

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

Fellowship

INTRODUCTION:

- I. One of the most noticeable characteristics of the New Testament church – certainly a characteristic that was even noticed by the enemies of the Lord’s church – was the sense of closeness among all those who were disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - A. In fact, immediately after the establishment of the church in the second chapter of Acts, we have this being said about the Lord’s followers –
"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42)
 1. Today, many churches place great importance to being true to the Word of God, observing the Lord's Supper, and being fervent in prayer.
 - a. These things are certainly important.
 2. But what about "fellowship"?
 - a. Fellowship is often defined as joint participation, or a sense of oneness in which there is genuine care and concern for others.
 - b. Do we really understand this facet of the Lord's church?

- b. Are we practicing it in a way consistent with the example of the early church?
- B. The elders and deacons have been having some wonderful discussions on the subject of fellowship, and some really great lessons have come from those meetings.
 1. But my purpose in these lessons will be a little different.
 2. Rather than spend a lot of time discussing when we can extend fellowship to others, and when it would be inappropriate to do so, I want to focus more on the genuine NEED for fellowship among us as believers.
- C. And so, beginning with this lesson...
 1. I want to examine the subject of "fellowship" in the light of the Scriptures – not the typical lessons on fellowship – but a short series of lessons designed to help us not only understand WHAT fellowship is, but even more so to understand WHY it's so vitally important to you and me as Christians.
 2. I want us to explore the uniqueness of our life together as members of the body of Christ, and help us all learn how we can be brought even closer together as a people than perhaps we've ever been before.
 3. And so, let's begin.

BODY:

- I. One of the biggest enemies to fellowship and a sense of oneness among fellow believers is the enemy of self-centeredness.
 - A. Have you ever wondered how people who are not members of this congregation view us?
 1. Have you ever wondered how people who just drop in to visit our worship services think of us?
 - a. Someone who perhaps has never attended a worship service here before.
 - b. Someone who is looking closely at a number of things, such as:
 - (1) How we relate to one another when we assemble for worship.
 - (2) How we interact with each other after the assembly.
 - (3) How we treat strangers – someone we don't know, and perhaps have never seen before.
 - c. What would be that person's opinion of us?
 2. Years ago a group of researchers asked and were granted permission to conduct a study of several congregations among churches of Christ, and here's what THEY discovered about most of these congregations.

- a. The great majority of members in nearly every congregation knew a very small percentage of the people.
 - (1). In some congregations, especially the larger ones, those who gathered for worship were mostly an anonymous group of worshippers.
 - b. There was a definite lack of closeness – the kind of closeness needed among a people who are truly interested in bearing one another's burdens.
 - (1). In many instances, the members of these congregations expressed little interest in becoming more involved in each other's lives.
 - c. In other words, they came to worship only for the sake of their own spiritual life and their own personal salvation – in fact, one researcher concluded, "Many go to church as they would go to the movie theater."
3. The bottom line was this:
- a. The churches that were analyzed consisted of members who were "self-centered."
 - b. And as a result, very little fellowship of any sort was taking place!

B. Now, please don't jump to conclusions.

1. I am NOT suggesting that same condition exists here.
2. I don't really think it does.
3. But as we grow in number, the potential is there for losing the kind of fellowship we should experience.
4. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to help us identify this tendency toward "self-centeredness," and do what we can to keep it from destroying the spiritual fellowship God would have us experience in this congregation.

II. So, let's ask: What are some reasons for "self-centeredness" among God's people?

A. One reason for this tendency of "self-centeredness" comes from our own culture.

1. Most of us lived through the "Decade of Social Rebellion" of the 1960's.
 - a. Following on the heels of the "Decade of Social Rebellion" was the "Me Decade" of the 70's was largely characterized by self-centered attitudes and self-indulgent behavior.
2. It was a time in which there was...

- a. A rapid rise of crime against others – including rape, theft, assault, and murder.
 - b. An increase in the use of drugs and alcohol as a way of escape.
 - c. A turn to philosophies and religions that promoted an unhealthy preoccupation with SELF:
 - (1). Such as Transcendental Meditation (TM), and Yoga.
 - (2). Not to mention all the interest in Eastern religions
 - d. And certainly an emphasis on consumerism and materialistic gain
3. One of the songs that topped the charts in 1969 – on the cusp of the "Me Decade" of the 70's – was Frank Sinatra's hit, *I Did It My Way*. Remember the words?

And now, the end is near, and so I face, the final curtain.

My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain.

I've lived, a life that's full, I've traveled each and every highway.

And more, much more than this, I did it my way.

4. That decade was followed in the 1980's by the "Decade of Greed."

- a. And sadly, these cultural trends have produced many self-centered people in their wake.
5. Because we live in a highly mobile society, our association with others is constantly in flux – even in the church.
 - a. New families move in, and others move away.
 - b. Some live sizable distances from the place of worship and from each other.
 - c. These facts don't PREVENT us from having fellowship, they just make it easier to become unintentionally isolated.
 6. The 1990's brought in the "Technology Decade." But even the technology that has been designed to bring us closer together, can easily move us apart.
 - a. Phones, email, etc., greatly increase our ability to communicate.
 - b. But we can become stretched out so thin through such technology that we never have time to develop any meaningful relationships.
 7. While societal trends may be nourishing the spirit of self-centeredness, I believe God has designed the church to point us in a different direction.

