

Healthy, Devoted Relationships

Lord Jesus, You're our Teacher and our Pattern. It is our prayer as we're gathered around You that the seeds of Your Word about devotion to one another would clarify our hearts and our minds and our actions. Our desire is that all of Your Work be done Your Way, in peace and in love and humility, with diligence but with all the sensitivity You had. We want to follow after You in the Way that You functioned in raising up men. Please help us. We trust You that You will. You have not left us without a shepherd, but You are our Shepherd and our Teacher. We're glad that we don't have to shoulder the burden of understanding exactly how everything needs to be. Instead, we can follow the Lamb wherever He goes. We will follow You, Jesus. You'll help us. Please let Your Word increase and reign in our hearts and in our minds. Teach us how to submit to You, Your Spirit, and Your eternal, immutable Word. Amen.

Birth Pains for Each Other

Paul said to the Galatian Christians, "I'm in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." And to the Colossians he said, "I want to fill up in my own flesh the afflictions of Christ as it relates to you, the church, His body." That's passion! He also said that he was "wrestling to present every man perfect in Christ."

That kind of commitment requires more than a dippy-doodle life of sitting in a chair, singing choruses, and then just waiting until the next meeting is called. Shame on you if your life doesn't consist of anything more than that! You're making a serious mistake. Unfortunately, that mistake has been made for generations on all six inhabitable continents in the name of Christ. But it is unbiblical and wrong, so I want to encourage you to snap that habit! Pursue making a difference in people's lives in a real way.

Every last person who reads these words is a priest of God, if he or she is truly a believer. And that calling doesn't have to do with chiming in during a meeting every so often—that's not what a priest is. A priest, as the Bible defines the term, is a servant of God with the assignment of bringing God to man and man to God. That responsibility doesn't mean you are going to *save* anybody! "There is one mediator between God and man, Jesus." I don't mean that anybody can ever be *Jesus* for someone else. But you can do what Paul did: wrestle to present everyone perfect in Christ. Like him, you can be in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in people who are already believers. You can say with him, "I'm in the pains of childbirth until the Anointed One is formed in you—until you are brought into the image and the fullness and grace and freedom of the Son of God. I cannot leave it alone! I'm dying a thousand deaths until I see true Life in you."

Now if you picture yourself solely on the receiving end of that statement, you are making a mistake. It's not that everyone *else* should be in the pains of childbirth for *you*. If that's how you are thinking, then you are walking in the Old Covenant instead of the New. In the Old Covenant you had a core group of mediators out there someplace—a collection of prophets, priests and kings—and you basically sat around and let them serve you. But that's not the way it is in God's New Covenant, where He is building a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:4-10, Revelation 1:6). Active participation in that priesthood is God's intent for *you*.

You'll never know what it means to be free in your own life unless you devote yourself to helping other people know God better. You'll never even know what it means to abide in Christ if you don't live for that purpose. Really, if you think you have a relationship with God and you're not living to bring others closer to Him, then you are self-deceived. On the authority of the Word of God, you don't really have a relationship with Him if you don't have the heart for others that Jesus had.

As Jesus Himself put it, "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." A life of devotion to God's work in the world around you is the fruit and the overflow of abiding in Christ. You're not truly remaining in Him if deep down inside your heart isn't stirring towards that end. You're missing the heart of God in a serious way if you don't genuinely care for others. Your prayer time isn't directed entirely to the God of the Bible! You might spend a lot of time praying, but according to Jesus, abiding in the God of the Bible will yield a clear result: having a heart for serving others and bringing them higher into His ways. That's "bearing much fruit to the Father's glory—fruit that will last."

So, to sum up: having that passionate heart, caring deeply for others, and being involved in their lives means taking risks. We dare not sit back, thinking we're to be the one on the receiving end of that kind of passion. We must thrust forward in faith and in humility—and it does take both. Trusting God and laying down our lives for other people is a rare thing, but it's inseparable from biblical Christianity.

The book of Acts says that the early Christians went everywhere "gossiping" the word of God. The Greek word for "speaking" there is literally "gossiping." Sharing God's word and His love was their heart and passion. They lived for it. So reject the idea that you can sit in your home with a scripture verse hung over your toaster and a plaque on your front door, have a great prayer time in the morning, listen to praise and worship songs all day, and show up at a meeting every now and then, and that's what Christianity is all about. Frankly, you haven't *had* a great prayer time if it doesn't result in a passionate heart to heal the wounds of the broken hearted and to loose the chains of those in bondage to sin. That is the heart of Jesus of Nazareth, and that is *your* heart if you are connected to the Head. It's automatic.

So really stretch yourself. Search deeply within to root out anything that would hinder that kind of heart. Crucify the fear and the selfishness and the lifestyle expectations and the busyness that the world and satan would want to impose on you. Reject any self-righteousness or laziness that would stand in the way. Get rid of all the excuses. Begin by "'fessing up." Then get rid of all the excuses in your life that would keep you from really being about the Father's business.

