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# *Six* KEYS TO LASTING FRIENDSHIPS

*Six*  
KEYS TO  
LASTING  
FRIENDSHIPS

Carol Kent &  
Karen Lee-Thorp

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BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

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# CONTENTS

Introduction—Wanted: Girlfriends	7
How to Use This Guide	9
1 Understanding Intimacy	13
2 Bringing Out the Best in Each Other	23
3 Holding One Another Accountable	33
4 Risking Hurt, Building Trust	43
5 Loving Lavishly	53
6 Freeing Friends to Love Others	65
Notes	75

# INTRODUCTION

## *Wanted: Girlfriends*

GIRLFRIENDS. From the time we were little girls, we loved being part of a group of friends who made us feel special. As we grew older, there were sleepovers where we watched movies (usually love stories or comedies), experimented with new hairdos, and talked through the night, sharing our secrets. We vowed to *keep* those secrets, giggling, hugging, eating junk food, and promising each other allegiance for the rest of our lives. I (Carol) can envision the scene as if it were yesterday—frozen in time like a Norman Rockwell painting.

Of course, it wasn't like that for all of us. Maybe it wasn't that Norman Rockwell perfect for any of us. But whether we were fixing our hair or fixing a car, surrounded by giggling friends or watching the giggling girls from the sidelines, we knew the value of a true friend.

Then we grew up. We got busy. But our need for friends is as strong as ever—maybe even more so. We have lives to plan: To marry or not to marry? College? Grad school? Work or raise children? Or, work *and* raise children? It seems like one day we're asking, *Is labor really the worst pain a woman can endure?* and the next day it's, *What do you do for hot flashes?* Then there are spiritual issues: How can I get to know God better? How can I

develop a meaningful prayer life? What *is* a meaningful life with God in a world like this one?

We need our friends for feedback, but perhaps most of all we need them *to be with us*—enjoying our presence, drinking coffee at our kitchen table, listening to our challenges, praying with us, laughing together at our mistakes, learning and growing in tandem, and receiving encouragement and pleasure from each other’s company.

In this study on friendship we’ll look at how Jesus modeled how to be a good friend. He invested time in His friends. He sometimes asked them tough questions and faced tense confrontations. He often had dinner with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. (Wouldn’t you love to hear a tape recording of the conversations among friends around *that* table?) He even hung out with some friends who were tax collectors and sinners. In John 15:12-14 He said,

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”

When our love for our friends is “as He loved us,” we have priceless relationships. We work at bringing out the best in each other; we welcome accountability—even if it hurts. We build trust by honestly risking hurt as we *get real* with each other. We celebrate the joy of loving each other lavishly, without demanding exclusivity in the friendship. The end result (that’s really a beginning) is an abiding, growing, strengthening, enriching intimacy that gives us the privilege of being called *My Friend*.

Maybe you’ve wondered how to make more friends or how to be a better friend to someone else. Get ready for what might be a life-changing experience in building relationships with other women—we really *do* need each other! And get your smile in place . . . because you’re about to create a twenty-first century painting of “Girlfriends.”

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

YOU were born to be a woman of influence. No—we don’t mean a busybody or a queen bee, telling others what to do or making their lives revolve around yours. You were born to model your life on Jesus’ life and, in so doing, to be a model for others. Perhaps your influence will happen in a few quiet words over coffee, in a hug or a prayer. Don’t say, “Not me—I’m barely treading water!” If you have the Spirit of God in your life, you have what it takes. God wants to influence people through you.

We’ve created these *Designed for Influence* Bible studies to draw out this loving, serving, celebrating side of you. You can use this study guide in your private time with God, but you’ll gain even more from it if you meet with a small group of other women who share your desire to grow and give. The study is designed around the seven life-changing principles explored in Carol Kent’s book, *Becoming a Woman of Influence*. These principles, which underlay Jesus’ style of influencing others, are:

- Time alone with God
- Walking and talking
- Storytelling
- Asking questions
- Compassion
- Unconditional love
- Casting vision

Each of the six sessions in this guide contains these seven sections:

**An Opening Story.** When you see the word “I” in this guide, you’re hearing from Carol. She begins each session with a story from her own life to let you know we’re not making this stuff up in some spiritual hothouse; we care about these issues because we’re living them. As you read these stories, look for a point of connection between your life and Carol’s.



