

Iron Sharpens Iron

(Articles Supplementing Class Material)

Iron Sharpening Iron (1)

As we begin our new class this morning, I will start writing an article on each lesson to serve as a supplement to what we cover in the class.

The text of Proverbs 27:17 states, *“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.”* This is the reading of the NKJ translation. The RSV puts it this way, *“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.”* The Amplified Bible (a translation and commentary in one) gets the general idea correct here in stating the obvious, *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens [and influences] another [through discussion].”*

The thought of the wise man is that we are influences upon one another. This influence matters more to us if we have a close relationship. The influence becomes a good influence (sharpening us) if our close relationship is based upon principles of righteousness. This is one of the reasons God established in His pattern local congregations of believers. Congregations are designed to worship Him, **and to build up each other**. *“Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:13).

This means to get the full benefits of your faith (both in growth and reward) you have to be involved in the lives of your brothers and sisters. Your growth and benefit is found not only in how you are helped by others, but by your own efforts on their behalf. Consider the following from Paul’s pen as he expressed thanks for the gifts given him by the Philippian congregation, *“Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:17-19).

Proverbs 27:17 shows that we are all equals, a fact that is established clearly in the New Testament (cf. Galatians 3:28; Matthew 23:11; Matthew 22:25-27).

The illustration of iron sharpening iron is very clear in revealing these truths. Iron was very important during Bible times, as the forging of iron allowed for better tools and weapons to be used. But these strong, hard implements would dull and need sharpening. It took iron to sharpen iron as the pieces met to hone edges needed for effective use.

It is in this we find our lesson. We are tools used by the Master. *“And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God”* (Romans 6:13). It is important that we remain sharp and effective in sharing the message of God through words and influence. But, like a knife, our edge can be dulled in many ways, rendering us less effective. This is why we need one another. This is why Paul *“tried to join the disciples”* in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27). And when he was accepted, we are told *“he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus...”* (28-29).

Using a different illustration, Paul wrote, *“Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually”* (1 Corinthians 12:27). There is an entire text there (verses 14-25) that shows us God intends for all of us to be of use to Him. As Paul put it, *“If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased”* (17-18). *God designed it this way for us to sharpen one another. We can even be of help to those who are more spiritually mature than we are! “No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are **necessary**”* (22).

Continuing the thought, we are also weapons as we wage warfare against the devil and his influences. We are soldiers (2 Timothy 2:13-14), wearing the armor Christ has supplied (Ephesians 6:10-17). In fact, the

offensive weapon we use in this battle against evil is sharp and effective! *“And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”* (17, cf. Hebrews 4:12).

In this we can see the responsibility to be on the receiving end of *“iron sharpens iron.”* Love dictates that we also be the instrument God **uses** to sharpen our brethren. This is important to us individually, and is important to us collectively as a congregation as well. We certainly do not want to lose our candlestick! (cf. Revelation 3:15-16).

Ask these questions of yourself. Am I?... Am I keeping myself sharp so I may fulfill my duties to God? Am I doing my best to be an implement of sharpening to benefit my brothers and sisters in Christ? If not, why not? And how may I do a better job of serving my God and my brethren?

Remember that no matter who you are, you have equal value, and work to do in the kingdom. (Ephesians 4:16). So, let's get to work sharpening one another!

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Knowing Your Brothers and Sisters (2)

As Christians we are part of God's family. God is the Father (Matthew 23:9), Christ is the elder brother (Romans 8:29; Hebrews 2:11), and we have our relationship with them through adoption (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:3-6). The importance of this spiritual family with God as its Head can't be overemphasized. It is because of it that we have the hope of eternity. Our hope is through adoption, as through it we become heirs, *“that we may be also glorified together”* (Romans 8:17).

Since matters of eternity trump temporal ones, it is right to say that our spiritual family is more important than our physical one. This is not to minimize our physical family and relationships. Jesus Himself is a wonderful example in this. He dearly loved his mother. One of his last acts before his death was to instruct His disciple John to care for her after His death (cf. John 19:26-27). However during His ministry Jesus showed His spiritual priorities as His physical family came to see Him and speak with Him. One of His disciples told Him, *“Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.”* Jesus' answer was one that every Christian should consider carefully. *“But He answered and said to the one who told Him, ‘Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother’”* (Matthew 12:48-50).

It is true that physical families can become estranged from one another. This is a travesty, and as Christians it should not be as a result of our own failings. Paul wrote, *“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men”* (Romans 12:18). It is not always possible, but any rift should not come from a faithful child of God. The same truth is clear regarding our spiritual family. This is why Paul wrote Titus, *“Reject a divisive man after the first or second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned”* (Titus 3:10-11).

As we acknowledge that Christians are adopted into the family of God, there are many passages of scripture that regulate how we are to treat one another. Love is the clearest principle of all, and should be seen in all our interactions. This principle precludes a vengeful attitude toward others, especially our own brethren. This is extremely important in any local congregation. Perhaps this is why in dealing with strife and anger Paul wrote in Romans 12:21), *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

There is nothing more distasteful and repugnant to God to see His children fight and fuss. *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also”* (1 John 4:20-21).