Jesus actually lives inside of you if you are really born from above, and His heart is consumed by zeal for the Father's house. It's a consuming fire—not a religious, glassy-eyed stare into the heavens every morning followed by a few pious statements at a meeting, offering some platitude or trite religious wisdom. Instead, lay down your life and make a difference, even in unglamorous ways. That's just basic Christianity.

We really have to be about our Father's business, for real, in our own lives, personally—not just as part of some group. We're not talking about a group; we're talking about your personal life. Don't hide behind "I'm a mother" or "I'm this" or "I'm that, and so it won't work for me." All those excuses have been tried. But in the end, it is only the Jesus who lives inside of you being released that threatens satan to no end. Let me encourage you to be that kind of person, by God's grace. With a heart that is open to Him, to let go of everything that stands in your way.

Don't Lord it Over

Now, let me turn that coin over so we can see the other side. As you move in the direction of caring passionately for others' spiritual lives, it's possible to approach it from the wrong angle. Taking *authority* over people's lives isn't what we're talking about. That's a totally erroneous approach to being responsible and passionate to see everyone presented perfect in Christ. Taking authority over others' lives is the gentiles' way. Of all people, Jesus didn't operate out of authoritarian control, and we certainly have no business doing it, either. It's imperative that we keep our heads straight on that point.

For instance, let's say that I really, really want to share something with a certain brother, because I've seen something in his life that seems disturbing. Now, if I'm in it for *myself*, I'm going to force him to hear *me*. But if I'm in it for *him*, I don't care where he hears it or whether he receives what I personally have to say. My ego has nothing to do with it. All I want to see is God glorified in the brother's life. Let's say that ten years ago I offended him in some way. Today, even though he's forgiven me totally, I've still lost enough credibility that he can't quite hear what I'm saying. Somehow there's a communication gap. In that case, he's under no obligation to submit to me and simply accept what I have to say about this matter in his life. He has no obligation whatsoever to submit to me personally. His obligation is to submit to the *Word of God*—to receive God's Word and move ahead in it. If somebody else helps him make those changes by bringing him a Word from heaven that he *can* hear and relate to and receive, then hallelujah! I have no problem with that outcome, because I don't need this brother to affirm me. What I need is for him to affirm *Jesus*.

Sometimes God will even purposefully block our ability to touch a certain person's life just to keep us humble. Thank Him for that. It's a blessing, because we're not in it for ourselves. We're in it to see God's will done in everyone's life. If I personally never say a word to a particular brother because for some reason it just doesn't click, that's okay. I need to be on my face for that man. If God has given me responsibility for him, but he can't hear what I'm saying, then I need to be praying and fasting—and otherwise staying out of it, if necessary. If it comes to that, I should get out of the way rather than clog up everything by being in the middle of it.

Now, Jesus gave us a means of dealing with things that are truly sin in someone's life. He *didn't* say that if I see a sin in a brother, I should go to him and bring it to him...and bring it to him... and bring it to him...and bring it to him. Instead, Jesus said that if I bring the matter to him and for some reason he can't receive it, then the next step is to bring in a few others. That's what Matthew 18 says: "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."

It *doesn't* say that God gave me responsibility for this person, so I need to harass him and badger him and lord it over him, whether it's by being mean to him and telling him what to do, or just by being an incessantly "clanging gong." God never intended our relationships to look that way. He's called me to bring the brother a word if I have to, according to 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18. If he can't hear me, then Jesus said bring two or three others, because maybe one of those other brothers can make the matter clear in a way that I couldn't. If none of those guys can get through, maybe in bringing it to the church—the next step Jesus said to take—there can be clarity.

That's fine, because I'm not in it for me. I don't need to be affirmed. I don't need to be loved, and I don't need to be appreciated. I don't need to be respected. I don't even have to have this person's friendship for my sake. All I want is to see this brother presented perfect in Christ. And whatever it takes to do it is fine, whether it humbles me or brings a more closely knit relationship between us as a result, as it usually does. Whatever the case may be, my only plea before God is that somehow, some way, this person will be everything God wants him to be.

The point is not relationship for its own sake. The point is that God's Glory can be seen in every individual's life. In the process, God builds the relationships. "Unless the Lord builds" the relationship, "the builders labor in vain." We actually prevent the genuine connections from forming when we create an Ishmael by attempting to lock a relationship into place. It's vitally important that our relationships are never built on a desire to have friends or any sort of other selfish motivation. We just have to be passionate to see God's will done in others' lives.

