

# "I Have Called You Friends"

## An invitation that could change your life.

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by Robert C. Crosby  
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I was struggling through a difficult year. The pressures of my new pastorate had been increasing daily. We had three school-aged children and a new baby, so the demands of parenting and marriage were equally high.

And then I lost my voice.

It did not merely disappear for a week or two, which would have been bad enough, but it was gone for almost a year. Just talking on the phone became a Herculean task, much less preaching every week.

To top it off, two key staff members resigned—within two weeks of one another. Things were not looking good. I needed help, and I needed it quickly.

By this point, I had walked with Jesus for 15 years. My life had been full of Bible-study groups, outreach, church work, and discipleship training. For all I had gained, however, it was becoming clear that I had lost something too.

Don't get me wrong. I still prayed. I knew that Jesus was there. But our intimacy had withered, degenerating into what I now call a "tasking relationship." My part consisted of the tasks I performed for Him; my prayers consisted of tasks I wanted Him to do for me.

Instead of coming with thanksgiving and worship, I routinely approached His throne with little more than my list of requests. I had invested so much into serving Him that I had forgotten what it meant to be His friend. The joy in my relationship with Jesus was all but gone.

The loss of my voice forced me to reexamine the foundation of my relationship with Christ. Not only did I need more of Jesus, but I needed a more biblical view of who He truly was and how He wanted me to relate to Him. I needed to rediscover a friendship that had faded over the years of service.

### An Astounding Invitation

My search led me not to a passage, but to a person: John, the beloved disciple. The more I read about John, the more I became convinced that of all the disciples, he was the closest to Jesus. John repeatedly refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" ([Jn. 13:23](#), [19:26](#), [20:2](#), [21:7](#), [21:20](#)).

John dared to do what others would not: to come close to Christ. When the other disciples sat around the table at the last supper, he reclined against Jesus. When the others fled from the cross, John stood before his bleeding, dying friend. I'm convinced it was his passionate friendship with Jesus that enabled John to outrun Peter to the empty tomb. John seemed to savor what others perhaps missed.

On the eve of His execution, Jesus made an astounding invitation recorded by John alone.

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. . . . I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

—[Jn. 15:13, 15](#)

At the cross, Jesus was not primarily laying down His life for His followers, His students, or even His servants. No, Jesus laid down his life for his *friends*.

If I had to guess what Jesus would want to call me, it would have been one of those other words. *Follower, student, servant, or disciple* all seem more logical—and useful—choices. But *friend*? That's something I never would have expected.

But we have to remember that the purpose of the cross was to restore relationship. The crucifixion was not just some theological event to satisfy part of God's nature. It was the sacrifice of a man willing to go to drastic lengths to secure the relationship He sought with His friends. John witnessed that sacrifice firsthand.

The invitation of the gospel is something far greater than learning more about Jesus Christ. It is a bold call to personal experiential knowledge. It was never intended to be mechanical, but to be powerfully relational. When we miss that, we miss Jesus.

John, however, got it. He gave Jesus more than his list of requests. He gave Him his heart.

## A True Friend

What does it look like when Jesus invites us into friendship with Him? God's Word offers a number of descriptions of friendship. As I've searched the Scriptures, I've found seven primary characteristics of a true friend. Jesus more than fulfills each of these in His friendship with us.

**1. A friend always loves you.** [Proverbs 17:17](#) says, "A friend loves at all times." A true friend's devotion does not change with the weather.

A few months after losing my voice, I was sitting in a hotel room with my wife, Pam. We were only minutes away from attending a large—and loud—banquet. Since talking one-on-one in a quiet room was difficult, I dreaded the overwhelming challenge of conversing in a crowd.

A multitude of anxieties raced through my mind: *What will people think when they hear my voice crack? Will I be audible amid the noise? Is it even worth going? Will my wife be embarrassed? Will I ever be able to enjoy friends again?*

Pam's voice gently interrupted my anguished, self-centered thoughts. "Robert, may I tell you something?"

"Sure," I strained to say.

"I believe God wants you to know that He is at work in this struggle," Pam said. "Also, I believe He wants you to know that *before* you are a pastor, and *before* you are a husband and dad, you are His *son* . . . and He loves you very much."

Tears not only filled my eyes, they began to pour.

Pam's encouragement tapped something deep within my soul. Those simple words came from my wife's lips, but they seemed to flow like a river straight from heaven into my heart. Jesus knew what I needed to hear more than anything else. In that moment, He was again proving His friendship.

