

STUDY GUIDE

FIVE SESSIONS

FRIEND OF SINNERS

Why Jesus cares more about
relationship than perfection

RICH WILKERSON, JR.

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WITH JUSTIN JAQUITH



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Friend of Sinners Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

I love having friends. That sounds pretty basic—I mean, who doesn't want friends? But think about it for a second. Friends are amazing. They support you. They laugh with you (or maybe at you; it's hard to tell sometimes). They believe in you. They tell you when your haircut looks terrible. They hack your phone. They cheer you up when you're sad. They help you survive awkward parties. Friends are so important that most of us couldn't imagine life without them.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why we care so much about having friends? I think friends are important to us because *friends are important to God*. God wants friends. And even more than that, God is a friend. He invented the whole idea of friendship, after all. And since he is perfectly selfless and the personification of love, it goes without saying that he is the best friend imaginable.

In my experience—first as a Christian and second as a pastor—many people don't see themselves as friends of Jesus. They look at Jesus as Savior, Lord, King, and God, but they don't dare to classify themselves as friends. That sounds too informal, too presumptuous. I know we sometimes sing that old song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." But do we really see ourselves as his friends?

Let me take it a step further. Can we believe that Jesus is a friend of *sinners*? Because again, in my experience, our mistakes always seem to throw a monkey wrench in this whole friendship-with-God thing. Maybe we can believe we are God's friends when we are living relatively holy lives: when we pray every day, go to church on Sundays, don't have any major addictions, and haven't

yelled at our kids in a few days. In those moments, we might dare believe God wants to hang out with us.

But what about when we mess up? What about when we fall back into a temptation or addiction we've promised God a thousand times we would leave behind? I know how I tend to react in those moments—I subconsciously assume I just blew any chance at friendship with Jesus. He'll continue to love me . . . because he has to. But he certainly won't *want* to be my friend.

But in the last couple of years, I've come to see Jesus as more than Savior, King, and God. I've come to see him as my friend, even when I don't deserve it (which is all the time!). Actually, I've come to see him as a friend of sinners everywhere. We are all sinners, after all. Who can claim to be perfect? Nobody. Yet the Bible reveals a Jesus who actively, intentionally, and continually sought out sinners. He spent time with the people society reviled and rejected. He risked his reputation because he cared about people, not appearance.

That's why I wrote the book *Friend of Sinners*. First, because we need to believe we are God's friends, even though we are all sinners; and second, because we must realize God's friendship extends to people who are far "worse" than we are. Better and worse are such superficial terms, of course. We are all sinners in need of grace; and in Jesus, we all find the grace and friendship we need.

During the next few weeks, I pray that friendship with Jesus becomes a reality to you. I believe God wants to show you how he sees you, and he wants to affirm his commitment and love for you. You can trust him and depend on him. You can enjoy his love. Jesus is your friend, a true friend, one who "sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24).

I also pray that as you glimpse the incomprehensible greatness of God's love for the world, you would discover a passion to befriend lost people as well. That is the natural result of friendship with Jesus. As you see the world through his eyes, you'll see people

differently. They aren't good or bad, they aren't sinner or saint; they are simply children of God.

I am so grateful for your willingness to follow Jesus. Thank you for taking the time over the next five weeks to open your heart and allow him to speak to you. He has great things in store for you! There is no more exciting, fulfilling life than knowing Jesus, the friend of sinners.

—Rich Wilkerson, Jr.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The goal of this video curriculum and the accompanying study guide is to help you grow closer to Jesus and to experience friendship with him like never before. The curriculum is designed to be experienced in a small-group setting such as a home Bible study or Sunday School class. There is a unique dynamic when you learn in the context of a small group. Ultimately, the idea is not to just gain knowledge but to experience life transformation, grow in relationship with others, and apply what you learn to your day-to-day life. And what better way to learn about Jesus as your friend than surrounded by other friends?

Each participant should have his or her own copy of the study guide, as you will receive much more from this journey if you are able to reflect on the topics during the week. It is also helpful (but not essential) to obtain a copy of the *Friend of Sinners* book. The videos and material in this study guide are based on the original book, which develops more fully many of the ideas that are briefly mentioned here.

