty-nine-year-old husband, the love of my life, to colon cancer. If ever I have appreciated the friendships of women, it is this year. During Steve's illness, my friends prayed fervently for his healing. My dear friend Jill, who also happens to be a nurse, helped me care for Steve when he was suffering. When God chose to take Steve home, my friends rushed to my side with tears, gifts of food, letters of compassion, and promises of unending love. Lorinda and Lee flew across the country. Patti would wake in the night and pray for me. Jean would call me daily to check on me. Lorma would have my fatherless daughters over to love on them. This fall, as I approach the first anniversary of his death, Kathy Troccoli decided I needed a lift from the sadness and flew out to help me redecorate my cottage so that I could "live in beauty because beauty restores the soul."

We have a gift, and when that gift is used in obedience to the Holy Spirit, it has enormous power to bless. As a glimpse of what is to come, today you are going to look at a few passages from the book of Ruth to see how these women loved each other. Ruth's name means "a woman friend." Isn't it wonderful that there is a book of the Bible named after "a woman friend?" To me it is an affirmation from God: "I created you, as a woman, with a gift for intimacy. Now, let me show you a woman who used her gift well."

Read Ruth 1 as an overview.

3. What are some of the losses Naomi suffered in the opening seven verses? List as many as you can.
4. What are some ways Ruth demonstrated her love and respect to Naomi? List as many as you can.
5. Think about a time when you were suffering and a friend demonstrated her love to you. What did she do that you particularly appreciated and why?

Read Ruth 2 as an overview.

6. Look particularly at the interaction between Naomi and Ruth in Ruth 2:19-22.

This is an example of "rapport talk," which linguists say is typical between women. Rather than just reporting, as linguists say men often do, the women listen carefully, link on to what the other has said, and "take each other higher."

It begins, in verse 19a, by Naomi noticing Ruth's arms full of grain. What questions does she ask? How does this show she is "paying attention" to Ruth's life?

What are some specific ways a friend shows you she is "paying attention" to your life, to the things you say?

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- A. How does Ruth answer in verse 19b?

- B. Boaz, as we will learn later, was a “kinsman-redeemer” who had a special responsibility to Naomi. How does Naomi respond to Ruth with enthusiasm and excitement in verse 20?

- C. Naomi was excited, in part, because she sensed God was at work. In a Bible study group, women have opportunities to take one another higher when they sense God is at work. When someone has seen something in the Word or experienced a God moment in her life, how might you take her higher?

- D. How does Ruth add to the excitement in 21? How could this happen in a Bible study group discussion?

- E. How do you see Naomi’s pleasure and conclusion in verse 22?

Think about women in your life who bless you by “paying attention” to your life, by drawing you out with questions, by being enthusiastic about God’s work. Write down what women do conversationally that blesses you.

DAY 3

Overcoming the Pain

Our depravity is deep, and our needs for attachment are strong. In Christ, we can respond to the pain our sin causes in a way that will overcome, break the chains, and unleash a gift that will not only bless us, but also the generations to come. I interviewed two women I deeply respect who overcame a conflict in their friendship through walking in repentance toward each other. Here is their story:

Kerry:

When Mabelle and I met there was a connection right away. She had make-up on, and yet she homeschooled. I thought, “Wow—here is somebody who is fashionable and still homeschooled.” We had practically identical scores on The Meyers-Brigg personality test, our kids connected—but most of all, Mabelle had such a passion for God. For five years we were blessed with a wonderful friendship. So when we fought that terrible day, it was devastating.

*From Girlhood On, Gifted for Intimacy***Machelle:**

Friendship with Kerry is not something I've experienced with another woman—and so I really treasured what we had. That makes conflict all the more painful. It began, weirdly enough, about a peripheral doctrinal issue that I haven't even completely resolved in my own mind: infant baptism. Kerry and Bob visited our church, and I was so excited to think they might be coming to our church. Well—that was a very unusual day—one like I'd never seen—we had six infant baptisms.

Kerry:

Our friendship had gotten so easy—I was careless. When Machelle asked me what I thought, instead of thinking how she would feel, I just talked loosely, telling her some of the disparaging comments our kids made about infant baptism—things I shouldn't have repeated because they were disrespectful. I was uncaring in how I handled it.