Love requires we be involved in the lives and welfare of our brethren. Paul wrote, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”* (Galatians 6:10). This

passage has a spiritual context. Among those good things we are to do is restore anyone who *“is overtaken in any trespass.”* It is described as bearing *“one another’s burdens, and so fulfill [-ing] the law of Christ”* (6:1-2). A simple question: How can we *“rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”* (Romans 12:15) without such involvement with one another?

In Ephesians 5, Paul gave further instructions regarding our care and concern for one another; this time referencing our interactions in worship. This is one purpose of our singing, *“speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”* (19). This in conjunction with his admonition to submit *“to one another in the fear of God”* (21), indicates that our lives are enriched by, and should include a close relationship to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is important that we think of each other as brothers and sisters. We are family. If the Father and the Son have invested so much in our relationship, it obligates us to be invested to the same extent! *“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”* (1 John 4:10-11).

Deep fraternity exists where investment occurs. How can we love each other if we don’t really know one another? If we know of the physical and spiritual needs of our brethren - if we recognize their strengths and weaknesses, if we can tell when they are trouble, when they need our intercession, when a simple hug will help - this enables us to assist each other!

One of the most important things you can do is develop a closeness to your brothers and sisters in Christ. We can help each other get to heaven!

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Accountability is Important (3)

Our title is taken from Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:36, *“But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.”* While the context specifies words, the truth is that the concept of accountability is an integral part of God’s dealing with every aspect of mankind’s conduct — words, thoughts, and actions. The phrase Jesus used here, *“they will give account”* (apodidōmi logos), is defined by Thayer in this here as an *“answer or explanation in reference to judgment.”* *“Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”* (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

It may be helpful to note that in judgment, efforts on our part to defend our actions will not take place. We won’t be able to ask for mercy at this time. The decision will have already been made, the standard is known, and on that occasion the penalty for ungodliness will be meted out. We glory in God’s mercy. It is only because God sent His Son who died for us that we have any hope of eternal life. However, we must acknowledge God’s justice as well. He has clearly established what He expects from man, and has just as clearly revealed the consequence of failing to meet those expectations. *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...”* (Romans 1:18).

This is one of the primary purposes of God’s plan for the local church. As we develop our relationships as brothers and sisters of Christ, we become accountability partners in our efforts to serve the Lord. It is comforting to know that we have brethren who love us and are looking out for our spiritual welfare. *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ”* (Galatians 6:1-2).

The idea of holding each other accountable obviously can be a bit uncomfortable. No one among us likes to be told we are wrong. Even more disturbing is to be told we are guilty of disobeying God. However, the wise

man embraces such. *“He who keeps instruction is in the way of life, but he who refuses correction goes astray”* (Proverbs 10:17).

There are limitations in this which we must observe and accept. We are not to be a *“busybody in other people’s matters”* (1 Peter 4:15). We are not to be divisive (cf. 2 Timothy 2:23). We are not to be like Diotrephes, *“prating against [others] with malicious words”* (3 John 10). We are not to be guilty of unrighteous judgment (cf. Matthew 7:1). The primary consideration in a righteous support of one another is love. My interactions with you, holding you accountable for your actions, should emanate from my love for your soul. If this is reciprocated by you, good comes to both of us. *“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another”* (Romans 12:10). Do you love your brother? *“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins”* (James 5:19-20).

A second part of this comes from the one who is receiving the admonition or instruction from his brother or sister in Christ. Are you willing to be held accountable? Are you willing to concede that your brother has your soul’s well being in view? Are you willing to seek out help from your brethren? *“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”* (James 5:16). This can be hard to do. But if we acknowledge the love of our brethren, and understand their desire for our spiritual welfare, we will embrace their efforts to pray for and help us. It means something to be a part of the body of Christ, both in way of obligation and benefit. *“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it”* (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Ultimately it is best that we hold each other accountable. It is better to get right with God now, than it is to be judged unworthy in the final day. We know that if no one else does, God will, and His judgment is eternal! *“And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books... And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire”* (Revelation 20:12, 15).

It is important to not let shame or pride interfere in our holding one another accountable to God. We are to love our brethren and be willing to be recipients of that same love from them. As we strengthen our relationship, this is a benefit supplied to us by God Himself. He planned for our needs by supplying the local church. He knows that we depend upon the love and concern of our brethren. Sometimes it is easy. Sometimes it is hard. But it is always a demonstration of our love for each other!

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Shore Up Weaknesses (4)

In Romans 3:23, Paul affirmed, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* This should be understood as a statement of fact rather than a necessary requirement for mankind. While it is true that we all have transgressed God’s commandments, we have free will and can choose not to succumb to any particular temptation which befalls us.

Jesus is the wonderful example to follow in this. The writer of Hebrews tells us, *“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin”* (4:15). Each of us fail because there is a war waging within us. *“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish”* (Galatians 5:17). While the apostle hits the nail on the head here, he also confidently affirms in the same context, *“I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh”* (Galatians 5:16).