**Connecting.** Next comes your chance to tell your own story about the topic at hand. If you’re studying on your own, take a few minutes to write down a piece of your life story in response to the questions in this section. If you’re meeting with a group, tell your stories to each other. Nothing brings a group of women together like sharing stories. It’s not necessary for each person to answer every question in the rest of the study, but each person should have a chance to respond to the “Connecting” questions. Sharing stories is great fun, but try to keep your answers brief so that you’ll have time for the rest of the study!



**Learning from the Master.** The entire Bible is the Word of God. Yet Jesus Himself is the Word of God made flesh. The Bible studies in this series focus on Jesus’ words and actions in the Gospels. You’ll get to see how Jesus Himself grappled with situations much like those you face. He’s the smartest guy in history, the closest to the Father, the one who understood life better than anyone else. This is your opportunity to follow Him around and watch how He did it. If you’re meeting with a group, you don’t need to answer the questions ahead of time, but it would be helpful to read through them and

begin thinking about them. When your group gathers, ask for one or more volunteers to read the Scripture aloud. If the story is lengthy, you could take turns reading paragraphs. Or if you really want to have fun, assign the roles of Jesus and the other characters to different readers. Karen wrote the Bible study sections of this guide, and if you have any questions or comments, you can e-mail her at [bible.study@navpress.com](mailto:bible.study@navpress.com).



**A Reflection.** This section contains some thoughts on the topic as well as some questions that invite you to apply what you’ve learned to your own life. If you’re meeting with a group, it is helpful, but not necessary, to read the reflection ahead of time. When your group reaches this point in the study, you can allow people a few minutes to read over the reflection to refresh their memories. Talk about the ideas in this section that seem especially helpful to you.



**Talking with God Together.** This section closes your meeting if you’re studying with a group. Inviting God to enable you to live what you’ve discussed may be the most important thing you do together. In addition to the prayer ideas suggested in this section, feel free to include your personal concerns.



**Time Alone with God.** This section and the next are your “homework” if you are meeting with a group. The first part of your “homework” is to take some time during the week to be with God. In this section you’ll find ideas for prayer, journaling, thinking, or just *being* with God. If you’re already accustomed

to taking time away from the rush of life to reflect and pray, then you know how these quiet moments energize you for the rest of your week. If you've believed yourself to be "too busy" to take this time to nourish your hungry soul, then this is your chance to taste the feast God has prepared for you.



***Walking with Others.*** The second part of your "homework" is to pass on God's love to someone else in some way. Here you'll sample what it means to be a woman of influence simply by giving away something you've received. This is your chance to practice compassion, unconditional love, and vision-casting with the women you encounter in your daily life.

That's how the Christian life works: We draw apart to be with God, then we go back into the world to love as we have been loved.

If you're meeting with a group, one woman will need to take responsibility for facilitating the discussion at each meeting. You can rotate this responsibility or let the same person facilitate all six sessions. The facilitator's main task is to keep the discussion moving forward and to make sure everyone has a chance to speak. This will be easiest if you limit the size of your discussion group to no more than eight people. If your group is larger than eight (especially in a Sunday school class), consider dividing into subgroups of four to six people for your discussion.

Spiritual influence is not just for super-Christians. You can make a difference in someone's life by letting God work through you. Take a chance—the results may surprise you!



# UNDERSTANDING INTIMACY

*I've dreamed of meeting her all my life ... a bosom friend—an intimate friend, ... a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul.*

—ANNE, IN *ANNE OF GREEN GABLES*<sup>1</sup>

GAYLE came into my life when I was a desperate woman. My husband had been transferred to his company's home office. With a heavy heart, I left my friends, my home, my church, and my dream job.

I met Gayle at a party for new employees at my husband's company. We were both newcomers to the city. We were both lonely, and *we connected*. The following week, she invited me and my young son over for lunch. I sat at her kitchen counter and watched her make peanut butter and banana sandwiches for the children. I had never thought of putting peanut butter and bananas together in a sandwich before. This woman was creative and she definitely had a sense of humor. I liked her.

