



## The Joy of Christian Friendship

This lesson will explore true friendship and self-sacrificial love.

## ENHANCER OF JOY

Friendship

## DURATION

60 minutes

## LESSON DEVELOPED BY

Wes Ellis with Kenda Creasy Dean

## GOAL

The Joy of Christian Friendship

## TIPS TO PREPARE

- Prayerfully Read John 15:12-17
- Review the lesson and decide if you want to split it into 2 consecutive meetings. This may allow more time for reflection and discussion based on the length of your typical youth group gathering.

## MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- Handouts: "I call you friends" (1 for each participant)
- TV or Projector (for Youtube or DVD)
- Wifi access for the screen (to show Youtube video) or DVD of Disney's *Aladin*
- *Aladin* video #1: "Friend Like Me" youtube video:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grVzHu-LcU> OR *Aladin* DVD
- *Aladin* video #2: "I'm free" youtube video:

<https://youtu.be/SUfP6IGQD00> OR Aladin  
DVD

- pens, pencils, or colored pencils
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## SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE

*No specific set-up is prescribed for this session, but participants should be able to sit comfortably and read text from a handout. Participants can be seated in a circle or in rows. Lighting should be managed so that it is bright enough for participants to see well when necessary.*

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## SCRIPTURE FOCUS

*John 15:12-17:*

*Jesus calls his disciples “friends” and no longer “servants”*

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## Purpose

Participants will learn that friendship is not about being bound to other people like a slave or using people to reach an outcome. True friendship is about the freedom of self-sacrificial love—being liberated and opening free spaces for other people.

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## Objectives

In this session participants will explore what friendship really is in light of the revelation of

God and how they are currently experiencing friendship in their own life. Participants will learn that the true basis of human friendship is the friendship we receive from God in Christ.

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## Further Study

**Read:** Wes Ellis, “Friendship, Joy, and Youth Ministry” at *Kindred Youth Ministry*, <http://kindredyouthministry.com/friendship-joy-and-youth-ministry/>

Jürgen Moltmann, “Freedom Experienced in Open Friendship” in *The Living God and the Fullness of Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 117-128.

**Watch:** Kenda Creasy Dean & Wes Ellis: “The Joy of Untamed Friendship,” from Yale Youth Ministry Initiative: <https://youtu.be/YBFRYBi-UyA?list=PLJ6vgdGbZWnbo16fpTeJtRLbGIR4bpIhi>

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## Introduction for Leaders

Friendship may seem like a mundane concept, even a bit superficial for a bible study. And, depending on your definition of friendship, it might be. But here, friendship is not just a “buddy” relationship. The gospel of Jesus Christ reframes the way we might usually look at friendship. Far from being a superficial relationship that’s just about fun and games, Christian friendship is a joy filled relationship that endures in the face of *whatever* may come... even death. Jesus says to his disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). The kind of friendship Jesus has with his disciples, the kind of friendship that God has extended to the whole world, is an unconditional friendship—a loving relationship *even if...*(fill in the blank). These are the kinds of relationships to which Jesus has invited us, his disciples.

Incidentally, young people need these kinds of relationships. Erik Erikson called it “fidelity.” According to Erikson, “‘the cornerstone’ of adolescence [is] the strength of being utterly true to oneself and others amid competing and contradictory value systems.” He wrote, “The adolescent looks most fervently for [people] and ideas to have faith in, which also means [people] and ideas in whose service it would seem worthwhile to prove oneself trustworthy.”

Unfortunately, however, these are not the kinds of relationships young people (or people in general) are actually experiencing most of the time in our society. Because of our obsession with achievement, we tend to *use* each other to get what we want, to get ahead. Unfortunately, “many contemporary young people simply have not experienced enough fidelity on their behalf to acquire it themselves.”

The church should be different—Christian friendship should be different! In this study, participants will learn from Jesus that true friendship is not about being bound to other people like a slave or using people to reach an outcome. True friendship is about the joy and freedom of self-sacrificial love—being liberated and opening free spaces for other people—because that is what God’s friendship with the world looks like. As the facilitator of this discussion, you have the unique opportunity to help young people sort through how they think about their relationships and to guide them toward relationships that reflect God’s joy and delight in the world.

