

Relationship to the Church

In the previous lesson, we discussed various area of our lives that we must spend time on, and how to do that in an acceptable manner. One of those areas was in spiritual endeavors. As we look at the responsibilities that God has placed upon us in our spiritual responsibilities, one thing becomes evident: He expects us to be a part of something much greater than ourselves!

God has set up the church to function as a living organism, and each member is a vital part of that organism:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. 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. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:12–31)

The analogy used by Paul in this context illustrates the importance of each and every member. If one member should decide that they are not going to do what is expected of them, they can throw off the entire body! There are many reasons that people do not fulfill the responsibility they have in the body. The Christian who is concerned about doing what God wants will be diligent about figuring out what is lacking and work to fix it!

Consider Paul's admonition to the Roman Brethren:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3–8)

Paul warned that a man is not to “think of himself more highly than he ought to think.” This is one of the main issues that we run into when the body is not functioning together properly: pride. We begin to think that we are too good for the job that we have been given, or the function that we provide. We think that we should be able to do something better. This idea is also expressed in Paul’s earlier writing to the Corinthians. *“If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body?”* If we don’t get to do just what we want to do, are we destructive to the rest of the body? Paul’s point in these passages is to show that every member serves a vital role in the functioning of the body. If we fail to do what we should because we don’t think our job is important enough, we are allowing pride to interfere with our work. Why do we presume that one job is less important than another?

Another reason some may not be fulfilling their responsibilities is that they simply don’t know what to do. People do not come into the church knowing every detail of the functioning of the church, or the individual’s responsibility in it. Instead, people have to learn the roles and responsibilities as established by God in His word. This will, of course, take effort on the part of everyone involved! It may take some time to identify and implement the areas that a person has talent, or ability to serve. If every Christian is trying to do the same things, and letting other activities go undone, we are not fulfilling the function of the whole body.

Some people have not yet learned that God’s plan is for all Christians to serve one another. The work that is done together is for one another. When we don’t grasp this idea, working together ends up being much less important to us. We function from the perspective of seeking what the church can do for us, rather than what we can do for the church. If we are not seeing any personal benefit, we fail to see value in our participation. As we think about the responsibilities that God has placed upon us, it becomes evident that our primary responsibility is to others. How can I serve them? I am not supposed to focus on myself first, asking, “How can others serve me?” When we change our perspective, the manner in which we interact with others will change. Let’s consider a few areas in which we should be working together.

Encouraging and edifying one another. One of the primary responsibilities we have as Christians is to encourage one another to faithfulness. Let’s face it, it is much easier to face difficult situations in our faith when there are others around us encouraging us to keep striving for the goal. Consider some of Paul’s teaching on this aspect of our Christian duty:

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. 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. Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. 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. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin. (Romans 14:14–23)

Paul was not dealing with an easy issue here. Brethren were disagreeing on how to deal with a difficult circumstance. In the midst of his instructions, Paul made it clear that Christians, even in these difficult situations, needed to work toward peace for the end goal of edifying one another. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul said this:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. (1 Corinthians 10:23–24)

If our focus is on edifying or encouraging one another, our actions will change. We will not be so intent on getting our way, or proving our point. Paul's point is that there are things we have a right to, that we will gladly and graciously let go of for the sake of others. When I become consumed by the social, political, or cultural topic of the day, and spend my time constantly addressing my opinions on those issues without regard to how it might be impacting my brethren, I am at fault!

Making edifying others a priority in our lives will make us be more cautious about what we say, and how we say it. If I am thinking about another person's well being, I will not say things that I know will not be received well by him. The art of learning when to say nothing at all is a valuable one!

However, there are going to be times when that which is edifying is not pleasant. For example, when a person has stumbled in sin, the one who works to bring him back to righteousness may not make him feel good in the moment, but will in the long run build him up. The idea of "edification" is not merely making someone feel good, or feel good about themselves. It has to do with building a person up, spiritually. We can, in most cases, see edification as the result of fulfilling our other responsibilities as Christians. We cannot simply edify without doing something!