This study guide is divided into five sections, one for each week of the curriculum. Every section contains video teaching notes, group discussion questions, prayer suggestions, and recommended readings from the *Friend of Sinners* book. As a group, you will watch the video and then use the video notes and questions to engage with the topic. There is complete freedom to decide how best to use these elements to meet the needs of the group. Again, the goal is developing relationships and experiencing life change,

not just “covering the material.” You are encouraged to explore each topic as a group and discover what God is saying.

These times together as a group can be rewarding, refreshing, even life-changing. Things might feel a little forced or awkward at first, but don’t worry. The other members of your group will soon become trusted companions. There is something about praying and learning together that is incredibly healthy for the human soul.

It is important to maintain a positive, safe environment in the group. Everyone should have an opportunity to share what they are learning to the extent they feel comfortable. Don’t feel obligated to participate, but please don’t keep silent if you have something that contributes to the discussion. People need to hear what you have to say!

On the other hand, no one should dominate the conversation or impose their beliefs on others. The group discussion time is a conversation, not a monologue or a debate, and differing views are welcome. People are encouraged to share their emotions, challenges, and struggles honestly, without fear of rejection or ridicule. And, of course, it is especially important to maintain confidentiality regarding what is shared.

At the end of each of the five sessions, there are three optional between-sessions activities for use during the week. These are individual, devotional activities, so feel free to use any or all of them to apply what you are learning to your daily life. You can spend as little or as much time on them as you’d like, of course, but they will typically take about twenty minutes.

Keep in mind there are no right or wrong answers—the goal is simply to engage with the topic on a personal level. You won’t be required to divulge what you write, but you might find that you want to share some things with the rest of the group. Often that is the best way to learn and grow, and you might be surprised how helpful your thoughts are to others. If you have a busy week and

can't get to any of the activities, don't worry! That is life sometimes. They aren't required, and you are always welcome at the group meetings.

Finally, expect God to speak to you! It's not a coincidence or accident that you have chosen to participate in this five-week journey. God has great things in store for you. He will reveal himself to you and speak to you in ways you might not even expect. Over the next few weeks, take time to pray and meditate on the things God is saying to you. You might even want to write them down for future reference. This is the beginning of a deeper relationship with Jesus, and your life will never be the same!

Note: *If you are a group leader, there are additional instructions and resources provided in the back of this guide to help you lead your members through the study.*

SESSION ONE

MISSED MESSAGE

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

MATTHEW 9:10-13

Opening Thoughts

Have you ever missed the point of a rhetorical question? You genuinely thought the person wanted answers, but he or she was actually trying to send you a message. And when you, oblivious and innocent, offered your opinion, you only made things worse.

Nowhere is this clearer than in marriage. I wish someone would have sat me down prior to getting married and said, “Rich, your wife is going to ask you questions sometimes, but she won’t be looking for information. Don’t answer those questions, Rich. Trust me on this. Don’t answer those questions!”

I had to learn this the hard way. For example, if DawnChéré says, “Why is there a wet towel in the corner of the closet?” she isn’t really asking why it’s there. She doesn’t want me to explain the thought process behind leaving a towel to mildew in our closet, no matter how convinced I might be that my lack of showering etiquette was justified.

“Well, you see, babe, I was in a hurry, and I wasn’t thinking about towels, I was thinking about Jesus and God and people and church . . .”

She’ll interrupt me mid-explanation, because I’m missing the message she’s trying to communicate. There is only one appropriate response: “I did it, I’m sorry, and I’ll never do it again.” Gentlemen, memorize those words. They could save your life.

To be fair, I ask rhetorical questions too. Except my wife is mostly perfect, so my pointed questions aren’t pointed at her but at the universe in general.

“What is up with the traffic today? This is ridiculous!” I’ll say. But I don’t really want an answer. If you are ever my copilot, don’t respond to that question by explaining local traffic patterns. I’m just going to get mad. And definitely don’t tell me traffic wouldn’t be an issue if we had left on time. I’ll probably make you get out of the car and walk. I don’t want answers. I want pity, I want empathy, and I want you to be as indignant as I am.

Missing the message is never a good thing. Not in marriage, not in friendship, and certainly not when it comes to God. Now, I'm not saying God communicates his message to us via rhetorical questions (although there are a few of those in the Bible). God has expressed himself to us very clearly through the Bible.