III. When we look at the basic function of the body of Christ, one of the first things we should see is that the Lord designed it in such a way to PREVENT a sense of self-centeredness.

A. Just look at all the passages of scripture directed to first century saints to encourage a sense of closeness.

1. The apostle Peter wrote, *“Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.”* **(1 Peter 4:9)**
2. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians, *“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.”* **(1 Corinthians 12:26-27)**
3. James, the Lord’s brother, says, *“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)**
4. He also wrote, *“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)**
5. Paul wrote to the church in Colossee and said, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing*

one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Colossians 3:16)

6. And to the churches located throughout the region of Galatia, the apostle Paul said, *“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! “ (Galatians 5:13-15)*

- B. This sense of oneness and closeness – this sense of true fellowship – was certainly seen among Christians in the first century.
 1. For example, consider the newly established church in Jerusalem.
 - a. **Acts 2:42-47** – *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 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, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

2. As the gospel spread into other regions, this sense of closeness was found among God’s people there – such as the church in Antioch.
 - a. **Acts 11:27-30** – *“And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”*
3. This same sense of oneness and mutual care and concern was also seen in the churches across the Aegean sea in Macedonia.
 - a. **2 Corinthians 8:1-5** – *“Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes,*

and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.”

4. This same sense of care and concern was seen among the churches in neighboring Achaia.
 - a. **Romans 15:25-28** – *“But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.”*
- C. It should certainly come as no surprise that this sense of oneness and care and concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ was taught by the Lord Himself.
 1. Jesus wanted those who choose to follow Him to understand that the Lord’s kingdom consists of those who love both God AND their brethren.

a. **Matthew 22:35-40** – *“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

2. From this, we understand that the fellowship we enjoy in the church is both "vertical" and "horizontal."

a. We have fellowship – a sense of oneness – with God.

(1) That's a "vertical" relationship – He's our "Father in Heaven."

b. We also have fellowship – a sense of oneness – with other Christians.

(1) This is a "horizontal" relationship – They are our "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ."

c. However, we need to guard against getting these VERTICAL and HORIZONTAL relationships out of balance.

- (1) Overemphasizing our VERTICAL relationship with God can lead us to neglect or become insensitive to the needs of others.
- (2) And likewise, an undue emphasis on our HORIZONTAL relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ can lead us to neglect our relationship with God.

CONCLUSION:

- I. And so, we're launching a brief study about fellowship so that we can understand what it is, and how we can make it what the Lord always intended it to be.
 - A. In future lessons, we want to examine the following:
 1. The kind of fellowship that those of us in the Lord's church need to be enjoying.
 2. The spiritual activities that the Lord designed to nurture fellowship in the body of Christ.
 3. Elements necessary to preserve our fellowship.
 4. Biblical limitations on the extent of our fellowship.
- II. But for now, here are some practical suggestions that will enhance our ability to provide the proper fellowship:

- A. I need to do all this as much as anyone else here!
1. Learn the names of EVERY member (make use of the church directory!)
 - a. Some people, like me, are notorious for suddenly forgetting names. I've embarrassed myself more than once – as some of you know all too well.
 - b. But now, I no longer have an excuse – not that I really had one anyway.
 - c. We not only have a bulletin board with the pictures and names of members of this congregation, but we also have a wonderful pictorial directory.
 - d. So, let's take the time to learn names, and associate names with faces.
 2. Take notice of the cares and the joys of fellow Christians (listen to the announcements!) of those who are sick, out of town, or just plane missing from our assemblies for one reason or another.
 - a. Pray for those with special needs, mentioning them by name in your private prayers
 3. Allow yourself to have an "approachable personality" (where people feel comfortable in your presence).

- a. Allow yourself to have the kind of "transparent lifestyle" the apostle Paul talked about in his second letter to the Corinthians (where you are not afraid to let others know the "real you")
 - b. Paul said, *O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open. (2 Corinthians 6:11-13)*
- B. By just taking these few steps, your relationship with others in this congregation will improve remarkably.
1. You will not only KNOW others better, you will also BE KNOWN better.
- III. I want to close with this final admonition.
- A. In his classic poem from the 17th century, John Donne ("*Dun*") wrote this:
 1. *No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man's death*

diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls it tolls for thee. – John Donne

- B. But Donne (“*Dun*”) wasn’t the first to express this thought.
1. Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote, *For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.* **(Romans 14:7)**
 2. This simply means that each and every one of us touch the lives of others – whether in life or in death.
 - a. The question is not IF we touch the lives of others, but rather HOW we touch the lives of others.
- C. How is YOUR life touching the lives of others?
1. If you’ve never obeyed the gospel of Christ, your life is touching others in a very negative way by telling them that surrendering your life to Jesus Christ in complete obedience is not all that important to you.
 - a. Not only are YOU running the risk of being lost eternally, those you’re influencing are also running the risk of being lost.
 2. And if you’re a child of God, but are doing things contrary to the will of God, your life is touching others in a very negative way as well – telling them that it’s not all that important to remain absolutely faithful to the Lord.

- a. Once again, you and those you are influencing are in danger of losing your souls.
3. It's not worth it. It's not worth YOU losing YOUR soul, and it's certainly not worth being the cause for OTHERS losing THEIRS.
4. While there's still time, why not do whatever you need to do to save your OWN soul, and be the right kind of influence in helping to save the souls of others as well?