

the Better Friend

12 Truths to Shift from Shallow
and One-Sided Connections
to Vibrant Friendships

Grace
Valentine



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WaterBrook

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To my best friends, my future bridesmaids, my future dance floor friends, and the people who have shown up for me over and over again. Whether we met in childhood, in class, at summer camp, as girls learning lessons the hard way and listening to “Closer” by The Chainsmokers a little too much, or in our twenties, thank you. Thanks for being good friends and making me better.

And for the lonely girl holding this book, this is also for you. I have been you, and I am praying that as you read these words, you will find peace from Jesus, unreasonable love, confidence to not give up, and friendships that make you better. Better is coming when you do life with the Giver of life.

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introduction

“i’m always the better friend.”

I’ve made a lot of important decisions in my life. After my freshman year of college, I decided to stop using six layers of eyeliner. I’ve already determined that when low-rise jeans come back into style, I will never participate in that horrendous trend again. I made the decision to leave my home state for college. And I chose to run a half-marathon with little to no training. (I survived but couldn’t walk for three business days.) But honestly, nothing was as important as deciding both to walk with Jesus and to walk with better friends.

I truly believe that’s true for each of us. The most important decisions you will ever make are about whom you will walk with in this wild adventure of life.

I get that it sounds cheesy. But I know it’s true because I have been in friendships that were shallow, one-sided, or hurtful or that just made me feel invisible. Sometimes it was their fault, and sometimes it was just because we truly weren’t better together. Maybe you resonate with the feeling of being overlooked, betrayed, or let down by the friendships in your life. Maybe you’re tired of superficial relationships and long for rich, life-giving connections. When friendships aren’t vibrant and fulfilling, chances are, we overthink, overcompensate, and feel overwhelmed.

We tend to overthink our daily lives when no one is growing alongside us or going deep with us. This might look like having friends who shrug their shoulders if we get drunk, who lead us to gossip instead of encourage, who simply don't care whether we're being our best selves, or who stir up fear with the things they're telling others about us.

When we surround ourselves with shallow or fake friendships, we overcompensate by searching for our worth in beauty, work, school, popularity, and things that just don't matter. Instead of working hard to become our best selves, we waste precious time obsessing over being who we're not. Instead of being loving, we try to prove we are worth loving.

These kinds of friendships make us feel insecure and, worse, lead us away from God's best, causing us to miss out on the experience of God's love and a sense of belonging. When we don't feel that we belong or that we are seen and loved, we become overwhelmed by this chaotic world. Daily tasks cause consistent stress and anxiety because we don't find the joy of Christ in sharing mundane moments with a loving community. If the people around us only make us feel alone, we become overwhelmed by the thought—and probable truth—that maybe they don't really care about us. When we have to consistently fight to feel seen by others, we often fail to see the God who sees us.

Shallow friendships really suck, right? In a culture obsessed with popularity, social climbing, and what others can give you, it's easy to get stuck in these relationships. But I like to think you picked up this book because, like me, you are over one-sided, fake friendships. Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity." A true

friend loves you all the time and is such a gift in in this crazy world. But so often we settle for

- friends who include us *sometimes*,
- friends who are fun *sometimes*, or
- friends who listen to us *sometimes*.

We prioritize fun, success, and the feeling of being wanted over friends who make us better people. We can't expect friendships that are perfect, and we have to remember we can't literally be invited everywhere, but I like to think it is holy to want friends who seek to love us at all times. And I don't think you and I are selfish for desiring this. In fact, this is a holy desire.

Maybe God has shown you recently that you have *sometimes* friends. This doesn't mean you need to cut them off completely and shame them. But it does mean that maybe we should all learn how to love radically and trust wisely.

And that is why I wrote this book: because I have been in your shoes and at one point felt the desire for people who were *all-time* friends and sisters I could lean on. And when we cultivate, identify, and cherish these God-given friendships—instead of always overthinking, overcompensating, and feeling overwhelmed—we feel the presence of God, who is over it all.

*When we find better friends, we become better people
and grow to know God better.*

When we find better friends, we become better people and grow to know God better. And when we become good friends

who care well for those around us, we experience not only the joy that comes from being a blessing but also Christ in us being a light to those He led us to.