For the next two hours Gayle listened to me moan, complain,

gripe, and criticize the company that had caused this unwanted move. She wept with me as I explained how much my job with pregnant teenagers had meant to me. After my outburst, she started asking about my interests. We discovered we were both interested in Bible study and had visited the same church.

When I hugged Gayle good-bye, I felt renewed hope. Over the next year our friendship blossomed. We laughed out loud together, shared our secrets, exchanged recipes and tips on raising children, held each other accountable for spiritual and personal growth, and occasionally cried together. I loved Gayle like a sister.

How much we owe to friends like these! They bring out the best in us and challenge the worst in a loving way. They get us through tough times and help us make hard decisions. They help us relax and laugh, cry and heal, hope and dream.

We want good friends; we also want to *be* good friends. What does it take to be a good friend to another woman? This is the question we're going to explore in this study. The Bible has a lot to say about friendship, but we're going to focus on Jesus—what He said about friendship and how He related to His friends.

In this first session, we'll look at Jesus' friendship with three siblings: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We'll also look at our own experiences of friendship. By comparing our stories to Jesus' story, we'll try to identify the qualities of a deep friendship.



1. Tell a story about a friendship that has been especially important in your life.

2. If you're studying with a group, think about all the friendships people in your group have just described. If you're studying on your own, reflect on the story you've just written, as well as on other friendships you've had.

List the qualities of a deep friendship that emerge from these stories.



Jesus loved everyone, but only a few were His close friends. When we think of Jesus' friends, the apostles come to mind first. But Jesus was also close to some members of a family who lived in the village of Bethany, about two miles outside Jerusalem. Luke and John each recount incidents when Jesus visited these friends. These incidents reveal much about what Jesus valued in friends and how He treated them.

To understand Luke 10:38-42, it's helpful to know that when Jesus came to dinner, He probably didn't come alone. The twelve apostles were probably there, and Luke 8:1-3 suggests that Jesus routinely traveled with a number of other people, including several women. If Martha's home could hold more than those, the party may well have included neighbors from the village, curious to hear the notorious rabbi. Martha owned no microwave and had no lasagna in the freezer for unexpected company. She made bread by hand and hauled water from the village well. She ran to the market to stock up on olives, cheese, and wine in heavy skins—and she carried it back herself. All that was women's work; the men weren't going to help. They were

going to sit at Jesus' feet, in the proper position of a disciple, and listen to Him teach. For a woman to take the disciple's position was outrageous.

3. Read Luke 10:38-42. How does Jesus treat His friends in this incident? What does He say, do, and feel?

John tells of two visits late in Jesus' ministry. The second of these two was another dinner party where Martha again served and Mary again did something outrageous. Women normally wore their hair up; to let it loose in public was extremely racy. Touching a man's feet was even more racy. The perfume Mary poured on Jesus' feet was probably a family treasure, worth a year's wages. (What do you suppose Martha said to Mary when that party was over?)

4. Read John 11:1-12:11. If you're studying with a group, you might go around the circle, letting each person read three or four verses aloud.

5. In John's stories, what do you observe about the way Jesus treated His friends? What did He say, do, and feel? (For instance, He challenged them to wrestle with faith. Their suffering actually *angered* Him.)

6. From what you've read in Luke and John, what expressions of friendship would you say Jesus valued? What qualities did He value in His friends?

7. Compare your answers for questions 3 through 6 to your answers for question 2. What similarities and differences do you observe between your friendships and Jesus' friendships?

similarities

differences

8. What hinders intimate friendship? Consider external factors (Do you think distance gets in the way, or is it not a problem for you?) and internal ones (qualities or actions of the individuals involved).

*A  
good friend will  
joyfully sing with you  
when you are on the  
mountaintop, and  
silently walk beside you  
through the valley.*

—AUTHOR UNKNOWN<sup>2</sup>



### **We Need Each Other**

All of us have a desperate need for intimacy. But what is it? *Webster's* defines it as "being on affectionate, personal terms." It

also has to do with familiarity. Intimacy in a friendship is a close relationship that results from careful study of the other person. When we know a friend personally and experience “connectedness” with that person, a bond is formed.

9. One day I made a list of what I look for in an intimate friendship. Take a few minutes on your own to put a check mark next to every item that you, too, find important in a close friendship.