The problem is, we humans tend to be a little hard to communicate with sometimes. We can get so distracted, so busy, so flustered, so guilty, so self-righteous, or so set in our ways that we don't accurately interpret what the Bible says. I've done this many times, and maybe you have too. We tend to look at God through the lens of our own experience. We assume God has a certain attitude toward us because that's the attitude we would have if we were God. Or maybe we think he will react to our failure a particular way because that's how an authority figure in our lives would have reacted.

That's why Jesus came and lived among us. He wanted to show us—in living color—God's heart for humanity. Think about it for a moment. He didn't have to hang out with messy, broken, hurting humans. He could have lived in a hermit's hut on a hillside somewhere, preached a few good sermons from a distance, and died for our sins. But instead, he spent three and a half years walking, talking, teaching, preaching, laughing, healing, forgiving, guiding, praying, pleading, correcting, calling, and comforting people just like you and me. Why? So we could get the message. So we could understand what God is trying to tell us.

What is that message? *That God is a friend of sinners.* That's what the idea of "grace" means. We don't deserve God's love, because we have all failed him. But he seeks us out, he calls us to himself, and he covers our sins with his righteousness.

Jesus' relationship with Matthew the tax collector is a clear example of this (see Matthew 9:9–13). Keep in mind that tax collectors in that day were considered traitors and thieves. They took money from their fellow Jewish citizens and turned it over to the hated Roman empire. And they collected quite a bit extra for themselves as well.

Jesus found Matthew seated at his tax booth. That means he was doing exactly what had made him infamous in the first place: selling out his countrymen to make a quick buck. Jesus said, “Follow me.” And Matthew got up and followed him. Just like that, he became a disciple of Jesus.

Notice what Jesus did *not* do. He didn’t rebuke Matthew publicly. He didn’t force him to give all the money back he had stolen. He didn’t put him on a lower level than the other disciples. He didn’t make him promise to never steal again. He simply showed Matthew grace and invited him to become his follower.

If we think Jesus came to bring about behavior modification, we have missed the message. His top priority in life is not to get us to stop using bad words. It’s not to convince us to give our money to people in need. It’s not even to fix our marriages or restore our families. Those things are good, and if you follow Jesus, you’ll notice improvement in your character, your thought life, and your actions. But behavioral change is not the point.

The point is relationship. Jesus is befriending us. He is calling us to himself, and his grace has made friendship possible. No matter who we are or how badly we’ve messed up, grace, forgiveness, and love are available in Jesus.

Video Teaching Notes

Here are a few key points to note as you watch this week’s video. Use the space provided to write down any observations or applications that come to mind as you watch.

If you miss the message of Jesus, you can find yourself in the wrong place and space in your faith journey and relationship to others.

The message of Jesus is much more than good versus bad. Jesus didn't come to make bad people good. He came to make *dead people alive*.

The story of Matthew (Levi) the tax collector in Matthew 9 is a clear illustration that Jesus is a friend of sinners. Matthew was a traitor and a thief, yet Jesus befriended him and called him.

Jesus came for everyone, but he can only save those who acknowledge their need for salvation. This includes both the obvious sinners and the self-righteous (like the Pharisees).

When we enter a relationship with Jesus, a transformation begins on the inside that eventually affects our outside life.

Many people reduce Jesus' message to a morality lesson. That is what the rich young ruler in Mark 10 did. He called Jesus "good," as if he were only a rabbi, and asked for a list of laws to keep in order to have eternal life.

It's not about what we do but about what he's done. It's about receiving his grace and living in faith. Religion makes us proud of ourselves. Grace makes us proud of Jesus.

Jesus isn't just a good teacher; he's the Savior of the world. He deserves much more than our morality, church attendance, rituals, and customs. He deserves our lives.

Group Discussion

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. How would you describe the message of Jesus? What was the main thing he came to teach and demonstrate?
2. How does the story of Matthew the tax collector illustrate that with Jesus, we can *belong* before we *believe*?
3. How do you think the Pharisees would have compared themselves to the tax collectors and sinners? Do you think God shared that opinion? What does their question about Jesus being a friend of sinners reveal about their attitude toward those who did not meet their standards?

Closing Prayer

Close your time together in prayer. Here are a few ideas of what you could pray about based on the topic of this session:

- Thank God for the gift of salvation through Jesus.
- Acknowledge Jesus' incredible gift of acceptance and friendship to you.
- Pray for a clearer understanding of his grace in your life.
- Invite Jesus to be Lord of your entire life, not just your behavior.
- Ask him to help you show grace and acceptance to others around you.