Since this whole book is on friendship, I feel like it would be wrong if I didn't introduce myself. So, hi. I'm Grace Valentine. In my almost three decades of life, I've learned a lot about friendship disappointments, friendship breakups, and one-sided friendships. I've experienced the heartache of loneliness as well as the joy of vibrant and life-giving friendships.

I've cried over boys I dated, boys I didn't date, period cramps, being laid off and struggling to pay bills, losing someone too soon, a bad hangover, the movie *The Holiday*, and having "nothing to wear"—and over friendships.

Meeting a new friend calls for some small talk to show you're a trustworthy and somewhat-interesting human. So, to that effect, I love sushi, I have an older brother who keeps me humble, I am from south Louisiana, and I did not study abroad in Italy like it seems every other twentysomething did. I also didn't go to New York City at Christmastime this year like everyone else. I talk too fast and too loud and sometimes get misunderstood. I have moved multiple times in my life but most recently to Atlanta, Georgia. Turned out, I could fit everything I own in my old Honda Civic and just drive off to a whole new state. I found myself back at square one—living in an apartment by myself for the first time and learning how to survive winter after moving from the Sunshine State. But even harder was learning how to make friends again while keeping my long-distance friendships, avoid comparing myself to those around me, date boys from both online and the wild (aka real life), and become my best self.

Truthfully, for the longest time, what hindered me from be-

coming a better friend and finding better friendships was how pathetic I felt. This sounds dumb to admit, but if we are going to talk about shallow, one-sided, and disappointing friendships, I have to be honest about my own shallowness. I was embarrassed and frustrated because I always felt like the better friend. Too often it felt like me trying a whole lot and my friends forgetting about me or just not wanting to be in good friendships. There was a time it really irritated me, and like so many of our frustrations these days, it all started with *a social media post*.

The post that caused me to spiral was simply a birthday message. Five girls who had all met each other because of me took a picture together by a pool at a fancy hotel, drinking margaritas and eating truffle french fries. The caption read, “Happy birthday to our girl Annabelle! To know you is to love you! Today was the best day celebrating you.”

So it’s Annabelle’s (not her real name) birthday weekend, and everyone I know was invited but me?

“To know you is to love you” . . . *blah*. My thoughts continued to spin as my insecurity grew. They knew her only because of me, so why couldn’t they actually treat me like a friend? They liked my friend recommendations but not me?

Maybe to know Grace Valentine is to not love her enough to invite her.

So there I was, staring at my cheap popcorn ceiling, crying alone on a Saturday afternoon with no fancy french fries and no luxury pool, feeling resentful and pathetic. I introduced them and helped them find their best friends, then got kicked to the curb and forgotten. *If they are having these birthday weekend trips together, then I know they also have a group text without me. I bet they even have a cute group text name with an inside joke and they update each other on every detail of their lives.*

Obviously, I wasn't just upset about this one post. I was upset because I thought that by my early twenties, I would have figured out this whole friendship thing. Maybe the post bothered me so much because I had watched so many sitcoms where a cute friend group had nine seasons of adventures but I had only a random assortment of "almost friends" who probably didn't even know I had a brother. The post reminded me that I was lonely, felt discontent, and had shallow friendships.

Now I can look back and see that I couldn't control how that friend group viewed me or whether they invited me, but I could control how I reacted. And my reaction made things worse. It wasn't healthy, holy, or good. That Saturday afternoon when I scrolled and saw that picture, I reacted out of my insecurity. I felt pathetic because I allowed disappointment to write lies about my worth. To be really honest about my emotions, I would say I wasn't just struggling with friendships—I was struggling with being content in my singleness, finances, and more. And I was doubting God's goodness.

I know I'm not the only one who has felt overwhelmed by friendships. Maybe you, too, have come across pictures of your "friends" hanging out without you and spiraled just like I did. Spiraling is the common reaction when we feel insecure about our friendships. It also looks like the freak-out we do when we wonder if a current friend is ghosting us. And it's that feeling we get when we reflect on a friend breakup from five years ago and realize we cared more than she ever did. Spiraling can happen when we feel lonely or when we meet new friends and feel insecure.