- A deep care and concern for me personally
- A personality I enjoy (intelligence, spiritual depth, and a great sense of humor are a few traits I’d be seeking—what would you look for?)

*Intimacy is risky. No doubt about it. If I reach out to a woman to whom I am drawn, she may reject me. If I tell a woman that I love her, that I cherish her as a friend, she may respond little (or not at all). If I open my soul to another, trusting her with my dark side of failure, she may draw back in shocked silence (or she may tell others). If I, out of the overflow of my heart, promise another unfailing love until the day I die, then I have bound myself before God. . . . Risky. Risky. Risky. . . .*

*Then why do it? Why set ourselves up for hurt? Why not play it safe, as most men do? Because daring to take risks . . . ignites the flame for bonding.*

—DEE BRESTIN<sup>3</sup>

- A compassionate heart that cheers when I succeed and feels my pain when I fail
- A tangible support through communication (often enough so I feel valued, but infrequent enough so I don’t feel strangled)
- An ability to lovingly confront me with hard questions that hold me accountable for spiritual growth and personal integrity
- A listening ear—someone attentive who will really *hear* me
- A heart for God’s Word and an eager interest in ministry-related activities
- A powerful prayer partner
- An affirming encourager
- An individual who can expect all of the above from me without making me feel the weight of obligation if I don’t measure up

I admit I’ve never yet found a person who perfectly demonstrates my entire list. However, it helps me evaluate whether I’ve been taking more from my friends than I’ve been giving back.

Intimate friendship demands a great investment, but the rewards are multiplied a hundred times over.

10. Which of the fifteen characteristics of friendship listed in question 9 are the most important to you? (Or, do you have others that aren’t on this list?) If you’re meeting with a group, share your top five.

11. Which of the characteristics seems most risky for you to offer to a friend?

12. How can knowing the characteristics you seek in a friend help you build stronger friendships?



If you're doing this study with a small group, close with conversational prayer. Before you begin, take a minute to pair up with another woman. Each of you should share one thing for which you'd like prayer.

Gather again with the whole group. Pray for your partner. Thank God for the friends He has brought into your life, and ask Him to help you understand the Jesus model of being a friend.

Make a note to pray for your partner during the week.



Imagine having Jesus as your personal friend, listening deeply to you and giving you feedback and encouragement. It's true! Jesus is available to you twenty-four hours a day on a toll-free line. But perhaps because He's invisible, it's easy to forget He's there, and perhaps because He's always available, it's easy to take Him for granted.

On a separate piece of paper, write a letter to Jesus that expresses what you're thinking and feeling about friends as a result of this study. You might address one or more of the following questions:

- What do you long for from a friend?
- When their brother was severely ill, Mary and Martha contacted Jesus. If someone close to you were dying, whom would you contact for support? Why would you choose that person? If you don't have anyone to whom you feel that close, what do you think about that fact?
- What hinders you from being the friend you'd like to be?
- For what friends are you grateful? Write about why you're grateful.
- Would you like to be better friends with anyone in your group? What can you do to extend friendship to (not demand friendship from) that person?
- If you feel short on true friends, write about your feelings. What goes through your mind when you think about seeking out someone's friendship?

*A friend is one to whom one may pour out all the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.*

—ANONYMOUS<sup>4</sup>



Many of us shy away from believing we could be the kind of friend Jesus was. He befriended spiritual beginners to help them become the mature men and women they were created to be. He didn't condescend or use them to feed His ego, but He did

make Himself available to pass on what He had received from the Father. He wasn't embarrassed to be a person of influence.

This week, look around you for a woman in your life who is younger or newer to faith than you. You don't have to "teach" that person or commit to "mentoring" her for years. Just agree with God that you're available to be present for that woman, to encourage her, to be whatever God would like you to be in her life for this season. *This season* might be a single contact with a stranger, or a friendship of a few weeks or months. It might grow into a long-term friendship. You're not on the hook forever; just agree with God to be available, and ask God what's needed.

If you're new to faith yourself, maybe you know someone else in the same boat. You may not be able to offer deep wisdom about God (yet), but you can share your thirst to know God. Make yourself available as a comrade in the enterprise of discovering God together.