In the Old Testament, we are told that "in building the temple, only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site while it was being built." (1 Kings 6:7). They didn't want to defile the temple with the pound, pound, pound of shaping the stones and making them fit so that they would work in the house just right. The Old Testament temple was a shadow of the church, and that type is very applicable in what I'm saying right now. It is not our job to pound, pound, pound in the temple courts to make a stone just the way we want it. That's not to say we aren't totally and *wonderfully* involved in one another's lives. But be very cautious in the temple of God, no matter how "nice" you might be about it, that in the process of building you are not just lording it over someone's faith by your mere presence in that relationship. This is a very serious matter, because the first side of the coin—the willingness to take risks to see Christ formed in others—can become twisted.

What if you walked into my house and said, "Give me \$50 because we are supposed to have all things in common"? Well, all right. It's no problem for me to give someone \$50 because the scriptures say that if we're really living for Jesus, our money is not our own. But as soon as somebody walks in the door and says "Give me \$50 since we have all things in common," you know you're in trouble. Something is out of whack here! Biblically, from just a pure intellectual standpoint, maybe the facts are right. But as soon as someone uses a scripture to manipulate another person to give, you know it's been twisted. Don't give them \$50 if they come in with that sort of presumption and selfishness and insensitivity! You'll be doing them a disservice if you do. That is not what the scriptures mean when they say that no one counted their possessions their own. It wasn't the Holy Spirit's intent that people would lord it over someone else's walk with God. If someone wants to give you \$50, let it be between them and God, not because you demanded it based on a scripture.

And that's what I'm saying about relationships, too. According to the scriptures, we are supposed to be "joined and knit together by every supporting ligament." But don't presume on that truth by barging into someone's life and demanding that they have a relationship with you. That is not right. That is not what the scriptures teach. If there's sin in someone's heart, pray for them. If you need to speak a word into their life, fine. But if they won't hear you, don't keep pummeling, pummeling, and pummeling.

If you're so sure you're seeing sin that *you're* willing to go to the test, too, by bringing in two or three witnesses, then please go ahead. That is what Jesus taught. But you'll find yourself being a lot more careful about what you bring to people's attention, because you may find out that you're the one in error. And if you are, it would be good for you to find that out.

One time a few years ago a certain person said to me, "You need to do this thing, and I'm sure it is sin in your life that you aren't."

I responded, "Are you sure it's sin?"

"Absolutely I'm sure it's sin," was the reply.

"Well then, please bring two or three witnesses, because I really don't think I can agree with that statement exactly the way it was put."

The person said, "Well, all right, maybe it's not sin, but..." They had this sixth sense that their statement wouldn't fly if two or three witnesses heard it. That's why I think Jesus put that provision into place. Everyone gets an opportunity to see what's actually happening when you bring two or three witnesses.

So do be passionate for other people! But as you go, also be cautious that you don't twist the concept of devotion around, like a man who walks in and says, "Give me \$50 because after all, we have all things in common." If you do, you will make a very serious error and will actually hurt others' walk with God. That kind of misguided devotion won't help them; it will hurt them. It will pressure them, and they'll be responding out of guilt and oppression rather than out of love of God.

I heard someone recently mention being "a resource to build other people's faith, rather than a hammer." A resource is an option, is it not? I mean, if I'm writing a paper, I have a choice whether I'm going to use the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or a quote from the "Today Show" or a computer almanac. Those are resources; those are options. They're not something that is forced on me. I have the ability to draw on resources, but I'm not compelled to. I'm not *forced* to pick one of them. In the same way, we are supposed to be resources for one another. But we are not to be hammers—even sweet hammers! Make sure that you're very open and honest and sincere, and that you're not clinging to anything for yourself. That's an important part of the "wrestling to present one another perfect in Christ" we've been talking about. Certainly "be in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed" in others, but have the right perspective towards it. Don't abuse it in any of the ways that I just mentioned.

Devoted Relationships

Remember the children's rhyme, "Here's the church and here's the steeple; open the door and here's all the people"? That's one philosophy. It is definitely the predominant ecclesiology, the current paradigm of what the church is supposed to be. "Here's the steeple. Here's the meeting. Here are the scheduled services. Here are the programs. Here's the church calendar."

Now, those of us with a little bit higher ecclesiology or church theology would say, "Oh, no. It's the *people*. Church is not a place to go. Jesus said it is not a 'here or there' kingdom; it's 'within you.' Church is not a building. It's not an event or a meeting. It's actually people."

But I'm really asking that we'd consider the church from a little deeper perspective. This won't be news to anyone, perhaps, but let's just put words on it, anyway. The church isn't the steeple *or* the people. The church is *relationships*. You can have a thousand people—or ten thousand, for that matter—and say that the church is the people. You can even insist that you can't go to church, because you are the church. But you know good and well that many people who say that still "go to church." You can hear them Sunday morning at a quarter to nine saying, "Let's get ready to go to church, Sally." It slips right out of their mouths, because it is the truth. They are "going to church." It's not really that they *are* the church. They are still attending something, even though they know better than that. They still haven't seen much of how the church really works.