Friendship can be hard. It sometimes requires a lot of emotional labor. And while trying to create community, we may find ourselves fighting through trust issues from past hurts and

overthinking new connections. Finding community can be a challenge because—let’s face it—you don’t just stumble upon a group of girlfriends who also love queso and make you feel happy, joyful, and seen. Community doesn’t happen overnight; it usually starts with an awkward hello and the hope that a current stranger will become a lifelong companion. Friendship requires vulnerability, but when done right, it leads us to our best and God’s best. And when we find better people and seek to be better ourselves, holy friendships become comforting, clear, and Christlike.

So let this book be your reminder that it is good to desire a community that cares for you and others well. You’re not pathetic for caring—in fact, it is great that you do.

*It is good to desire a community that cares for you
and others well.*

This book will give you twelve truths to help you find, identify, and keep vibrant friendships. You’ll also learn how to react when your friends inevitably disappoint you, leave you, or confuse you. But there is one simple truth I want you to know as we start this journey: Friendship is worth it.

When I look back over my life, I see the pain from friendships but also the incredible joy.

In middle school, I was teased by some peers, and a girl named Paige stood up for me and defended me. I got to stand by her side as a bridesmaid in her wedding over a decade later.

In early high school, a group of girls who were my “friends” often left me out and talked about me. This brought me closer to my friend Chloe. Today, she is my favorite person to Facetime.

One day in college, while struggling to find my group, I was eating alone outside my dorm. A girl who was walking by asked if I wanted to hang out. She has become my best friend. I am thankful that eating alone one time at age eighteen led me to many dinners, lunches, and much laughter with Britta.

When I was a young adult mourning the end of a best guy friendship because of feelings, confusion, and boundaries, my friend Nora (who knew us both) stood by my side, sent me comforting handwritten notes, and reminded me of my worth. She didn't make me feel crazy for crying over a guy I never dated. She cared for me well.

In my twenties, when singleness made me feel lonely and all my good friends were getting married, having babies, and (I thought) forgetting about me, I met two roommates who became close friends. We cooked salmon, did ice-cream runs, and watched all the seasons of *Scandal* together. My singleness and loneliness led me to Ramsey and Maile.

When I moved to Atlanta and knew maybe two people by name, my friend McKenzie introduced me to all her friends. What started off as a scary season ended up becoming a blessing because of her inviting spirit.

So, yes, friendship is hard, but our lonely times often lead to moments of real connection. Our hardest goodbyes lead to beautiful, unexpected blessings. And maybe if you're feeling lonely, bitter, or stuck in one-sided friendships, you just need to start this journey by remembering that God is leading you to a miracle. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" (ESV).

In our current culture where everyone is online, sarcasm can

quickly become mean, and confusion is common, friendship is often under trial. When you stand steadfast and trust the Lord during the loneliness, disappointment, and insecurity, you receive something better than life going “your way”—you receive His presence. And when you receive God’s presence, He will lead you to a community that cares because He cares for you and loves you.

Don’t doubt yourself if you gave friendship your all while others didn’t. Instead, celebrate that you cared, because that’s Christ in you. Caring is a good thing. Stand firm in His love, in living a loving life, and trust that God has promised you His goodness.

the better friend challenge

Take a few minutes to reflect on your current friendships.

- When was the last time you overthought, felt the need to overcompensate, or felt overwhelmed because of friendships? Why did you feel this way?
- What does it mean to celebrate Christ in you when you care more than others seem to? How can you be thankful for the times you loved big?
- What would it mean for you to find friends who love you well?

Write a prayer asking God to reveal His truth to you about your current and future friendships. Ask Him to not only teach you contentment in your present circumstances but also give you boldness and hope to create better community.

The Better Friend

truth 1

know the difference between miserable
comforters and unreasonable love

I wasn't cool in middle school. While all the cool kids got picked up in carpools, I spent thirty-five minutes riding down random streets in a sweaty school bus waiting for my bus stop. I wore glasses that I got at the same store where you can buy mayonnaise, toothpaste, and tires, so they weren't glamorous. I didn't even have braces yet because I didn't finish losing my baby teeth until age fifteen. You probably have a young cousin or niece who finished losing them at seven years old, but I was a late bloomer. And late bloomers are hardly ever cool. My front teeth each leaned in opposite directions, and there was a big gap in between them. I didn't make the middle school cheer team, and I struggled to fit in with the girls whom I desperately wanted to call my friends.