Not everyone sins against God in the same way. Some commit sins of pride. Others commit sins of lust. Some people lie, et al. Your list of sinful actions will not be identical to mine. Why is this? James describes why sin comes, *“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when*

desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (James 1:14-15a). Simply put, we are not all enticed by exactly the same things. Be aware that the devil knows our particular weaknesses and is ready to supply illicit enticements at our weakest hour. *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour”* (1 Peter 5:8).

Thankfully, Jesus Himself is on our side. He sympathizes with us, having been tempted by the devil as we are. Yet He did not sin. It is helpful to note that despite difficult circumstances, Jesus’ will and familiarity with His Father’s will kept Him pure despite the devil’s best efforts in Matthew 4:1-11. He is willing and qualified to help us with the problem of sin. *“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever”* (Jude 24-25).

A primary way we are equipped is through the will Christ has delivered to us. His will bolsters us in our battle of wits against Satan (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Jesus used it effectively when the devil tempted Him, saying again and again, *“It is written”* in response to the enticements He faced. We also have the avenue of prayer. Jesus, our great High Priest, serves as our Mediator between us and the Father in heaven. And, as a part of His will for man, he has given us one another!

This truth can not be overemphasized. God did not intend for us to face the devil on our own. We are soldiers in the army of the Lord. We have others fighting the devil with us, side by side. We can lean on them to gain tactical strength, encouragement and friendship as we navigate the minefield of our lives. *“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Paul expressed it well in 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15, *“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all”* (1 Thessalonians 5:14-15). Whether they be the offering of comfort, encouragement, and even warnings and admonition, these are the pursuit of what is good for all of us. We are to be working together to protect, strengthen and aid in our service to God.

Some weaknesses are more profound than others. Some of our brethren are struggling more than others. All are worth our efforts to help. *“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God...”* (Hebrews 12:12-15 a).

Whether we struggle with worldliness, pride, strife, fear, dismay, shame, a loose tongue, confusion, ignorance, doubt, or a myriad other things, we can help one another in our spiritual battle against the *“spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”* (Ephesians 6:16). Two things are needed here. **First**, we must be aware and willing to help. It is our responsibility as *“members of one another”* (Romans 12:5). With this we may *“grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ”* (Ephesians 4:15). **Second**, we must be willing to accept the help others offer. It is a part of God’s plan for His children. We are the family of God! As family we must be willing to lean on one another!

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The Warmth of Friendship (5)

All of us understand the importance of friendship. We grasp it when we are young. Perhaps that is why a little child can come tell their parent after an hour’s play, “Mommy, I have a new friend!” This desire and readiness to accept another as a friend, unfortunately, becomes more rare as we get older. Personalities,

politics, religion, culture, and biases all begin to erect boundaries. Perhaps personal disappointment or unpleasant experiences make us more cautious and make it harder to foster close relationships.

Disappointing experiences change nothing about the benefit of friendship. We are told, *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful”* (Proverbs 27:6). All of us need a voice we can trust and cherish, knowing that what they say may be difficult to hear, but it is said out of love and concern for us. A voice that comes from someone who we know is looking out for our interests. In short, a friend.

The Bible gives us great examples of friendship. One such example is that of Jonathan and David. Jonathan was the son of King Saul, and David was God’s chosen, the one who was ordained to take Saul’s place as ruler over Israel. As Saul soured on David’s successes (cf. 1 Samuel 18:5-9) there was a potential for tension and conflict, but their friendship remained strong. It remained strong because of the righteousness of their character and the true nature of their friendship, *“the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul”* (1 Samuel 18:1).

On one occasion when Saul sought the life of David, Jonathan spoke with passion to his father, defending the faithfulness and effectiveness of his friend, *“he has not sinned against you, and because his works have been very good toward you”* (1 Samuel 19:4), leading Saul to promise to Jonathan, *“As the Lord lives, he [David] shall not be killed”* (6). Finally, when Saul could no longer be persuaded by his son, Jonathan effected David’s escape from danger in 1 Samuel 20. The chapter ends with Jonathan’s plea, *“Go in peace, since we have both sworn in the name of the Lord saying, ‘May the Lord be between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants, forever’”* (42).

David showed his own friendship to Jonathan, not only in the vows he made with the man, but also in the way he treated the family after Jonathan’s death. His song regarding the death of Saul and Jonathan included these words, *“I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished”* (2 Samuel 1:26-27). Later as David reigned as the King of Israel, he asked, *“Is there anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake”* (2 Samuel 9:1). A lame son of Jonathan’s was found, a man named Mephibosheth. David restored to Mephibosheth all of the family land and possessions and took the man in to dine at the king’s own table *“like one of the king’s sons”* (9:11) taking care of him from then on.

This was a true demonstration of friendship. No matter the danger or trouble, they counted on one another. And they both remained faithful through good times and bad. This is what a friend does. This is why all of us need good friends. This is why God supplied a ready complement of like-minded brethren for us in the establishment of the local church. We all need friends.

