

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

Freedom In Fellowship

INTRODUCTION:

I. We have been studying the subject of FELLOWSHIP in the Lord's church – the body of Christ – and have entitled this study as "OUR LIFE TOGETHER."

A. In PREVIOUS lessons we've seen:

1. Fellowship is both VERTICAL and HORIZONTAL.

a. We have VERTICAL FELLOWSHIP with God our Father, and with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and with the Holy Spirit who has revealed God's word through the divinely inspired Scriptures.

b. And we have HORIZONTAL FELLOWSHIP with one another – our brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. We've also discovered that God intends for His people to have the same CLOSE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS in the local church that we would see in a NURTURING, LOVING FAMILY – because that's what we are: WE'RE FAMILY.

a. And because we ARE A FAMILY, we have mutual care and concern for one another.

3. And then in our LAST lesson we learned that there is simply NO LIFE OUTSIDE OF THE BODY OF CHRIST – the CHURCH.
 - a. Not only is Christ the SAVIOR of the body, He also provides DIRECT spiritual NOURISHMENT to the body (the church) through His words and through the teachings and writings of the inspired apostles contained in the New Testament.
 - b. And, the Lord provides INDIRECT spiritual NOURISHMENT and WARMTH when members of the local church use their God-given talents and abilities to teach and exhort, to care for, and to minister to the needs of ONE ANOTHER.
 - (1). Because of this, we learned that as members of the body of Christ, we are INTER-DEPENDENT – we are all DEPENDENT on ONE ANOTHER.
 - c. Therefore, if we fail to use the gifts God has given us, then the local church is not able to edify itself and reach the level of spiritual maturity the Lord expects.
- B. However in THIS lesson we want to further expand on the subject of fellowship by taking a close look at our FREEDOM IN FELLOWSHIP.
 1. What do we mean by “FREEDOM IN FELLOWSHIP?”
 2. Simply this.

- a. The kind of fellowship the LORD wants us to enjoy is one that is FREE of JUDGMENT and SUSPICION, and FREE to EXPRESS ITSELF in keeping with the Scriptures.
 - b. However, for THAT kind of fellowship to TRULY FLOURISH in a local congregation, there are certain RESTRAINTS we must exercise in our fellowship with one another.
 - c. If we fail to properly USE our FREEDOM we may end up DESTROYING the fellowship we enjoy, which will ALWAYS lead to DIVISION and to HEARTACHE caused by that division.
3. Therefore, in this lesson, we want to examine the NATURE of our freedom in Christ and learn how it AFFECTS our fellowship with one another.

BODY:

- I. Let's begin by examining the TRUE NATURE of our FREEDOM in Christ.
 - A. The Scriptures tell us that we enjoy REAL FREEDOM in Christ.
 1. Jesus offered this kind of FREEDOM to His disciples.
 - a. **John 8:31-32** – *Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.*

(32) And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

b. **John 8:36** – *Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.*

2. The apostle Paul ALSO taught that Christ has given us FREEDOM or LIBERTY.

a. **Galatians 5:1** – *Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.*

3. And James, the Lord's brother, described the New Testament gospel of Christ as the "PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY."

a. **James 1:25** – *“But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”*

B. But what does it MEAN to have liberty or freedom in Christ?

1. Does this mean we are TOTALLY FREE, without ANY RESTRICTIONS of ANY KIND?

a. Does it mean that we are free to "do our own thing"?

b. Does it mean that we have no responsibilities to others?

c. Does it mean that we are free from having to be concerned about others?

- d. Of course not!
2. We need to properly understand the CONTEXT of the freedom we are able to enjoy in Christ Jesus.
- a. In **John 8**, Jesus was promising freedom from sin.
 - b. In **Galatians 4**, the apostle Paul was speaking of the fact that we have been LIBERATED or FREED from the restrictive YOKE OF BONDAGE which was the Old Testament Law of Moses.
 - (1). In other words, we are not longer under the OLD LAW, or OLD TESTAMENT, but are living in FREEDOM and enjoying LIBERTY in Christ through the GOSPEL of Christ – the NEW TESTAMENT.
 - c. And in **James 1**, James tells us that spiritual blessings can only come through remaining faithful to this PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY – the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ contained in the NEW TESTAMENT.
- C. The TRUTH is that we have been set FREE, but we have been set FREE for a PURPOSE.
- 1. The apostle Paul told saints among the churches throughout Galatia that we are FREE, but that we are free to SERVE one another IN LOVE.