I wanted so badly to sit at the cool-girl lunch table. All those girls had Vera Bradley lunch boxes while I had the "interesting"-looking school lunch every day. Even the teachers favored the popular group. The cool girls could do toe touches and, even in middle school, knew how to talk to boys. But no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't included. I remember sitting near them

and listening in on their conversations about sleepovers and their Webkinz collections.

One day, I approached one of the girls and asked what Vera Bradley pattern her lunch box was. When she said, “Cherry blossom, *dub!*” everyone laughed and turned away from me.

Exclusion stings.

Now that I’m older, I wear contacts, have straighter teeth after finally getting braces (even though I should’ve worn my retainer more), and even occasionally get a lot of likes on Instagram. But despite all that, I’ve noticed that I still feel like that awkward middle schooler approaching the cool-girl table of friendship.

See, no amount of followers, dinner parties, happy hours, sorority date parties, or invites can make up for the bullying, hurts, isolation, and empty lunch tables you experienced growing up. In fact, you need to find contentment in who God made you to be before you can truly find friends who love you in a way that reflects His love.

No amount of followers, dinner parties, happy hours, sorority date parties, or invites can make up for the bullying, hurts, isolation, and empty lunch tables you experienced growing up.

When I noticed I had mainly shallow and one-sided friendships, my first reaction was to blame everyone else: *Why couldn't they be better friends? Why couldn't they choose me, care for me, and show up for me?* I blamed my disappointment on their inability to see my worth. Although sometimes I truly was betrayed or

let down by others, I can now see that the disappointment actually started with *my* inability to see my worth.

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a novel by Stephen Chbosky, there is a popular quote that many of us have heard and lived out: “We accept the love we think we deserve.”¹ I’ve spent too long feeling insecure and inadequate and therefore settling for superficial friendships. I couldn’t change how those people treated me or saw me, but I could change how I saw myself and what I accepted. When I walked confidently, understanding my worth, I found people who celebrated and cared for me.

So what I want to ask you, new friend to new friend, is this: How have past friendships, hurts, betrayals, exclusion, bullying, and insecurity shaped the way you view yourself? Do you believe this has affected the way you search for friendships?

When I think about middle school Grace who wanted so badly to sit with the cool girls, I can’t help but also be reminded of the early-twentysomething Grace who moved to a new city and once again wanted so badly to be in the cool girls’ group text, be invited to their fancy brunches, and somehow have such cool friendships. But like I said, no amount of table invites, friends, followers, or likes can make up for the insecurity and empty lunch tables you had in childhood.

Friends can comfort you and cheer you on, but it is up to you to accept yourself.

Once you commit to following God along the path to better friends, He will often start the journey in your own heart. And He’ll help you discover three things:

Better confidence in who He made you to be. You don't need perfect confidence. You will still face bad days, insecurity, and exclusion. But you must learn to accept your quirks and be okay if others don't see your worth. Don't let someone else's inability to see your value stop you from walking in confidence. Make sure your security comes from God, not from others accepting you, adding you to the group text, or inviting you to their lunch tables. Friends can comfort you and cheer you on, but it is up to you to accept yourself.

Better contentment when life isn't going how you wish. You can find contentment in lonely seasons when you remember the friend you already have in Jesus. Jesus is your Savior, your Lord, and also your friend. John 15:15 says, "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." Jesus spoke this to His disciples, the men who followed Him on this earth and documented His miracles, but I believe He was also thinking of you and me when He said this. Jesus made His life, character, sorrows, and strength known to you. So you, too, should let Jesus in, share your life with Him, and call Him your friend. Once you seek Jesus as your friend, you have a friend for life who creates miracles unexpectedly.