Recommended Reading

Review chapters 1 and 2 in the book *Friend of Sinners*. Use the space provided to write down any key points or questions you want to bring to the next group meeting. If you'd like to read ahead for the following week, read chapters 3 and 4.

PERSONAL STUDY

The following pages provide an opportunity for you to reflect personally on the topics you covered this week in the *Friend of Sinners* video and discussion. Feel free to engage with any or all of these three activities during the week. There are no right or wrong answers, and no one will see your responses unless you choose to share them. These moments alone with God are a time to allow his love, peace, and wisdom to fill your heart and mind.

The Message Matters

Missing the message another person is trying to communicate is never a good thing. That's why we try so hard to understand what other people are saying—especially when a relationship is important to us. The same holds true with Jesus. It's vital we understand what his life and teachings are meant to communicate.

1. Jesus' message can be summed up in the word *grace*. That's not an easy word to define, though, because it is such a beautiful, all-encompassing term. What does grace mean to you?

2. In Romans 3:23–24, Paul writes, “*For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us*”

from the penalty for our sins” (NLT). According to this passage, what does it mean that you are saved by grace?

3. In Luke 19:10, Jesus says, “*For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost*” (NLT). What are some of the ways Jesus sought to fulfill this mission?

4. Take a few moments to write down a brief prayer of gratitude for the difference Jesus’ grace has made in your life.

Unfortunately, many people who consider themselves Christians and followers of Jesus . . . try to *correct* people before they *connect* with people. Not Jesus. As you read about his life and listen to his teachings, you see time and time again a man who went out of his way to befriend people who had been ostracized, labeled, and rejected by society. . . . They were friends of Jesus, and their lives were inevitably and irrevocably changed as a result.

—**FRIEND OF SINNERS**, PAGE XIII

“But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (NLT).

What does this say about the attitude God values in us?

Who did the Pharisee trust in for his righteousness? Who did the tax collector trust in?

4. Are there people in your life to whom you have trouble showing grace and mercy? What makes it difficult to show grace to these people?
5. Do you tend to compare yourself to those around you? What are some negative effects of comparison?

Jesus' message was *grace*. It was salvation for all who believe in him. It was mercy and compassion and forgiveness for all who would put their faith in him. And I'll go even further. Jesus was the personification and the embodiment of grace. In other words, Jesus *himself* is the message. Jesus is the purpose and the point. The message isn't mere dogma or doctrine. It isn't behavioral change. The message is that no matter who you are or how badly you've messed up, grace and forgiveness are available in Jesus.

—**FRIEND OF SINNERS**, PAGE 14

Good or God

Like the rich young leader in Mark 10:17–22, sometimes we might think our walk with God is primarily about behavior, and if we do enough good things, we can gain God's acceptance. We reduce Jesus' message to a self-help program, and in so doing, we underestimate what he came to do. Remember, Jesus didn't come to help good people get better. He came to bring spiritually dead people back to life.

1. Why do you think people so often focus on behavior when they think about religion, God, or spirituality?

2. Paul writes the following in Ephesians 2:4–10:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ

and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Why isn’t it possible to be “good enough” to please God on our own? What does this passage say about grace?

3. Think about how you tend to relate to God. Is it more about fear or trust? Is it more about rules or rest? Is it more about behavior or friendship? Explain.

4. Why do you think you relate to God this way? Have any authority figures in your past or present affected your view of God? Explain.

Take a few moments and ask God to reset your view of him. If you'd like, you can pray something like this:

Jesus, thank you for accepting me by grace. I don't trust in my own goodness or my own efforts. I have faith in you. I believe you died for my sins and rose again, and now I can have friendship with God. Help me keep my focus on you, not on myself. Help me know and believe how much you love me. I pray this in your name, amen.

If we approach Jesus simply as a teacher, he will give us the law. But if we approach him as our Savior, he will give us grace. . . . When we underestimate Jesus, it usually has nothing to do with whether we think he can heal or provide for us. We don't underestimate his power. We underestimate his grace. We think—just like the rich young ruler—that he came to make us better. Jesus is not a self-help message. Jesus is a “he did all the work because you couldn't” message.

—**FRIEND OF SINNERS**, PAGES 37–38