Remember that we can accomplish much more as friends than one can alone. As the wise man said, *“Two are better than one... And a threefold cord is not quickly broken”* (Ecclesiastes 4:9,12). While keeping company with those who are evil can lead to corruption (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:33), a righteous brother who befriends us will influence us to good. Jesus said a true friend is willing to show his love even to the point of laying down his life (John 15:12-14). He also offers sage advice when needed. This is where we get the premise for our study, *“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend”* (Proverbs 27:17).

David and Jonathan are a single example of the type of friendship that would benefit each of us. We can also use Ruth’s friendship with Naomi; Daniel’s with Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Barnabas, as well as his mentorship to Timothy and Titus; our Lord’s friendship with the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary; and Jesus’ close ties with His disciples, whom He loved, and called for them to love each other.

Establishing the importance of such close relationships, we glory in what God supplied. We know that in order to enjoy these relationships, each of us *“must [ourselves] be friendly”* (cf. Proverbs 18:24). May we all act as the disciples at the beginning of the kingdom, who rejoiced constantly in one another. *“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart”* (Acts 2:47). God has given us a ready supply of friends, will you yourself be friendly?

Strengthening Each Other (6)

An examination of Ephesians 4:29 helps to explain the premise of our article. *“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”* Important concepts here are edification and grace. Edification defined is “to build up...the act of one who promotes another’s growth in Christian wisdom, piety, holiness, happiness.” Such efforts to edify are required by God. Grace is defined as “that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness: grace of speech.” Our language toward one another should be to build up, to be that which will make us better and promote loveliness and righteousness rather than strife.

This is key — this job, this obligation to one another. It is a responsibility every child of God has to strengthen his brothers or sisters. Anything violating such an effort has no place, *“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth.”* The next time you are tempted to speak without carefully considering how it will impact your brother, you need to refrain. God expects us to take great care in how we speak.

The motivation for our efforts in this regard is selflessness and love. I seek the welfare of others and am not centered at all on my own interests. *“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being”* (1 Corinthians 10:24). When each of us act in this way we are all lifted up. Think of it this way. If everyone seeks their own, each person has one advocate, leading to division. If everyone subjugates their own desire for others, as we advocate for one another unity and edification is the natural result!

The call for us to edify one another is found time and again in the New Testament. One that ties in closely to our discussion is Romans 15:1-3, *“We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’”* Jesus Christ is our preeminent example. Though He was God incarnate, He suffered for you and me. His motivation was selfless love. Again, this should be our approach. When Paul wrote our purpose was *“not to please ourselves”* he put his finger on what differentiates the Christian life from the typical worldly practice.

Paul’s pen also noted the end of such focus on others. It is good, leading to edification (building up). So the weak get stronger. As Paul noted in Ephesians 4, there is utility in this effort. *“From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love”* (Ephesians 4:16). Edification self-propagates. As we practice such selfless love, each of us grows stronger. As each of us grows stronger, we become more selfless and loving, finally reaching the state of a self-sustaining group that is reaching its full potential in doctrine and work. God’s plan is sublime!

The effective work of edification can be seen from two directions. Not only are my interactions positive and uplifting, but I also take care to do nothing which will tear down. This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 14. While we enjoy certain liberties as Christians, we should never use those liberties if they damage our brother. Paul wrote it this way, *“It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves”* (14:21-22).

How do we edify one another? One is our worship together. Singing, praying, communing. When we come together, we must *“Let all things be done for edification”* (1 Corinthians 14:26). This is why God expects our attendance at worship (cf. Hebrews 10:24-25). The office of elder is given to *“build”* up Christians (cf. Acts 20:32). The study of God’s word is to build ourselves up (2 Timothy 2:15). The concept of ministry accomplishes the same. The word minister means to serve, to wait upon, to be an attendant. Our efforts as Christians are to be centered in our brethren, *“minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God”* (1 Peter 4:10).

The end result of all this is a stronger congregation. We help each other to be strong, *“for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Peter 1:11). It is like having a workout partner. It takes some time, but with accountability and steadfast effort, transformation is possible and even inevitable as it is maintained.

This strengthening of each other is God’s divine and sublime plan. He knows our needs. He knows how so many fail in their Christian growth because they either refuse to involve themselves with other Christians, or because we fail each other due to selfishness. May we use God’s plan for each other to accomplish our own spiritual growth. This is God’s way. He requires it. But, He requires it for our own good! It all comes down to Jesus’ words in John 15:12, *“This is My commandment, **that you love one another** as I have loved you.”*

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Loving Each Other (7)

The single most important characteristic that is to identify children of God is love for one another. This truth is revealed especially by the pen of the man known as the apostle of love — the apostle John. There are a number of reasons for the designation. First, it was a self-designation as John humbly referred to himself in the third person in his gospel, as a disciple *“whom [He/Jesus] loved”* (cf. John 19:26; 13:23; 20:2; 21:7). Too, love was a central theme of both John’s gospel and his letters.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

“We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:19-21).