Machelle:

My pride jumped up, and I got really defensive. Kerry could hear it. I could have closed my mouth and prayed about the right response—but I didn't.

Kerry:

The next day we had P.E. together for our kids, a homeschooling group, and Machelle came up to me, and I said, "Are we okay?" She nodded, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that we weren't. So we walked and talked and cried. People probably thought, Oh, those women.

Machelle:

We talked about infant baptism and agreed to disagree, and I don't even know if we disagree. But it wasn't even the issue of baptism—it was that we each reared our ugly heads. We were each sensitive enough to the Holy Spirit to admit we each had been wrong. We left P.E. okay—but not totally okay. Both a little edgy because we hadn't had conflict before. All afternoon I felt sick to my stomach.

That night I was in front of my computer—I started to call Kerry, and hung up thinking, She doesn't want to talk to me. I'm a rotten friend anyway. Then I spent time praying and reading Scripture. After that, I knew the Lord's heart: "You've got to call her."

So I did. I started crying right away. She'd obviously been weeping—and it was so encouraging to know that she had been weeping for me. She called herself an idiot, saying she'd been a terrible friend. We talked and cried for about two hours. I wouldn't want to live that day over, but it has really taken me to a different place in worshiping God. Kerry and I are kindred spirits, and we need each other to point each other to God.

Kerry and Machelle are two of the healthiest Christian women I know. Likewise, the Philippian church was a particularly healthy church, yet even within a healthy

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friendship, even within a healthy church, there will inevitably be pain and conflict. Why? Because we are sinners. Sooner or later we will reveal our feet of clay. Conflict between women is often excruciatingly painful because the friendships of women are typically closer than the friendships of men. It hurts a lot more to have a conflict with a soulmate than it does to have conflict with an acquaintance. In her book, *Just Friends*, Lillian Rubin wrote, "The pain of the demise of a soulmate friendship is akin to the pain of divorce."

7. What problem does Paul address in Philippians 4:2-3? What does he ask of the women? What does he ask of the church?

8. What evidence is there that Euodia and Syntyche were godly women? How is it that even people who truly love the Lord can cause conflict and pain?

9. What caused the conflict between Kerry and Machele? Comment on how they resolved it and what you learned from them.

10. Describe our natural state according to Romans 3:9-18. Be specific.

11. How have you seen evidence of the above in your own life?

12. Read Philippians 2:1-11.
 - A. According to verse 1, what are some of the joys of being united with Christ?

 - B. On the basis of these joys, what appeal does Paul make in verse 2?

 - C. What overcoming keys are given in verse 3? Think about a conflict in your life that was resolved or needs resolving. What impact did or could they keys have?

 - D. What exhortation is given in verse 4? How might this overcome conflict?

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E. In detail, describe the attitude of Jesus on the basis of verses 5-11.

F. In every conflict, you must begin with personal repentance. If you have a conflict in your life right now, ask yourself: How have I contributed to this problem? What could I repent of? What could I humbly confess with no excuses?

If your relationship with anyone is broken, strained, or even questionable, take the initiative to be reconciled. Assume that any fault is yours and be eager to confess it.

Dr. Greg Scharf, preaching professor at Trinity Evangelical Seminary

DAY 4

Three Generations, Three Models of Friendship

A hole in a cloth seems small until held up to the sun. As rays come streaming through, you realize how great the hole is. In the same way, the inadequacies of the best of our friendships as women may seem small—especially when compared to the friendships of men. Yet if we dare to hold our friendships up to the light of the scriptural models of friendship, we realize how far we have to go. As we study three generations of friendships in Scripture, a pattern will begin to emerge. Threads of strong and healthy spiritual friendships will appear and re-appear. When God repeats a refrain in Scripture we need to pay attention.

Beginning today, and continuing through next week's lessons, we will be examining "God's friendship pattern" as we juxtapose passages from three generations of these friends in Scripture:

- Ruth and Naomi
- David and Jonathan
- Mary and Elizabeth

While it is true that most women (and a few men—like David and Jonathan) have a gift for intimacy, that gift lays dormant in many of us—what can "quicken," it, bring it to life, is the Holy Spirit. Read carefully the following accounts and see if you can discover how an individual may have been receptive to the Holy Spirit's leading and acted upon it. Then describe how it impacted their friendship.