Martin Luther was one of the biggest proponents of having a priesthood of believers. His teaching was filled with truths about how there is no caste of priests because we are a priesthood. But he didn't *do* anything about his conviction. The priests who were converted from catholicism married nuns, but in reality they continued to function as the priests, except now they were called "preachers" or "pastors." They went on exactly the same as before, marrying and burying, blessing and controlling. What had been the Roman priesthood now became a protestant priesthood known as "ministers." This reformulated priesthood still has nothing in common with the biblical order of things. If you were to look at the book of Acts, you'd see nothing that looks like this protestant version of clergy, but it evolved anyway. Now Luther knew in his mind there was to be a priesthood

of believers, and that truth was one of his serious teachings that shook the world he lived in. But even he didn't know how to *apply* this truth. As far as we know, he didn't apply it during his lifetime.

But the same assessment could be said of the often-heard statement, "Oh, I know for sure that the church isn't the steeple; it is really people." Unfortunately, a lot of people who can say those words don't live them out. In reality, they still go to church. Their "church" consists of events on a calendar.

Maybe a way to break through that faulty thinking and provide greater understanding is this: If the Kingdom is "neither here nor there," but "within you" (Luke 17:20-21), then the only way I can get *into* the Kingdom that Jesus was speaking of is to get *within* you, because that's where the Kingdom is. To get within you, there has to be a living and active word that lays bear the motives of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). We have to "admonish one another daily so that none are hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:12-13). We have to be "joined and knit together by every supporting ligament" (Ephesians 4:16). It has to be *real*. It has to be relationships. Not steeples, not even "peoples," but relationships—that's the issue.

Relationships are the only way that I can really be part of the *ekklesia*, the "called out of God." I don't mean part of the church in the universal sense of whether or not a person is saved. I mean living in the purposes of God as a "city set on a hill that can't be hidden," instead of a bunch of little flashlights scattered over the countryside. Being "compacted together," as Ephesians 4 puts it, is God's intent for us. His heart is to have a body joined and knit together, not a body that is simply scattered, saying the right things, perhaps, yet somehow missing the testimony.

"This is how all men will know you are my disciples"—not *one* way that they will know, but *the* way they will know. Relationships aren't icing on the cake; they are themselves the pivotal issue. "This is how all men will know you are my disciples, by the agape they see you having with each other." It is essential, then, that lives be knit together. The world is waiting to see it.

End Times Readiness

Recently the pastor of a megachurch in the southern US spoke with me. He acknowledged the truth about the church being defined by relationship. In fact he said that if they didn't begin to function that way in the very near term, regardless of the cost, then when the harvest comes in at the very end of the end times, people are going to get slaughtered by the enemy. The new converts are not going to make it, as he put it, "because the current wineskin cannot hold the harvest."

The point that I tried to get across to this pastor was this: the nature of the new wineskin isn't being informally scattered around the city in living rooms and apartment complex clubhouses. The real question is whether we have *light* in the form of relationships that lay bare the motives of our hearts. According to 1 John 1, the basis of our fellowship with the Father as well as with one another is that we walk in the light together. The apostle John said that it's mandatory that we walk in the light together if we want genuine fellowship with God and man.

When the end times come, Jesus has prophesied—along with all of the men that we trust were inspired of the Holy Spirit to record their teachings in the Scriptures—that there will be a massive opposition to the work of God. God has held that hostility back for a season of time. And honestly there really hasn't been very much for satan to oppose. Satan has pretty much had his way, and too often the people who have slipped through his cracks and have been saved have died in spiritual poverty. Very few people have ever made a difference in the world they lived in. They

could talk about the truth. They could sing about it. But very few people have had a record of lives that were not only brought to salvation, but brought to *glory*.

And that is how the Hebrews writer put it: "bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). Glory! That means fullness and effectiveness and authority in Christ; it means love, compassion, and forgiveness; it means both the Calvary road and road to Pentecost. Put all of those things together, and you will have the life of Jesus manifested among us. God is after far more than producing good citizens, who got saved and so don't smoke or cuss anymore and work a little harder than they used to. God is after the full manifestation of His glory through His people.

That desire will certainly be fulfilled when Jesus comes back. But He's looking for a bride who has made herself ready for the return of her Groom. Pure, spotless, and radiant, an equal yoke for Jesus—now *that's* what His heart is longing for. When the last trumpet blasts, the tune will be "Here Comes the Bride," because history ends and eternity begins with the wedding of the Lamb (Revelation 19:1-10). That's what God is waiting for.

Now this matter of the Bride gets really practical. This "new wineskin" the pastor felt they so desperately needed is not having "cell group" meetings, kinship groups, or little home meetings to supplement having a worship service on Sunday morning. It has to do with *true relationships*.