There are two words which define the love of a Christian toward his brother or sister in Christ. One is the affection we are to have for one another due to our common relationship with God and our filial relationship. This is the brotherly affection noted by the Greek term *philadelphos*. This word is used by Peter in 1 Peter 3:8, *“Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous.”*

John also uses the second word, one which elevates the discussion to another level. John wrote in 1 John 5:2, *“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments.”* The words translated “love” in this text both come from the Greek *agape* which Strong defines as love “in a social or moral sense.” Thayer adds “to have a preference for, wish well to, regard the welfare of...” *Agape* is elevated by God, as He through His Spirit refers to it as the love He has given to men (cf. John 3:16). Love as seeking the best for others is elevated by Him to a place of preeminence in the Christian life.

Though we can have affection as a part of this love, it is not intrinsic to the term. The simplest demonstration of this is Jesus command for us to *“love your enemies”* (Matthew 5:43). We may not have affection for those who seek our harm, but we can return their evil with good, seeking their welfare.

Now consider the special relationship we have with other Christians. We have the same God, the same Savior, the same Master, the same hope, the same instructions. This should be considered the next time we hear or are tempted to say that we have no real commonality with some brother or sister in Christ. We don’t all have to be jocks, or nerds, or young, or old. What we similarly embrace is sufficient for the closest of relationships! We have the most important things in common! *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise”* (Galatians 3:28-29).

The New Testament is replete with such calls for brethren to love each other, emphasizing its importance and quality. *“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins’”* (1

Peter 4:8). *“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart”* (1 Peter 1:22).

This is important, our love must not stagnate. Our love must be fervent. How do we ensure this? By working at it! Paul expressed this to the Thessalonians. *“But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more”* (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10). So you say, I know I am to love! Well, I know you know. Further, I know you have already been loving your brother, maybe for quite a while. The encouragement is still relevant, *“But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more.”* This shows the value the Holy Spirit puts upon the action of love!

Consider Paul’s words describing how this love is shown. *“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Our love for our brethren is based in humility, seeking their welfare before our own. It impacts every aspect of our relationship. If we all act in this way, our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ will blossom!

This is key to our efforts in our interactions with brethren. God expects it. So let’s *“increase more and more”!*

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Praying for Each Other (8)

Prayer is an essential part of the Christian’s daily life. It has been said that the Bible is how God communicates to mankind, and prayer is how mankind communicates with God. It is through prayer that we praise God, we let God know of our needs, we intercede to Him on behalf of our fellow man, and we petition Him through the mediation of His Son. God expects, and requires such communication on our part. *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:6-7).

The book of Revelation has an interesting description of heaven with a mention of the prayers of the saints, in Revelation 5:8. The description is of God’s throne, with the Almighty at the center of all creation. Paul describes the moment the Lamb (God’s Son) takes a scroll depicting the Father’s will for man. *“Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”* Truly our prayers are taken to the very presence of God and our petitions to Him are heard. As we contemplate our imperative to love one another, it is difficult to think of any better way to practice that love than praying for our brothers and sisters in Christ to the Heavenly Father.

The world may not know the significance of this action. Indeed some are so lacking in spiritual understanding to know the power of prayer. That is why secular politicians and pundits often ridicule the profession of prayers for others, claiming they do nothing. We know better. We know this for two reasons. First, God has promised us that prayer is effective. Second, we have seen that effectiveness in our own lives. While others may attribute it to chance, we know that God’s hand is over all. We know that God’s will is preeminent in creation, and God has shown us that our prayers make a difference in His will for us. *“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”* (James 5:16).

Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matthew 6 by sharing with them a model prayer. Read Matthew 6:9-13, where Jesus began by saying, *“In this manner, therefore, pray:”* Consider the components that are

contained in this simple petition to God. **First**, praise to His hallowed name. **Second**, an acknowledgment that the disposition of every petition we make ultimately will be answered in accord with His will. **Third**, the petitions themselves, both physical and spiritual in nature. Requests for help for ourselves, and help (or intercessions) made for others as well. **Fourth**, a final acknowledgement of God's preeminence in the world.

This model prayer is not given to us merely to recite by rote. It is to teach us to pray. It is simple. Sometimes our prayers are much more complex. But this is a good place to start. If you want a more personal example of Jesus' prayers, look to John 17 where our Lord first prayed for Himself, then for His immediate followers, and finally for you and me.

The intercessions Jesus made for us in John 17 are an important part of prayer, and an example we must follow. This accomplishes so much for those who are the subject of our petitions. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, *"Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* It is God's desire that all be saved. This should be our desire as well. Praying for each other helps a great deal to accomplish this in our lives. Paul wrote that we are to be *"praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints"* (Ephesians 6:18).

Nothing is off limits in our prayers for ourselves and our intercessions for others. We pray for families, we pray for those caught in inopportune circumstances, we pray for those who are ill or injured, for those who are poor or oppressed, for those who are troubled or in mourning. We express thanksgiving for the blessings and providence of God. We pray when things seem bleakest, knowing full well the power of the Almighty and His care for all of us.