13. Read Ruth 1:15-17 and describe how God may have "quicken" Ruth and how she responded.

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14. Read 1 Samuel 18:1-4 and describe how God may have “quicken” Jonathan and how he responded.

15. Read Luke 1:35-40 and describe how God “quicken” Mary and how she responded.

16. What common threads do you see running through the above passages? What does this say to you?

DAY 5

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Reflections

One thread that winds its way through all three generations of friendship is godliness. These were individuals who loved God and desired to live reflective and “blameless” lives. Blameless in Scripture does not mean sinless, for we all sin every day in thought, word, or deed. What it means is that you walk in repentance—as soon as you are aware of sin, you confess and turn from it—and because God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, we are blameless in His sight—the cleansing blood of Christ keeps us clean.

How does a believer become godly? It begins with a desire for godliness—to thirst as David did for the living God. David wrote:

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
So my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

Psalm 42:1-2

Ask the Lord to help you fall more deeply in love with Him, to thirst for Him, to pant for Him as the deer pants for water. Then run to the stream of living water, the Word of God. Our friendships will never be different from the friendships in the world unless we are filled, “quicken” with the Spirit of the Living God.

For this reason, woven throughout our study of friendships we shall also study Psalm 119, a psalm that tells how to be godly, how to be “quicken,” or revived by the Spirit. This is the longest, and many believe, most wondrous psalm. It is made up of twenty-two octrains—twenty-two poems of eight verses each that flow through the Hebrew alphabet. Learning to meditate and then pray through Scripture is a key to godliness, and therefore, a key to profoundly impacting your friendships. Beginning next week, we will begin to pray through this psalm.

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In reflection, today:

17. Write down what you will take away from this week's lesson.

18. If you are also reading the book, *The Friendships of Women*, what stood out to you from the first chapter?

19. What application will you make to your life?

PRAYER TIME

Learning to pray together can feel intimidating, but once you learn, you will find it to be one of the most gratifying experiences of Christian fellowship. This guide will gently lead you in this – so don't be afraid. You may be stretched a bit, but eventually you will rejoice. You may feel like the child who was afraid to swim and clung to the ladder, but one day, you did it! You didn't sink! And oh, how wonderful it feels to glide through the water! Just as there is support in the water, there is genuine support in praying together. He is there, He is not silent, and He listens to His children as they cry out together to Him.

A few common problems we will try to avoid:

- Too much talk—too little prayer. Sometimes women, because of their gift for intimacy and their ease with “rapport talk” can talk so long when they are explaining their prayer request, that there is no time to pray. For that reason, we need to learn to share our prayer request in prayer—and then allow others, who need to be paying close attention, to support us with sentence prayers.
- A lack of openness. Sometimes we hide behind praying for other people. Granted, it is wonderful to be an intercessor for others, but here, in this friendship circle, lift up your own needs and allow yourself to be supported by friends. Intercede for others on your own time, unless you are compelled by His Spirit to do otherwise. Ask here for yourself. Granted, it takes time to build trust, and you may not be ready to share that you struggle with a bad temper, money troubles, or holding a grudge. But you can begin by sharing things that Scripture says everyone needs—for example:

Help me thirst for Your Word.

Help me love You more.

Give me wisdom in my relationships.

Openness is also facilitated by trust, so keep confidences!

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- Praying outside of God’s will. James says we have not because we ask not, and when we do ask, we ask “amiss.” To help us ask within God’s will, we will use Scripture, often, as our guideline.

Today—cluster in groups of four, at most, five. Each woman should choose one of the following prayers or a need she feels free to articulate.

- Lord, help me to better “pay attention” to the people You put in my life.
- Lord, help me to forgive as I have been forgiven.
- Lord, help me thirst for You more.
- Lord, help me love You more.
- Lord, help me understand Your Word.
- Lord, help me.....

After a woman has articulated her sentence prayer aloud, everyone should support her silently, and a few who are willing can support her audibly. Here is a model:

Sylvia: Lord, help me love You more.

Ann: I agree, Lord.

Dee: Yes, Lord, help Sylvia love You even more than she does.

Pause

Dee: Lord, help me to better “pay attention” to the people You put in my life.

Sylvia: I agree, Lord.

Pause

Now—cluster and follow the above pattern. Keep it short and simple. After you break the ice today, it will get easier and easier.