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## Gather

### **Gather (5 minutes)**

- Greet participants and invite them to be seated in your discussion area.
- Invite participants to think silently, for 30 seconds, about a friend they have who might need prayer. Then invite them to condense that prayer request into one word and be ready to share it out loud.
- Tell participants there will be a time in your prayer for them to share their one word out loud. Pray a short prayer that opens a free space for participants to speak their prayers out loud to God and to each other. [example: “...Lord, hear our prayers...”]
- Give participants 1-3 minutes to share their words of prayer for friends. Then close out the prayer. [example: “...God, thank you for our friends. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”]

*Practitioners’ Note: Have the students write the prayers out on paper and take them home.*

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## Engage

### **Engage (30 minutes)**

#### **Activity 1: “Friend Like Me”**

- Set up the video by explaining the beginning of Aladin. Aladin is a poor young man trying to navigate the social pressure to achieve the status of a prince. His pursuit of this goal leads him down a dangerous path until he eventually stuck in the Cave of Wonders with his pet monkey, Abu. When it seems there is no way out Aladin rubs a golden lamp he has discovered. Out comes a big blue genie who spares little time before songfully marketing himself to his new young master.
  - optional variation: try inviting a participant or two to help you set up the video by describing the story if they’ve seen it.
- Show Aladin Video #1
- Have participants discuss how the genie is and isn’t a friend to Aladin.
  1. Ask: “is the genie really a friend to Aladin? Is Aladin Genie’s friend?”
  2. Genie says “friend” but their relationship is all about the services the genie can offer to Aladin.
  3. Their relationship is about command and obedience. That’s not really friendship, is it?
- Have participants turn and share with someone near them: “have you ever felt like the genie?” (constantly having to produce and do “magic tricks” for someone else to make sure you’re still friends).
- Regather.
- Explain: We often experience relationships that are all about doing things for another person. We use and get used by others. That’s not real friendship. Jesus gives us a very different picture of friendship.

#### **Activity 2: “I no longer call you slaves”**

- John 15:12-17 (or have a participant read) out loud.
- Invite participants to reflect on the parts of the text that stood out to them.
- Ask: what are the characteristics of friendship you see in that passage (self-giving love, joy, passion, grace, invitation. This is not slavery. This is not about just producing).
- Show Aladin Video #2
- Ask: “How does this illustrate true friendship?”
- This is about love, joy, freedom, and self-sacrificing love. This is the kind of relationship God wants to have with us—a relationship that isn’t about reaching some other goal, that’s

not about using people, a relationship that isn't anxious all the time.

*Practitioner's Note: Splitting this exercise into two separate 40-minute sessions with two separate reflection activities below works. This exercise really helped students articulate how their relationships actually are and to rethink relationships.*

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## Reflect

### **Reflect (20 minutes)**

#### **Activity 3: "I Call You Friends"**

- Offer the handout , "I Call You Friends," to each participant and, if there is space, invite them to spread out and find a place to sit "alone" somewhere in the room.
- Tell them they will have 10 minutes with this handout to think and pray. The handout will prompt them to reflect on John 15:12-17 and write a responsive prayer.
- Once everyone is spread out, give them 10 minutes to follow the handout instructions. (Option: play contemplative music in the background).
- Regather after 10 minutes.
- Invite participants to share their experience of reflection .

#### **Activity 4: Let's Be Friends**

- Say something like: "Jesus is our true model for friendship. We are to be friends to others in the same way that God is a friend to us in Jesus. God's friendship is the true basis of human friendship. In the beginning of this session we offered prayers for our friends. What are some other ways we can be good friends to other people?"
  - Invite participants to share some a time when someone was a friend to them—the kind of friend Jesus is talking about.
  - Widen the scope beyond just peer-to-peer relationships.
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## Send Forth

### ***Send Forth (5 minutes)***

- Sum-It-Up: “God does not want us to be slaves, but friends. In the same way, since Jesus called us to love others as he has loves us, we are invited to be friends with other people and to enjoy loving friendships with other people.”
- Closing Prayer — pray that participants will learn the joy of true friendship