Introspection is needed here. Each of us need to examine our prayer life to determine whether there is room for improvement. For example, Paul wrote simply, *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Is your prayer life what it needs to be? Are you sufficiently involved with others in your spiritual family to be effective in your intercessions on their behalf? Are you diligent and organized, ensuring that the spiritual needs of your brethren are lifted up to God?

It may be a simple prayer list, or it may be a resolve to pray to God at certain times a day. Daniel is a great example here. The king had written a law that prohibited his prayers to the Almighty. We are told, *"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days"* (Daniel 6:10). Whatever it takes may we all be diligent in our prayers!

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Esteeming Each Other (9)

The key to esteeming each other is humility. If I am proud, my attention and interest is in myself. Pride associates with selfishness. However, if I am humble, my attention and interest typically will be in others. I see their value equal to, even exceeding my own. My humility makes me selfless. At least, that is God's intention.

We are not talking here about self-hatred or despair. It is the realization that the value of another equals my own, and therefore my duty is to positively impact their lives. If you consider it, such actions reciprocated benefit all. I look out for multiple others, and all of them (having the same values) look out for me!

Consider the example Paul gave, writing about the care shown by a husband to his wife. *"So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated*

his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church” (Ephesians 5:28-29). The husband’s love is to be selfless. He esteems and values his wife and makes her welfare and happiness his work. This is an example of esteeming that should be common in the disciple’s life.

We seek the welfare of family, friends, neighbors, strangers and enemies. We acknowledge their value, and do what we can to be a blessing to them. Our Lord expects such behavior from us. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:43-45). This applies to everyone with which we come into contact, but especially our brothers and sisters in Christ! “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Philippians 2:3).*

The scripture is full of God’s admonitions for us to humble ourselves. A good summary statement is offered by the prophet Micah. *“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8). Justness and mercy are both attributes that emanate from selflessness, and a humble walk is defined here as submission to God’s will. This accurately represents a true child of God!*

The practice of humility greatly impacts our relationship with each other. For example, Paul tells us that we are to bear with one another and to forgive one another (cf. Colossians 3:13), these coming from the selfless esteem we have as a result of a humble demeanor. *“Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For ‘He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:8-12).*

Contrast humility with worldly pride and selfishness. We are told that God, *“scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34). Self-exaltation is ludicrous as we consider our place as humans, created by God — and accept the reality that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). King Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man alive in his time, was humbled by God. Jehovah took his kingdom away for a season. The king lost his reason, becoming as an animal. After a time, Nebuchadnezzar had his reason and his kingdom returned by God. His testimony, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down” (Daniel 4:37).*

Consider the destructive nature of selfishness and pride in the local church. It will lead to anarchy, strife and division. For an example, read of willful Diotrephes (cf. 3 John 9-11). But as we esteem others more highly than ourselves (cf. Philippians 2:3) we show that esteem by being agreeable, considerate, charitable, friendly, interested and kind. We practice love for one another, following the example of Jesus Christ, *“who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).*

In summary. As Christians, *“Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).*



The Sweet Counsel of a Friend (10)

“Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man’s friend gives delight by hearty counsel” (Proverbs 27:9). Men have always understood and benefitted from the advice of others. That is, if it is good advice. You may remember Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, who inherited the reign of his father in Israel. When he ascended the throne, he was told by the *“whole assembly of Israel”* to *“lighten the burdensome service of your father”* with the promise if he did so, *“we will serve you”* (1 Kings 12:1-4).

Rehoboam asked his father’s advisors what to do. They told him to grant the people’s request, telling him if he did, *“then they will be your servants forever”* (7). Instead of following their sage advice, he instead listened to his peers, who lacked the wisdom the elders supplied. The young men suggested he say, *“And now, whereas my father put a heavy yoke on you, I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!”* (11). This was a direct cause of the northern tribes rejecting him in favor of Jeroboam. It led the chronicler of the Kings to write, *“So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day”* (19).

Good advice for the child of God comes from heavenly wisdom. *“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy”* (James 3:17). It comes from those who have been long immersed in the word of God, and have through experience, age, and prayer developed an awareness of how best to apply God’s will to any particular circumstance. This is why Paul emphasized that an elder must not be *“a novice”* (1 Timothy 6:1) and *“sober-minded”* *“self-controlled”* and *“holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught”* (Titus 1:5-9) among other qualifications.

That is not to say that a Christian has to be of a certain age or experience, or have a certain position to be able to offer sage advice. In fact, anyone who has a good knowledge of God’s will and a workable perception of the problem can share good advice with his fellow brother or sister in Christ. Consider God’s promise, *“The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail”* (Isaiah 58:11). Simply put, good advice is godly advice. It is advice that is informed by God’s word!

Here we revisit Proverbs 27:17, *“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another”* (ESV). God intends that we be willing to advise our brothers and sisters, and shows that such advice is a way for us to edify one another. We are not talking about being a “know it all”, or a *“busybody in other people’s matters”* (1 Peter 4:15). Often a brother or sister in Christ can be floundering, and a gentle piece of sagacity is needed and greatly appreciated by them in their struggles or confusion.