This leads to another responsibility we have toward one another:

Correcting one another. This is not an easy responsibility to fulfill. No one likes either being corrected, or being the one who has to do the correcting. However, this is a serious responsibility for Christians in the relationship that God has instituted for us.

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)

Some have the misconception that if we are watching out for others we are being busybodies. While it is certainly possible to become a busybody in other people's business, watching out for the spiritual well being of others doe not constitute this problem. We have a responsibility to be watching out for others!

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1–2)

In this passage to the Galatians, Paul made it clear that we need to be watching out for others, and work to correct them when they falter. He also states that we need to be cautious in the process, making sure that we are not tempted to do the same thing that they have fallen in to.

Jesus gave instructions for how this "turning back" process was supposed to work:

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 'Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 'Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.' (Matthew 18:15–20)

The goal is always to attempt to bring the one who wanders from truth back to the Lord. Sometimes, that is not going to be the case. We cannot force anyone to do the right thing, and we certainly cannot force anyone to repent when they do not want to do so. If that is the case, then we are given instructions of what we are to do to keep the church pure. Consider:

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. (2 Thessalonians 3:14)

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. (Romans 16:17)

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addressed a specific situation in which there was sin in the church that would not be repented of. He instructed the church to deal with this brother who had his father's wife:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.” (1 Corinthians 5:1–13)

It is evident from Paul's second letter that the church did just as Paul instructed. Surely this was not a pleasant experience for either the one who was being corrected or the ones who had to do the correcting. However, they did what God instructed to restore the one who was sinning. Had that man not been restored, they would have still ensured the purity of the church (Ephesians 5:27).

God provides correction to His people in various ways. The Hebrew writer conveyed this idea (Hebrews 12:3-11). One way that He accomplishes this is by having each of us watch out for others, and strive to help one another stay on the straight and narrow path. This reflects the kind of love that we should have for one another. We need to consider how to respond on both sides of the correction process. We need to make sure that when we need to be corrected, we do not become angry about those who would love us enough to come to us and show us our error. It is easy to get defensive, and then seek to reject the admonition of those who would approach us. We should think of their actions as an act of love, and respond accordingly. If we are in error, it should encourage us to repent and return to faithful service to the Lord with our brethren. When we see others who are in error and need to repent, we should love them enough to approach them and seek to help them.

There is certainly no joy in this process, but love demands it. When we think we should just mind our own business, and ignore their departure from faith, we are essentially saying that we do not care about their souls enough to bring them back to the Lord!

Love one another... Arguably, we should have started with this characteristic, as it is the foundation upon which all other responsibilities are built. God expects for us to love one another, and that love will cause us to do all the things that are specified for Christians as they interact with one another. Consider especially the writings of John who had more to say about the need to love one another than perhaps any of the other New Testament authors:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35)

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another. (John 15:12–17)

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. (1 John 3:10–23)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen,

how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 4:7–21)

John makes it clear that love is at the heart of the relationship between brethren. In fact, he pointed out that Jesus said that this is the characteristic that would identify His disciples. This should be a striking thought to us: the presence of love identifies those who are the people of God! This should make us realize that when love is not present, we are declaring that we are not the people of God!

Paul, when writing to the Roman brethren, showed the practical applications of these principles:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9–21)

Truly loving the brethren will make us act in a particular way toward them. It is, for example, at the very heart of putting others ahead of ourselves. Paul said that proper love will cause us to show honor to our brethren and give preference to them. It will cause us to serve one another, and be diligent toward God and our brethren. It will cause us to pray for others, serve others and show hospitality. This love will cause us to empathize and sympathize with those who are struggling, and rejoice with those who are rejoicing. This type of love goes a step further, and causes us to bless those who would even persecute us! Paul's instructions are challenging, making us truly consider what it means to love our brethren! Following these instructions is not always going to be easy for us to do. Remember again what John wrote about loving in sincerity:

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

Love is something that is easy to talk about, to say, but which does not mean much if it is not shown. We can say that we love our brethren, but if we are not showing it in the manner in which we treat them, we are not truly loving them. Let's not just say that we love our brethren, let us show it "in deed and in truth."