It will also require that pressure be applied to our lives. I want to encourage you with these words, that the struggles and the trials that are only beginning to come upon your life are necessary. For one thing, when we suffer we're mostly reaping what we've sown. We've got it coming anyway. But besides all that, it's under God's total, sovereign control that struggles happen, because too many of us have been asleep. Maybe we'll get excited about this teaching or that teaching, or we'll get worked up about this issue or that issue. But what about being deeply in love with Jesus, worshiping Him when no one else is watching simply because we desperately love Him? What about having courage in the face of adversity, and stature and stability in the face of pressure? Hey, those things are pretty rare, I'm sorry to say. God can't leave matters that way. In the end times, in the very last of the last days, satan himself is going to unleash an attack that isn't simply us reaping what we've sown. If we brought it on ourselves, it was because this time we decided for a change that we were going to be like Jesus, and satan hated that choice and opposed it because he saw that his time was drawing to a close.

Revelation 12:10-12 speaks of satan being filled with fury because he knows that his time is short. Unfortunately, his time has not seemed so short for quite a long while now. There has been no evidence, no real stirring in the Body of Christ that would lead you to believe that Jesus would return soon. Very few of satan's deeds have been opposed, destroyed, reversed, and shoved in his face. Very little of satan's work has been crushed under our feet (Romans 16:20). Once in a while at various times in history and in various places around the world, there has been some measure of overcoming the devil. But what God is looking for is a testimony of power, authority, stability, stature, fullness, freedom, exuberance, and steadfastness—when you've done all, to stand (Ephesians 6:13). Heaven and earth are waiting to see that kind of heart and life displayed.

The point is, don't think it's strange if you experience a little bit of a struggle or problem or trial in a relationship, be it on the job or in your neighborhood. It's going to happen. You will find yourself under great heat, under great pressure and trial—first of your own doing, maybe, but then not of your own doing at all. It will happen because satan sees you being willing to endure the chastening rod of God.

God "disciplines the children that He loves" (Hebrews 12:6), and you're willing to endure it because you want the "harvest of righteousness and peace" (Hebrews 12:11) in your life that will follow. You're willing to reap what you've sown. You face up to it and 'fess up to it. You humble yourself and say, "Look, I've been way off track in this area." You're willing to let that discipline come to

you and to stretch out your hand and accept the nail of your cross. You're not kicking or fighting or fussing. You *want* to be refined by God and "built up in the Most Holy Faith." You *want* to learn how to "pray in the Spirit in all circumstances" and to take up the sword of the Spirit to fight for your brothers and sisters. You want that reality more than you want your own comfort, more than you want your reputation or the love and appreciation of your family members who always thought you were a little odd, but never stood against you.

Well, those times are coming. People will stand against you, and there will be more fury, more chaos, more hatred, more name calling, and more twisted, manipulated accusations than you've ever dreamed of in your life. If you're going to fool around feeling sorry for yourself with this little problem or that, if you're going to be lazy instead of getting on your face before God, if you insist on pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, you're going to get slaughtered. God is preparing you now through simple things that may hurt really bad but are really harmless. God is totally in control. He wants to see what we are going to do with those tests.

It was just like that for Abraham. The future of that "great nation" that he was to become—and our own future as part of that nation—somehow hinged on his willingness to put Isaac on the woodpile. Because the next thing God told Abraham was, "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Genesis 22:17-18).

God will put those kinds of tests in front of us, too. So much for the "neutral" stuff—you know, just "place membership" at this church or that church, have a happy sing-along, say some neat things, and if the members don't like it, they'll just go somewhere else. I mean, that whole scenario is going by the wayside because there's some really hard-hitting, heavy-pressure sorts of experiences coming down the pike.

Now if we're going to give in and crumble under the little, baby things, we'll never be fit to overcome the onslaught of the last days. I guarantee you there will be an onslaught then! I also guarantee this: there will be a people who are ready for it. But the only possible way to be ready is to face the little things with courage, with loyalty to one another, with love, with peace in our hearts, with joy, with worship, and with righteousness. What set Jesus apart from his peers was that He "loved righteousness and hated wickedness" (Hebrews 1:9). Well, it will set you apart from your peers, too, if you love what's right and hate what's evil. Not everyone does. But the ultimate climax is coming, so for there to be a prepared people, there must be training now.

In the face of those little tests, will you whine and moan and complain and throw a fit? Will you disappear in your room for two days? Will you refuse to talk to so-and-so, or choose to be critical and distance yourself in your heart, even though you still smile on the outside? If you play those games now, you are going to be in trouble when the real heat comes. The spiritual attacks then will be so deceptive and will come with so much energy and power. The accusations will become so twisted in the attempt to make you lay down your faith and to become lukewarm like everybody else. Of course, not everyone else *will* be lukewarm, but that's what the pressure will be.