- a. **Galatians 5:13-14** – *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. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*
 2. However, the apostle Paul understood that there is a very real DANGER that we might ABUSE our liberty and allow our FLESHLY NATURE to rise to the surface and DESTROY the fellowship we have with one another.
 - a. This happens when we push our OWN AGENDA, or when we force our OWN BELIEFS on others, destroying the peace and unity in the body of Christ.
 3. When that occurs, the body of Christ turns on ITSELF.
 - a. **Galatians 5:15** – *But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!*
 - b. Paul said if we MISUSE our LIBERTY in the body of Christ, we will *"BITE and DEVOUR one another,"* and the end result is that we will eventually be *"CONSUMED by one another!"*
- II. So, how do we BALANCE our freedom so that we never MISUSE the liberty we have in Jesus Christ? How do we keep from destroying the peace and

unity in the body of Christ, especially when we are so PASSIONATE about our OWN beliefs?

A. The church at Corinth was troubled by this very thing.

1. There were apparently those in the church who felt they had certain FREEDOMS in DOCTRINAL AREAS, but in exercising those freedoms they were actually causing DIVISION among members of the church.
2. The doctrinal issue dividing brethren in the church at Corinth was over the eating of meats that, in all probability, had been sacrificed to idols.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 8:4-8** – ... *concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. 7 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.*

3. The city of Corinth during the time of Paul was the site of dozens of pagan temples where all sorts of immoral and idolatrous practices were performed during the worship of pagan gods.
 - a. One of those practices concerned offering animal sacrifices to these pagan gods.
 - b. There were so many animal sacrifices that there was an EXCESS of meat, which eventually was taken to the market place and sold to the public.
 - c. In the church at Corinth there were SOME who saw NOTHING WRONG with eating meat that may have been offered to an idol because they knew these pagan gods were only in the imagination of the worshippers.
 - (1). There was only ONE GOD and only ONE LORD, JESUS CHRIST.
 - (2). In fact, SOME members of the church in Corinth were SO CONVINCED it was okay to eat meat offered to an idol, that they could even eat it IN THE IDOL'S TEMPLE!
 - (3). That being REALLY BOLD!
 - d. However, there were OTHERS in the church at Corinth who could NOT, in all good conscience, eat ANY MEAT that had

been offered to a pagan god, believing they would be sanctioning idolatry.

4. The abuse of LIBERTY came when those who felt they COULD eat meat offered to an idol DID SO in such FLAGRANT and OPEN MANNER that they didn't care about the beliefs of those who felt the practice was WRONG.
 - a. In fact, Paul says those who did NOT eat meat sacrificed to idols were so DISTURBED by all this that they were in danger of violating their own consciences by actually EATING MEAT – apparently, just to keep from looking foolish.
 - b. **1 Corinthians 8:9-10** – *But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?*
5. Paul said this CALLOUSED and INSENSITIVE ATTITUDE toward their brethren was not only a sin against THEM, but a sin against CHRIST.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 8:11-12** – *And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But*

when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

6. Therefore, the apostle Paul said he would personally go to ANY EXTREME to avoid harming the conscience of a brother in Christ.

a. **1 Corinthians 8:13** – *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

7. Why would he go to such an EXTREME to avoid harming the conscience of a weak brother?

a. **1 Corinthians 9:19-23** – *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; 22 to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.*

8. Paul sums up this whole issue with these words.

a. **1 Corinthians 10:31 - 11:1** – *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, 33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. 11:1 Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*

B. The apostle Paul addressed a SIMILAR problem among the members of the church in ROME.

1. The apostle Paul understood that some were “weak in the faith” for a COUPLE REASONS

- a. Some are NEW CHRISTIANS and haven’t had time to grow and mature spiritually and therefore lack a proper understanding of the word of God.
- b. Others have simply NEVER MATURED spiritually – their indifference toward studying the word has left them ignorant and “weak.”

2. However, the “weak in faith” that Paul speaks about in the **14th chapter of Romans** are apparently those who have not had time to mature spiritually. Their knowledge and understanding of spiritual things is VERY BASIC at BEST.