One challenge we face is a willingness to accept advice from others. Misplaced pride or willfulness is a problem. Every call to repent that is refused or ignored is a piece of advice refused. Consider the reception to Paul’s words as an example, *“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent”* (Acts 17:30). In response to Paul’s call we are told there were three responses: Some mocked Paul, some delayed, *“However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and other with them”* (Acts 11:34). Remember the wise man’s words, *“Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety”* (Proverbs 11:14).

Consider how important it is for us to be willing to help others in this way. Especially when a person’s soul is at stake. *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ”* (Galatians 6:1-2). It is not appropriate to say “who am I to talk”, or to keep silent when a soul is in any way in need. It shows a lack of love to be unwilling to share God’s wisdom to your brother or sister.

Consider wise counsel taken in the Old Testament. Pharaoh’s acceptance of Joseph’s counsel (Genesis 41); the advice Jethro gave to Moses (Exodus 18); Eli’s guidance of young Samuel (1 Samuel 3); Mordecai’s warning to Esther (Esther 4); and Joshua’s challenge to Israel (Joshua 24). In all of these cases good godly

advice was given and followed, saving lives and encouraging spiritual growth. This is one reason for God's determination that His people establish intimate and loving relationships as brethren.

With this in mind, read Paul's advice to the Corinthians and consider it good advice for you as well. *"Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain"* (1 Corinthians 15:1-2).

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Hospitality! (I I)

Our discussion of the love we are to have for each other is continued with the consideration of hospitality. The Greek word for hospitable is *philoxenos* and consists of two parts: *philo* indicates love or affection; and *xenos* is the Greek word for stranger. A love for strangers. It was used in Bible times to indicate a fondness of guests, or to be given to hospitality.

This is a characteristic to which God gives great emphasis. It was an integral part of ancient culture, and its value is shown time and again in scripture. Both in teaching and example. *"But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is pleased"* (Hebrews 13:16). When we speak of hospitality, it is not limited only to strangers. In fact, it is an important part of our relationship with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a part of the intimacy God wants us to develop. *"Be hospitable to one another without grumbling"* (1 Peter 4:9).

God has specifically commanded us to be hospitable. *"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality"* (Romans 12:10-13). This has always been God's expectation of His people. Under the Old Covenant He put it to the Israelites in this way, *"And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God"* (Leviticus 19:33-34). This is an aspect of the holiness that is to be a mark of God's children. *"I am the LORD your God."*

Hospitality is so important it is described as a litmus test, separating the faithful from the ungodly. In Matthew 25, Jesus said the faithful are those who showed kindness to strangers: *"For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me"* (Matthew 25:35-36) ... (40) *"Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."* The entire text is (31-46).

Regarding hospitality as a family in Christ, the Holy Spirit is clear in supplying examples. Paul was a frequent recipient of this. In Philippi a newly baptized Christian named Lydia said to Paul and Silas, *"If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay"* (Acts 16:15). Later in the same city Paul and Silas were imprisoned. We are told that the jailor after obeying the gospel, *"brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household"* (Acts 16:34). In Thessalonica, it seems that Paul and his companions resided in the house of a Christian named Jason (cf. Acts 17:5-9), and Acts 18 notes his residing in the house of Priscilla and Aquila. *"So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tent-makers"* (Acts 18:3).

One wonderful aspect of hospitality is though it is a physical activity, by offering such physical benefit to faithful children of God, you participate in a spiritual relationship or fellowship. This is taught negatively in John's second epistle (9-11), *"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you*

and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” It is taught positively by Paul in Philippians 4:15-17, “Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account.”

We can show hospitality in many ways. We can take a meeting preacher out for dinner, or have him stay in our home. We can let brethren passing through reside in our spare bedroom. We can help a needy brother or sister by supplying food or shelter for a more lengthy period of time. Often our hospitality has an aspect of benevolence, as we are able to express our love for one who has a specific need. It must be an outgrowth of our love for each other. Jesus said, *“When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just”* (Luke 14:12-14).

Hospitality is one of the most joyous ways to strengthen one another. It is of God’s design. God created man as a social creature, and by associating with brethren we each become stronger and better able to serve Him!

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Physical Considerations in Our Relationship (12)

A fact of life we all face is our inevitable decline. The Bible says, *“...it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment...”* (Hebrews 9:27). While some die due to unforeseen circumstances, most see it coming through age, or a failure of health.

It is not a surprise that God has accommodated this truth in His instructions to His children. His call for us to love one another is specially challenged when the object of that love becomes more vulnerable or needy. There are numerous examples found in scripture of such circumstances. And it often does not involve age, as other physical circumstances in life can impact our service to one another.

One example of this service is found early in the existence of the Lord’s church. While the Christians remained situated in Jerusalem (Acts 6), it became necessary to take action to ensure the welfare of the widows of their number. The passage reveals God’s provision, a *“daily distribution”* of aid to them. No doubt this would include food, but there is no indication it was limited to it. The reason for Luke noting the practice is to point out a problem. The Hellenist widows were being neglected. While the specific reason for this neglect is a matter of speculation, the apostles determined it had to stop, and took steps to ensure their care. Seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, were appointed to ensure the inequity was solved.

