

Interpersonal Relationships

**We are called to love, to forgive
and to serve one another**

There are a number of things you can't do on your own. A honeymoon is one of them. Neither can you be a football team or a family. This is also true of God's family, the church. It has never been God's intention that anyone should live the Christian life on his or her own. Instead we are to live together as a part of the family of God.

A number of New Testament references explicitly address those relationships within the church and can be identified by a Greek word usually translated "*each other*" or "*one another*." This word appears over 70 times. It is addressed to Christians, and motivates them to express fellowship in very practical ways. Every Christian is called to live those "*one another*" verses. Here we shall look at three such callings:

1. Called to love one another

It was the scene of the last supper. As the Lord Jesus finished telling His disciples that He would soon return to his Father, He gave them a new command: "Love *one another*, as I have loved you, so you must love *one another*." Then He added, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35).

Notice that the Lord does not give them "a new suggestion" or "a good idea." It is a command, not an option. But what is new about it? Earlier, the Israelites had been given a clear command from God to "love your neighbours" (Leviticus 19:18). But the Lord's command to His disciples involves a new standard: not "love your neighbours as yourself," but "love as I have loved you." Just imagine. Our new model is the love of Christ Himself!

The Lord presents this quality of love as a test before "all men" as to whether or not we are His disciples. We would like to think that we prove our discipleship by interesting and varied church programs, by enthusiastic praise, by correct doctrinal statements, or perhaps by connection with some historical leader or movement.

Without minimizing the importance of wholehearted worship and holding to revealed truth, the force of Christ's statement must be accepted: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love *one another*." Do I love my brothers and sisters in Christ? Do I express this hallmark of true discipleship?

Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that we criticize each other - the way she dresses, the way he expresses himself, how she sings, the way he preaches... Or we spread unconfirmed rumours that run others down. Nothing of this is new. Paul warned the Galatian Christians, "If you keep on biting and devouring *each other*, watch out or you will be destroyed by *each other*" (Galatians 5:15). In days marked by individualism and indifference, God calls us to love one another with unconditional love. What are some characteristics of such love?

- **Tolerance:** Paul urged the Ephesian Christians, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with *one another* in love" (Ephesians 4:2). Why are we called to bear with one another? Simply because it is necessary. It would be wonderful if we were all mature, reasonable, humble, considerate and lovable human beings. But sometimes we are tired, or selfish, or unthoughtful, or immature. Therefore, love requires that we be tolerant in our interactions with one another, not because we don't care about sin or about the truth, but because we are to obey the Lord's command.
- **Respect:** Sometimes as Christians we say very foolish things, and do even worse. We are all human and prone to act in carnal ways. Yet even under these circumstances the Scriptures teach us to show due respect for one another: "Submit to *one another* out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5: 21). We are to love and respect others out of reverence for our dear Saviour.
- **Concern:** Comparing the church with a body, Paul concludes that "its parts should have equal concern for *each other*. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). True Christian love cannot but express itself in genuine concern. Am I really concerned when my brother loses his job? When my sister is taken ill? When a new person arrives at your neighbourhood or visits your local church?

2. Called to forgive one another

A fair amount of space in a computer manual is devoted to trouble shooting - how to identify and correct possible errors and malfunctions. Human relations are much more complex and delicate than computers. So much more can go wrong. We have different tastes, upbringing, and convictions. On top of this we are sometimes tired and short of patience. Therefore we are urged to forgive one another. Holding a grudge against a fellow Christian, regardless of who is to blame, is sin. Ephesians 4:31-32 says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger... Be kind and compassionate to *one another*, forgiving *one another* just as in Christ God forgave you."

What then should we do when we sin against one another? Just forgive and forget? Doesn't that promote unrighteousness? In some areas such as our thought life we offend God alone. At other times we must recognize with the prodigal son that we

have sinned against heaven and also against another (Luke 15:21). In such cases we need to put things right with God and the other person. If a brother sins against me and does not seem to be concerned about it, I am to forgive, not because he deserves it but because I am commanded to do so. This lightens my heart and sets me free to worship and serve. If the other person does not repent, that is a matter between him and the Lord.

Matthew 18 explains what we should do in practice to maintain righteousness in the local church. First meet the brother alone. If he will not listen, take one or two others along. If he still refuses to listen involve the assembly. If he still refuses, the local church should act. Notice that my first step is to look for the offending brother and talk to him in private. Many problems could be solved in a small and clean way if we would just follow Christ's teachings on this matter.

My personal responsibility is to forgive: "Bear with *each other* and forgive whatever grievances you have against *one another*. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). In days marked by conflicts and interpersonal problems, God is calling us to strive for harmony by forgiving one another - as Christ has forgiven us.

3. Called to serve one another

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). On the very night in which Christ was betrayed and handed over to be crucified, He chose to teach His disciples an unforgettable lesson about service. He "took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist... He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciple's feet, drying them with the towel" (John 13:4-5).

We can imagine how the disciples must have felt. Perhaps they were waiting for one of the less influential disciples to get on with the job. Perhaps Peter thought, "I have been given the keys of the kingdom; surely someone else should volunteer to wash our dirty feet." Before criticizing Peter, let's consider our own unworthy thoughts: "I have been in this fellowship for over 10 years; let one of the newcomers do the tedious job. I've done it so many times before and no one ever thanks me. I shall stop and wait for someone else to volunteer." But how did the Lord Jesus conclude this practical lesson? "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash *one another's* feet, I have set you an example" (John 13:16).

The apostle Paul also stressed this point: "you, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve *one another* in love" (Galatians 5:13). To serve one another we must keep our eyes open to see the needs of those around us. We must cultivate genuine concern. We must be ready to respond with a word of encouragement, a friendly visit, a phone call or a letter. Because it is so easy to feel discouraged ourselves, Scripture urges us to "encourage *each other*" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). In days marked by apathy and self-centeredness, God is calling us to serve one another.

Conclusion

The apostle John was an old man when he wrote those last three letters which bare his name. His writings are flavoured by his personal experience of the first half century of Church history – the times of happy expansion, times of persecution, the internal problems and disagreements, the hypocrisy of some, the long doctrinal debates, the many sermons... We can nearly hear him say, with a thoughtful expression on his face, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but *with actions* and *in truth*” (1 John 3:18). How genuine are your interpersonal relationships? As Christians, our relationships should reflect our calling - and we are called to love, to forgive and to serve one another. May we do so “with actions and in truth.”

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