3. In fact, the issue in Rome was over those who were keeping ordinances in the Law of Moses that FORBADE eating certain FOODS, keeping of certain HOLY days, refusing to drink ANY strong drink, such as WINE.
4. OTHERS in Rome felt a Christian could eat ANY kind of food, did NOT have to keep the holy days under the Law of Moses, and felt the drinking of WINE was not sinful as long as it didn't lead to drunkenness.
5. These were issues which BOTH SIDES were passionate about, and which could EASILY erupt into a conflict between brethren that could splinter the church into a thousand pieces.
6. So, here's what Paul said.
 - a. **Romans 14:14-21** – *I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

- b. Paul wanted everyone in the church at Rome to understand that SOME brethren there believed, in all GOOD CONSCIENCE, that to engage in certain practices would be A SIN – such as eating meats (since you can never tell if they've been sacrificed to pagan gods), or failing to keep certain holy days, or drinking of any strong drink such as wine.
 - c. And yet, when we completely DISREGARD the SINCERE BELIEFS of our brother or sister in Christ, without even taking time to EXPLAIN why we don't agree, we are no longer walking in love.
 - d. Paul wanted everyone in the church at Rome to understand that the kingdom of God is characterized by RIGHTEOUSNESS and PEACE and JOY in the Holy Spirit.
7. And so, Paul sums it all up by saying:
- a. **Romans 14:19-21** – *Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. 21 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.*

- b. The key to maintaining a proper relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ is to *"pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."*
(Romans 14:19)
 - c. By trying to push our own agenda or by carelessly disregarding the sincere feelings or beliefs of others will ultimately DESTROY the work of God.
- C. So, what does all this mean? How do we make application of all this to our own lives?
- 1. Does this mean that there MAY be times when we need to give up our freedoms, or surrender OUR beliefs by avoiding those things that will FORCE a misinformed brother or sister to participate in something they feel is wrong?
 - 2. The answer is YES!
 - a. But there's one very IMPORTANT thing we need to understand here.
 - b. The apostle Paul is NOT saying we need to surrender TRUTH or compromise TRUTH in areas where God HAS COMMANDED us to do certain things.
 - c. Paul is talking about our being willing to concede, or set aside our freedoms in areas where God has given us the LIBERTY

or FREEDOM to do as we choose – areas where God has NOT commanded, but has left the choice to us.

- d. In other words, when it comes to things that are simply a matter of PERSONAL PREFERENCE, or where we sincerely feel God grants us LIBERTY or FREEDOM, we cannot put OUR liberty or freedom ABOVE the sincere feelings of someone WE consider WEAK in the faith.
- e. They are our brother or sister in Christ, and they're one for whom Christ died.
- f. That's why Paul told the Corinthians – ...*when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. (1 Corinthians 8:12)*

- C. Try to imagine a fellowship of believers where these principles are followed.
 - 1. Rather than trying to always please ourselves, we would make a serious effort to avoid doing anything that might cause someone to be weakened because we are MOST concerned about building one another up and edifying one another.
 - a. We wouldn't just be thinking of our own personal beliefs and practices.

- b. But we would also be concerned about the impact our beliefs and practices might have on others.
2. We would be more patient with those weak in faith – willing even to forego liberties in Christ in order to strengthen our weak brother or sister in Christ.
 - a. We would not try to press issues or ideas on those whose consciences could not allow them to participate.
 - b. Instead, we would seek other ways where we could accomplish the same goals without offending the conscience of those who would otherwise be offended.
 - c. We'll have more to say about THAT in the next lesson.
3. The end result would be a congregation of believers where an atmosphere of love, peace, and unity pervades – an atmosphere in which true Biblical fellowship thrives to the glory of God!

CONCLUSION:

- I. The fellowship we enjoy in Christ is a precious thing, and it's made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.
 - A. Do you remember the words of one of the last prayers of Jesus?
 1. He prayed this on the night when He would be taken in the Garden of Gethsemane and crucified the next morning.