So as the little things come along—the light and momentary troubles—rest assured that they are necessary for your preparation. When the bigger things come, they're going to hit real hard. You need to be ready for them if you are to be an overcomer: "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:14). "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7). To him who overcomes...to him who overcomes. The bigger challenges are going to come, and I really want to be ready for them. I know that without clean hands and a pure heart—without a good conscience, a pure heart, and a sincere faith—I'm going to wander and miss the mark.

Now, then: why is it important that church not mean just sitting somewhere in a pew on Sunday morning, even if the message is really good and biblical? Because according to Hebrews 3, the only way we're going to get through the tough things that are ahead, instead of being deceived and hardened, is by being involved in each others' lives on a daily basis. "See to it brothers that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." Well, how can you obey that command if you don't have relationships? "See to it that *none* of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart." God is calling us to be very, very deep in relationships.

And the same Hebrews writer went on to say maybe twenty-five minutes later when he was writing, "Watch out that you don't fall into the habit of not gathering yourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25). Do you remember what else he said? "..and all the more as you see the day approaching." As the Day gets closer and closer and closer, it becomes increasingly important that the wineskin be right. It's not only for the sake of the harvest that's coming. It's not just so that the wineskin can hold together all the babes that God will bring out of the idolatry of the world system. It's also so that we all can overcome the pressure of family members and the hatred and selfishness that the world offers—the beast's enticement to sell yourself for the sake of material things, and even to satisfy your own belly. The pressure's going to be there. So the wineskin must change, not only for the harvest, but also because of the nature of the opposition that the enemy will throw at us as he sees the Bride making herself ready. Be sure to prepare yourself now.

Telling People What to Do? Or "Laying Bare their Motives?"

There is such a thing as an unhealthy relationship, however. I'll give you one case in point.

Was it Jesus' idea that people go out two-by-two to do the work of God? Yes, it was Jesus' idea. Does that mean that three people can't go out? I don't think so. Does that mean that Paul never went out by himself? Well, Paul was a man of considerable stature—he watched dead men be raised—and a revelation surpassing, in many ways, even that of Peter and John, men who walked with the Lord Himself. By his own admission in Ephesians 3 and Peter's admission in 2 Peter 3, Paul was a man of great revelation, having been caught up into the third heaven. If you follow him around in the recorded account of his life in Acts and various places in his letters, you can count almost fifty people who were with him over the course of his journeys. Not all of his companions were together at the same time, but there was a continual flow of two or three or four or six people with him as he went from city to city. As far as I know, there was only one time during his twenty-five year history as recorded by the Holy Spirit, where we find him alone in a city. He traveled by foot overland, for some reason known only to him and God, and had his friends go by ship to meet him down the coast. I don't know of another place where we can find him alone, anywhere during a twenty-five year period.

So, is it a good idea that we be together? Certainly it is a good idea. "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I Am." Why didn't He say, "*Whenever anybody has the Holy Spirit, there I Am*"? He *could* have said that, in one sense, because it is true. But why does He "force" two or three to be together? "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:19-20). Why did He say that? Because *Jesus wants to drive us together in loyalty and in trust*. He knew that we would be an offense to one another and that we'd have to learn the way of the cross. That's why He almost bribes us to be together.

Jesus sent them two-by-two for solid reasons: so that they would be accountable to one another, so that they could pray together, so that they could lift each other up when the enemy attacked. Jesus Himself very seldom went anywhere alone. Even in His greatest, deepest agony, He had three brothers a stone's throw away. He wouldn't even go further than a few paces away, Himself,

from three brothers at that most agonizing moment, knowing full well they didn't have really much of an idea what was going on. He still walked with them.

Of course, He did also pray alone. He taught us that there are times to go alone into your closet and pray, where no one can see or hear you. That's all valid; I'm not minimizing it.

But I'm saying there's something that's captured us over the years in the place where I live. We've seen what it's like when instead of one person going alone to speak at a church in another city, six or eight brothers and sisters go to that city together. We've seen God work through it in an amazing way. It's the biblical pattern, and that's a good reason. There are commands about it and promises related to it. Those are all good reasons. We've seen the fruit of it, too. When somebody's off in the back room trying to help a marriage that's just about to blow up, there are also four or five other people in the living room—teaching, mutually encouraging, and worshipping with them. That way there's accountability. There's no braggadocio on the one hand and no depression on the other. There's none of the massive temptation that happens to brothers doing it alone without brothers and sisters around to help them overcome when it's necessary. God's pattern is real, God's promises are real, and the fruit of doing it God's way is very real.

However, let me tell you about the pitfalls. Again, healthy, devoted relationships are great. Going two-by-two is also great. But as soon as you say you *have* to go two-by-two or else it's sin, you've overstepped your bounds. Is going two-by-two valid? Is it a gift from God? Is it precious? Are there promises associated with it? Are there commands associated with it? Absolutely. But when we speak of it to others, it needs to be an appeal that they would see God's heart themselves— whoever this person is you're talking to, who's living the independent life that they've been "cultured" into having. After all, they've been taught by satan as well as by their environment during their whole family-life, because everything about the American lifestyle is "look out for number one" and "do your own thing." How many slogans are there that basically say the same thing? So many have incorporated that culture into a Sunday-morning-go-to-meeting sort of church thing, where everybody goes off into their nuclear families to live life any way they please. It totally disavows any knowledge of what the Scriptures say about being devoted to one another, loving one another, and bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ.