Better discernment when it comes to friendships. Interestingly, when I was almost begging to be included at the cool-girl lunch table in middle school, I didn't realize that one of my future best friends was sitting at a table on the other side of the room. I was going where I wanted to belong, not looking around for the spaces that God could've been leading me

to. While I was wasting my time hoping these girls, whom I had nothing in common with, would include me, good things were waiting for me. When Jesus is your friend and you consistently pray for His guidance, you will get this gift called discernment. I joke that we women have “girl gut,” the power of the female intuition. However, discernment is even more powerful. It leads you to truth and stops you from trusting delusions that will only lead you astray. If I’d had more discernment in my middle school years, maybe the Holy Spirit would’ve led me to my future best friend even sooner.

Discernment is tricky in our social media–obsessed, social-climbing world. Yet it is crucial. There’s a man in the Bible named Job who was basically a good guy, called “blameless and upright”² by God. Satan assumed that Job only worshipped God and trusted Him because of his prosperity. God allowed Satan to cause havoc in Job’s life—not because He wanted Job to experience havoc but because He knew Job’s faith was strong enough and would be an example to others, including us thousands of years later. So chaos came Job’s way. He lost all his property, his children died, and he suffered physically. And then his friends turned on him.

At the beginning, they did comfort him, but after a while they inaccurately described God’s view of him. Job’s friends belittled him in a time of great stress, grief, and pain. They made him feel worse. Job even told them, “You are miserable comforters, all of you!”³

I can look back on my life and see that some friends were miserable comforters. But often, I wasn’t as blameless and upright as Job. Job’s faith prepared him for the chaos he would face. Job knew his friends weren’t being helpful, and it hurt. But

he was able to discern that they were miserable comforters and not truth tellers.

Now, you and I, we have to discern when friendships are good and challenging and, like Job realized, when they aren't from God.

Miserable comforters today may not be friends who blame you when your life is chaotic, like Job's friends did. They might be more like this:

The frenemy. This is the one in your close circle who doesn't seem to support you. They almost seem happy when things don't work out for you. They call themselves a friend, but they appear to cheer against you more than for you.

The social-climbing friend. They like what you can give them but don't really know you. In groups, you wonder if they have forgotten about you. They drop your name when convenient but aren't afraid to leave you out if it means they can have something better.

The gossiping friend. They always gossip with you, but if you're being honest, you don't feel like your name is safe in rooms you aren't in. Their gossip causes you to be bitter and cynical toward others.

The ghoster friend. This friend often disappears and doesn't respond for long periods of time, not necessarily because they're going through something but because they don't feel like responding. They don't prioritize communication and clarity, leaving you confused and frustrated, constantly wondering if they even care.

These types of friends are common, and some names might even come to your mind. But the truth is, we have all been these friends at times. We need discernment not only to know which friends to lean into but also to take stock of our own behavior and know what character traits to grow and what to trim. We can be better, and we should strive to discern how to do so.

To me, the best part about Job's story is when God stuck up for him and expressed anger that Job's friends hadn't spoken the truth about God's ways.⁴ So often we think we have to get even, speak our minds, and tell everyone off. But God is fighting for us. God will deal with those who tear His followers down. Trust God to fight your battles with you.

See, when Jesus was on this earth, His friends never called Him a "miserable comforter." They called Him "Teacher,"⁵ and in Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus's coming, He was also referred to as "Wonderful Counselor" and "Prince of Peace."⁶ A teacher is patient with someone and points them to be better, and a counselor is kind enough to listen and empathize with them. We all can be better friends.

Discernment will help you and me see where we can be better and how we can cultivate better friendships. Jesus confidently and consistently chose discernment, peace, and gentle empathy in His friendships. In Jesus, we see someone who was always the better friend. His friends let Him down, many scattered in His final moments, and one betrayed Him in the worst way. Jesus knew He was the better friend. But Jesus always showed unreasonable grace and love.

Jesus knew He was the better friend. But Jesus always showed unreasonable grace and love.

In this book, you'll see very clearly that I am not saying you have to put up with hard, shallow, or one-sided friendships. In fact, the bravest and best thing you may do after reading this book is walk away from some friendships. However, I do want you to see that when you care more, love radically, *and* trust wisely, you will hold holy relationships that bring you peace and joy. When you live a holy life, you won't find perfect friendships, but you'll find caring comforters, genuine cheerleaders, and loving fellowship—friends who see you and care for you. We can learn from Job to identify the miserable comforters in our lives and from Jesus to become more like Him when we are the ones who can love more.