- a. Jesus first prayed for Himself, praising God, His Father in heaven.
 - b. Then He prayed for His disciples, the apostles, that God would keep them from the wicked one and bless them as they go out into the world to preach and teach the gospel of Christ.
 - c. Finally Jesus prayed for us, who would eventually believe in Jesus through the words and teachings of the apostles.
2. Here's what He prayed:
- a. **John 17:20-22** – *"I do not pray for these alone [i.e. "I do not pray just for the apostles"], but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.*
3. The Lord's GREATEST DESIRE is that WE may all be ONE, just as the FATHER and the SON ARE ONE.
4. But the reason WHY Jesus wants us all to be ONE is so THE WORLD may believe that Jesus is GOD-SENT – that Jesus is TRULY the CHRIST, the SON of the LIVING GOD!
- B. Brethren, it's NOT about YOU AND ME.
1. It's NOT about OUR RIGHTS, OUR LIBERTY, OUR FREEDOM.

2. It's about being UNITED TOGETHER in a LOVING and NURTURING FELLOWSHIP so that the WORLD may see us and WANT the LOVE, the JOY and the PEACE we share together in Jesus Christ!
- C. This is why the apostle Paul said THIS about our fellowship.
1. **Philippians 2:1-4** – *Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*
 2. The kind of ONENESS Jesus prayed for is possible when we do the THREE THINGS Paul mentions here:
 - a. When we do NOTHING through SELFISH AMBITION or CONCEIT.
 - b. When we ESTEEM others better than OURSELVES – when we give HONOR to others above ourselves.
 - c. And when we not only look out for our OWN interests, but also for the interests of OTHERS.

3. Is this EASY to do? Absolutely NOT! But it's ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL that we DO IT!
- II. As you think of your own life, what kind of FELLOWSHIP do YOU have with your brothers and sisters in Christ?
- A. Is it like the kind Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Romans 14, and Philippians 2?
1. Are you willing to set aside YOUR OWN personal preferences, YOUR freedoms or YOUR liberty to keep from offending the conscience of someone you consider untaught, or perhaps even weak in the faith?
 2. Do you avoid pressing YOUR AGENDA, or pressing YOUR ISSUES or IDEAS on those whose conscience cannot allow them to participate?
 3. Do you CONSCIOUSLY and DELIBERATELY look out for the interests of OTHERS – especially those whom you consider to be untaught, or perhaps weak in the faith?
- B. If you DO, then doing your part to FULFILL the prayer of JESUS.
1. You're helping to create an atmosphere of unity, joy and peace in this congregation.

2. And you're doing it to the glory of GOD and His Son, JESUS CHRIST!
- III. If you're not a part of this local fellowship – if you've never come to Christ in faith and obedience, and been added by the Lord to His body, the church – then we offer you that opportunity today.
- A. There are some things here you will FIND and some things you WON'T FIND.
 1. You WON'T find PERFECTION in the lives of the members here – we ALL sin and fall short of the glory of God.
 2. But you WILL find a people who LOVE and CARE for one another, who LIFT one another up, who love the LORD, and who try to follow the WORD OF GOD to the best of our ability and understanding.
 - B. If this is the kind of people YOU want to be in fellowship with then let me tell you how you can do that.
 1. If you've never committed your life to Jesus Christ, then come to Christ in FAITH, REPENTING of your past sins, and BE BAPTIZED into Christ for the forgiveness of all your past sins.
 - a. You will not only be added by the Lord to His church – the body of all those who have been redeemed by His blood – but

you can also become a member of this local fellowship of believers.

2. If, after obeying the gospel of Christ, you chose to live your life to please yourself rather than please the Lord, you can come back to the Lord this very day.
 - a. The God of heaven is a MERCIFUL and FORGIVING God.
 - b. **Micah 7:18-19** – *Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. 19 He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*
 - c. God is waiting to forgive you, and Jesus Christ is waiting to take you back into His arms.
3. Perhaps you're a faithful Christian who has moved into this community, or you're visiting and you see the kind of church HERE that you want to be a part of. Then simply let that be known.
 - a. In New Testament times churches in various cities or communities were like a FAMILY.
 - b. They WORKED and WORSHIPPED together.
 - c. They EXHORTED and ENCOURAGED one another.

- d. And they TOOK CARE of one another.
 - e. They were TOGETHER because they were FAMILY.
 - f. And we would like for YOU to become a member of OUR family.
4. Therefore, whatever you NEED or DESIRE may be, we encourage you to come at this time.