There are potent words attached to these ideas in the scriptures. "Confess your sins one to another and pray for one another, *that you may be healed.*" "How can you love a God you haven't seen"— in your independent little prayer closet and worship time—"when you don't love your brother whom you have seen?" "Be not deceived!" See, the theme is all through the Scriptures.

Jesus Himself, the Word manifested in the flesh on planet earth, showed us the way. He was "in their midst as one who serves." "He came and tabernacled among them." He made His home here as "God *with* us." He was in the midst of His followers. He came to be with them that He might send them out. The way of life both manifested by the Living Word and taught in the written Word is, "Let's do it together."

But any appeal we make about these truths has to be continually towards a person's *heart*. Why do they desire to be independent? "Well, I don't want anybody following me around. I want to go to the mall all by myself, and don't you tell me I can't."

Our response shouldn't be, "Nope, you've got to go two-by-two." It ought to be, "Fine, go to the mall by yourself. Pray tell, why do you want to go by yourself to the mall? Fine. Do it. Go. Take my car! But why? Why do you want to do it that way?"

"Well..." You start out trying to answer that question, and if you're real honest, maybe what you find out is that you just want to spend some time window shopping and drooling over material things.

Maybe I'm just self-centered and I have no interest in serving others and loving them, or I want to blend into the world. Maybe I'm ambitious and want to go back and tell stories about how I witnessed to so-and-so and exaggerate the story about how spiritual I am. Maybe I tell people that I'm going off to pray, and I do pray for five minutes, but then I walk through the mall drooling for an hour and a half. What is the reason, really? What is it really that's going on in a person's heart?

That's what the living and active Word does. It "lays bare the motives of the heart." It does *not* tell people what to do. Healthy, devoted relationships do not tell people what to do, either. Like the Word of God, they, too, lay bare the motives of the heart.

If anybody wants you to tell them what to do, don't do it, because that will do them no good at all. If you gave them fifty-eight consecutive correct answers on the topic of what to do, maybe they'd stay out of trouble, but they'd *never have any relationship with God*. And what, after all, is the goal? Five thousand people staying out of trouble, or five thousand people who love and adore God and trust Him with all their hearts, obeying Him to the core whether anybody's looking or not? There comes a time when you've got to let go. Sure, there's an incubator period. But even so, be careful that you don't come up with dogmas of, "It's gotta be two-by-two." Well, yeah, togetherness is God's heart. But why wouldn't I *want* to go that way? That's the *real* issue. But if I know truth, and I see it, and I really am humble before God and want to obey Him, but I still feel like I need to go to the mall alone because God has a purpose for it, well, okay, sure; go for it. And then we trust each other, love each other, and pray for one another. It has nothing to do with "the right thing to do" versus "the wrong thing to do." It has to do with the matters of the heart in helping one another to find God and His ways.

All of that is part of the wineskin. I don't want anyone to confuse the issue, because relationships—*devoted* relationships—are the wineskin of the last days. There is no question about that fact. It's all through the New Testament and so clearly God's heart. The hand is not to say to the eye, "I have no need of you." When one part suffers, the whole body—not just your best friend—should be sad. In 1 Peter 2 we read that Jesus is the precious cornerstone that God has laid in Zion, though many disregarded Him. He is a stumbling stone, a rock that made men fall on Him. Now we, as living stones, are going to be a spiritual or "spirit-filled" house, "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Once we were not a people, but now we are a people"—a people, a people, a people. It's God's heart, that when they've seen me, they've seen you; that when they've seen you, they've seen me; that we are one, as Jesus and the Father are one. "And this is how the world will know," is Jesus' prayer in John 17.

This is important stuff, not an optional extra. This is God's heart for the last days. If we won't walk in these things, then as the old saying goes, if we won't hang together, we'll hang separately. Mark it down. It is very true, and it is imperative that we learn the principles of God.

Healthy Relationships

God desires *devoted* relationships, but He also desires *healthy* relationships. Care deeply about the soul and heart and life and future of others. Help to protect them from the enemy. Work to make them to be aware of satan's devices. But make sure that in no way, shape, or form you control them and tell them what to do. Even if you succeed in protecting them from some initial harm, you cannot hold their hand forever. They must have their own relationship with God—and a devoted relationship with you, too. This is not an either-or situation. You can have both. But you will not have a *real* relationship with another person, with love and trust and forgiveness and joy and adventure, as long as the relationship is based on pushing buttons of "Do this; don't do that. I'll give you a principle for this and a principle for that. Remember all these principles and you'll be a good little Christian."