Another example of help supplied to widows is found in Paul’s instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5. In this passage another truth of God is revealed. While there are certainly circumstances when a congregation collectively (using the resources afforded by the collection) can act to help, the main responsibility is to us as individuals. Note verse 16, *“If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.”*

There are numerous passages that establish this truth. For example, James 1:27, *“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”* The context, and even the language of the verse itself (*“oneself”* — a singular pronoun), shows the individual nature of this responsibility before God. Using this text, we might note that the collective righteousness or faithfulness of the group (local church) does not preclude our own individual judgment before God. While engaging with others in unscriptural activities might negatively impact your

standing with God, it is clear that you can't get to heaven riding on the coattails of others! *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10). Another text that shows the individual aspect of our consideration for one another is Jesus' teaching about the Samaritan who helped his fellow traveler, Luke 10:25-37). This illustrates God's command to each of us **individually** to love, and be neighborly.

While widows are a good example, as well as the orphans of James 1:27, there are many who may need our individual help. It may be because of some devastating natural occurrence. Hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters come to mind. An example was the famine which took place in Judea, prophesied by Agabus in Acts 11:28. (Note that while limitations are placed upon what the church collectively does in the matter of benevolence, no such limitation is given to the individual. *"So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" And he said, 'He who showed mercy on him.'* Then Jesus said to him, *"Go and do likewise."* (Luke 10:36-37). The showing of love and mercy to the needy is always a good thing to do!

Other circumstances would include illness, the loss of a spouse or family member, indigence (a state of extreme poverty), and any other situation that would require our physical assistance.

We live on the earth for only a short period of time, and the earth is the place where God determines our loyalty and worthiness of spiritual reward. Jesus affirmed the importance of this when He foretold the judgment, *"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"* (Matthew 25:37-40).

Remember Paul's words, *"But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part **which lacks it...**"* (1 Corinthians 12:24). Whatever need our brother has, physical or spiritual, we should seek to fill!

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My Individual Responsibility to Accept Your Friendship (13)

Each of these articles in past weeks have emphasized our responsibility to help each other. At this point we recognize the importance of expressing love for our neighbor, and the emphasis that the Lord places on our good treatment of other brethren. The imperative of love is what divides the righteous from the unrighteous. The Lord emphasized this truth, distinguishing between two groups as He talked of future judgment. His statement, *"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world"* (Matthew 25:34), was directed at those who were benevolent and loving to others. A peculiar part of our culture is the pride (or perhaps other motivations) that cause some to refuse the help or friendship of others. This should never be the case with a Christian. Why would we ever put an obstacle in the way of another's potential reward in Judgment?

Hopefully we will be quick to offer friendship, care, benevolence and hospitality to those we love. We should be quick to ask, "What can I do?" And to *"rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep"* (Romans 12:15). Consider the very next verse of that context, where Paul admonishes the Romans, *"Be of the same mind toward one another..."* (16). If we are ready to help our brothers, but unwilling to ask for or receive the same from them, how can we be described as being of the same mind? Part of being gracious is our willing reception of the help offered by our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should not let pride, or a desire "not to be burden" to impede their efforts to do what God expects of all of us.

Consider the following verses from the perspective of the one receiving friendship and help from another. We use them to prove how important it is for us to DO, but when it is done to us, we have a part to play as well!

Philippians 2:3-4: *“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”*

Hebrews 13:16: *“But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”*

Proverbs 19:17: *“He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, and He will pay back what he has given.”*

This was a constant theme of Jesus’ life and teaching. He came to minister to man, both physically and spiritually. To be His disciple, we must emulate Him. It is interesting that not only was Jesus giving, He was taking. He and His band were itinerant. When one proclaimed a willingness to follow Him *“wherever You go.”* Jesus responded, *“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head”* (Matthew 8:20). Jesus was supported by followers wherever he went. Interestingly, He expected it! His graciousness in receiving the support doesn’t change the fact that He admonished His followers to offer such help. *“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them”* (John 13:14-17).

We need self-reflection. Is it hard for us to accept help from our brethren? Part of maturity is the realization that it is better to give than to receive. But someone has to be on the receiving end too. It is reciprocal, after all!

Our series of lessons have established the responsibility the Lord has given us to extend our friendship and love to others. We are to strengthen each other. Actively show our love for one another. Pray for, esteem, and advise each other as brothers and sisters. We are to be hospitable and benevolent. And we know that in the end, we will give account for how we have treated each other and the world at large.

Looking at it from the other side, each of us need love, we need prayers, we need support, advice and the benevolence and hospitality that our brethren supply. This is nothing to be ashamed of, and we must not let our pride cause us to deny our needs. The great apostle Paul was an example for us in this. He requested help. *“Get Mark, and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry”* (cf. 2 Timothy 4:9-16). He also graciously accepted the help that his brethren offered to him. *“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you... for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now”* (Philippians 1:3-5).

God has supplied our brethren to befriend us! Accept the benefits that friendship provides!