**2. A friend always sticks by you.** "There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" ([Prov. 18:24](#)). Though Jesus' disciples were riddled with shortcomings, He stood by them. Jesus seemed to focus more on their faithfulness than their obvious imperfections. Neither John's impulsiveness nor Peter's impetuosity nor Thomas' doubt could deter Him from loving them.

**3. Friends spur one another on.** "As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend" ([Prov. 27:17, NLT](#)). Friends bring out the very best in one another. It's not always easy—the sparks fly when iron sharpens iron—but it's worth the discomfort. A friend challenges you to step out of the safety and security of what you know to pursue God's purposes in your life.

One night during my voiceless months, I was doing my best to visit with a missionary prior to a worship service. Obviously aware of my impaired speaking ability, he commented: "You sound awful. You must be so frustrated. I mean, here you are a pastor and a preacher, and you can't talk! What are you going to do . . . write?"

Those words flipped a switch within me. Little did he know that I had a growing interest in writing. For weeks, I had been asking God, "Is my interest in writing just a whim, or is it Your will?" I was hungry for an answer. God used my missionary friend to help confirm His purposes for me.

Over the next few months, God opened several doors for me to write. In His unique way, God used my pain to help me develop a different kind of voice. Jesus had proven a faithful friend yet again.

**4. A friend will tell you the truth.** "Wounds from a friend are better than many kisses from an enemy" ([Prov. 27:6, NLT](#)). Jesus was a consummate truth teller. When it came to calling things as they were, He never pulled a punch. Jesus was far more concerned about conveying truth than about being considered "nice." With straightforward honesty, He spurred change in those He cared about: "Apart from me you can do nothing" ([Jn. 15:5](#)).

**5. A friend is interested in what interests you.** "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" ([Phil. 2:4](#)). Whether discussing a woman's ponderings about worship or His opponents' questions about taxes, Jesus constantly engaged with people at their point of interest.

Looking at Jesus as my friend has affected what I talk to Him about. When I thought of Jesus solely as my Lord, I was prone to bring Him only the "weightier" matters of my life. Now that I

look to Him as my friend, I feel free to ask anything. I have found that the borders of His comfort extend much further than I ever imagined. It has changed the way I pray.

**6. A friend operates on your schedule of need.** "Never abandon a friend. . . . Then in your time of need, you won't have to ask your relatives for assistance" ([Prov. 27:10, NLT](#)). Real friends are there when you need them—even when it is inconvenient.

Jesus is that kind of friend: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" ([Ro. 5:8](#)). When we needed Him most—even *before* we knew Him—Jesus was already a faithful friend to us. One of the marvels of Jesus' incarnation is that He made Himself available to meet our needs: to serve, to heal, and to save.

Even during the most difficult times with my voice, He gave me enough strength and energy to preach each week. I may have been spent and exhausted, but He gave me what I needed. Eventually my voice healed. It didn't happen in an instant, as I had wished, but little by little. Through that slow season of brokenness and recovery, Jesus was indeed "an ever-present help in trouble" ([Ps. 46:1](#)).

**7. A friend is a part of your life, not just your conversations.** John was the only gospel writer to record another spectacular promise Jesus made: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" ([Jn. 10:10](#)). Perhaps one of the most satisfying discoveries during my struggle was that Jesus wanted to walk through it with me. Even though healing did not happen on my timetable, I believe a deeper healing took place—not primarily of body, but of soul. Jesus brought a providential pause to my hectic lifestyle and taught me how to love again—how to love Him and love others.

More than a Savior

Throughout his spiritual journey, John came to know Jesus as his Savior. But he also discovered something more. You see, a savior is someone you *need*. A king is someone you *admire, respect* and *obey*. But a friend? A friend is someone you *know* and *love*.

All of us long for a relationship with someone who will love us, understand us, and challenge us to reach our potential; someone to encourage our dreams, confront our oversights, shield us in our insecure moments, and guide us in our bolder ones. John understood that Jesus was such a friend.

The Lord does not call us merely to be servants who periodically come before His throne with our lists of requests. Instead, He calls us to be His friends. The Christian life, then, is not as much about *working harder* as it is about *coming closer* . . . closer to Jesus, the perfect friend.

It has been several years since my voice returned, and I thank God for it. In the struggle, He was not—as I feared—taking me out of ministry. Instead, He was taking something out of me so that I could better fulfill my calling. That "something" was a wrong view of Jesus.

In the long run, I got back more than my voice. I got a new set of eyes and a friendship like no other.