Principles are important. The Word of God was written for our learning so that we could believe and therefore have Life to the full. It's imperative that the seed of God—His eternal immutable Word—be written in our hearts. We're supposed to help each other know and plant that seed. We're even supposed to admonish one another daily *with* the Word of God so that none are hardened and deceived by sin. But don't confuse admonishing with telling people what to do. That is *not* a healthy, devoted relationship. That's an *unhealthy*, immature, devoted relationship.

Don't shy away from loving each other and caring. Try to throw a body block if you know somebody who's about to go out and hurt themselves spiritually. But make *sure* that after you've stood them up straight, reasoned with them from the Word of God, and shown them the heart of Jesus, that you get out of the way and let them make their own decision about whether what you are saying is really the Word of God. Let them ask themselves, "Is this really what God's saying? Am I really willing to go forward? Should I reconsider? Should I fast about it first?" Allow them to face God Himself and to make those choices after you've tried to help.

The Word of God is useful for teaching and correcting and rebuking and training in righteousness so that the man of God might be fully equipped. So use the Word in all of those ways. But in the end, let others face God and decide. *Make* them face God and decide. Don't let them lean on you to the point where they don't have to face Him.

Healthy, devoted relationships—they will prepare and equip you to deal with the pressures, the pain, the agony, the failures, the temptations on "level one," as well as with the total assault of the enemy as he pours out his wrath on "level two." We're going to need those relationships. But they will have to be not just *devoted* relationships, but *healthy*, devoted relationships if we are to outwit and totally humiliate satan. We need Calvary relationships: going to the cross for one another, not telling one another what to do.

I'm not saying that unhealthy stuff is happening now. But there can be a tendency for any of us, when we see somebody who's really about to make a mess of things, to think, "I know that I need to be devoted enough to this person to try to stop them from destroying themselves," but then to panic.

The right response likewise can't be, "Oh, let the Holy Spirit take care of it." Meanwhile, while most are sitting back, a third of the teenage girls in youth groups have either got pregnant by age fifteen or have got themselves in serious enough trouble that they easily could have been pregnant. Satan has totally ransacked Christendom while people have said, "Let the Holy Spirit do it." Well, the Bible that the Holy Spirit *wrote* says things like:

- "Admonish one another daily so that none are hardened and deceived by sin." (Hebrews 3:13)
- "How can people have faith in the Lord and ask Him to save them, if they have never heard about Him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them?" (Romans 10:14)
- "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."
(2 Corinthians 4:7)
- "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."
(2 Corinthians 1:21)

So relationships are absolutely necessary, according to the Word of God. But at the same time, be sure that you don't cross the line into being overbearing and robbing them of their own chance to meet God and to make choices before Him. Then be there for them to love them and help them pick up the pieces. Do be thoroughly involved, but don't panic when somebody is about to make a mistake and therefore rob them of an opportunity to face God and make their own choices.

There'll be times when you'll need to be really animated with them, we'll say, in the application of the Word of God. Certain brothers and I have had some great times together—highly animated times in the Word of God. Many of us have done the same at different times. And that's okay. But in the end, you need to push people away from you and towards God, having thoroughly "equipped them for every good work" to the best of your ability. Let them face God and make their own choices. What changes the heart is to behold Him and then to be transfigured with ever-increasing glory by the Lord, who is the Spirit. The seed of God is the Word, and we need to allow Him to give the increase to it. Okay?

Healthy, devoted relationships—it's an important topic. Consider what's yet to come, the wrath that will be poured out against God's people, perhaps towards the end of our generation, maybe right in the middle of the next generation. We're just going to have to be ready for it. So make sure you have devoted relationships, but also make sure they're healthy, not the counterfeit of being overbearing or controlling relationships.

A Prayer

Father, even now I ask that you'd give increase to Your Word. Allow Your seeds to bear fruit in our lives. Give us wisdom, not paranoia, in being involved in each other's lives—a great, great, great wisdom of seeing You through the person that we are speaking to, lifting our hands to You, and calling them to do the same. Lord Jesus, You are our Teacher. You've shown us how to live that way. Maybe we've not always watched You very carefully in the past, but we want to. We know there has to be a People who are prepared. Someplace, sometime, somehow, there has to be somebody who's prepared for the full cup of wrath to be poured out on those on whom the enemy seeks to devour. We don't want to avoid that cup. We want to be overcomers in the midst of that wrath. That's what brings You the greatest honor. Our desire is not to escape by the skin of our teeth through the flames, but to meet You having built a Holy House for you. We don't want to build our own paneled homes, but a home for You, a habitation for You by the Spirit. We long to be that kind of people. Zeal for Your House, not for our own survival, consumes us. Father, please help us, encourage us, and empower us for the time ahead. Build us in wisdom. We need that, because Your House is built with wisdom. Amen.