Peter also had much to say about the need to show love, rather than just talking about it:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because "All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the LORD endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (1 Peter 1:22–2:3)

Notice that Peter connects our obedience to the gospel with the love that we are to have with one another. When we are baptized into Christ, we enter a relationship with Him, and therefore we enter

into a relationship with all others who have entered that same relationship (See 1 John 1:1-7). Discipleship and loving the brethren cannot be separated. We enter into a relationship with others, and with all the responsibilities that entails, when we are obedient to the gospel of Christ.

Paul wrote:

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)

He connected love here with service. This emphasizes the point that we have been making: love demands action. We cannot claim to love our brethren and then refuse to be a servant to them. Paul quoted the teaching of Jesus, which had been taken even from the old law: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." This was the instruction on which Paul's teaching was hung. Love demands that we serve one another!

Assemble with one another. Sometimes, we miss the point of the New Testament instructions for Christians to assemble together. It is often viewed as a checklist item, identifying us as being "faithful". We use the failure to assemble as the determinant factor in whether a person is indeed faithful to the Lord. In doing so, we have missed the point of God's instruction for us. Let's consider the most pertinent passage concerning our need to assemble:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:19-25)

The inspired writer did not say that we are to assemble so that we make sure and get our gold star for the week. Notice how he connects the act of assembling with some very important concepts. Assembling is a part of drawing "near with a true heart..." It should be the natural result of "having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." In other words, when we are converted to Christ, we should instinctively have a desire to assemble with those who have also been converted to Him. In a previous segment of our study, we discussed how loving one another was directly related to our obedience to Christ. Here, the author makes it clear that this principle will be made evident through the act of assembling with one another.

A part of this assembling together is an act of serving others. Here, the inspired writer said we are to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works." We assemble together because we are considering others, not ourselves. We are putting others ahead of ourselves! Sometimes, people say that they don't come to assemblies because they really don't get anything out of them. While that may be a completely different issue, primarily we don't assemble for what we might get out of it! We assemble because we are considering "one another in order to stir up love and good works." When we stop thinking about what might be in these actions to benefit me, and start thinking about how we might be able to serve others, our whole perspective on the assemblies will probably change. Instead of thinking about how we "have to go to church", we should be thinking about how we get to go to assemblies so that we can encourage and edify others, and help them be ready for "love and good works." Why do we assemble? Because we have to fulfill a command?

That is not the approach this writer took. He said that we consider one another, rather than forsaking the assemblies. When we don't assemble with the saints, we are letting our brethren down. We are not there to help them be ready for the coming week ahead of them. We are not there to show love, or to allow them to show love to us. We are not preparing together for good works, and therefore we are not serving our brethren in this way.

Notice, the author of Hebrews says that the manner of some was to forsake the assembling of the saints together. They had made this their practice. That decision had shown that they did not love the brethren enough to be with them when they fulfilled their responsibilities to God. They did not love the brethren, and that illustrated that they did not love the Lord. He said that we should not be like those brethren! Instead, we need to want to be with the saints when they assemble. It is not that we *have* to be there. We *get* to be there!

Paul, when he was traveling saw this as so significant he allowed it to alter his plans. In Acts 20, Paul was in a hurry to make it back to Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Yet, he made the decision to wait 7 days in Troas to meet with the disciples there (Acts 20:6-7). We should be able to deduce from this that meeting with the disciples in Troas was an important activity for Paul. He did the same thing when he came into Tyre (Acts 21:4), even though he was getting very close to the city of Jerusalem, and his time before Pentecost had to be running short. He had only 7 weeks between Passover and Pentecost, and he spent 2 of those weeks waiting to meet with brethren!

Some have suggested that the day on which we meet is of no importance, and that the day we see in scripture was nothing more than the one that was most convenient for the brethren. Without going into great detail to show the significance of the First Day of the Week here, it is of some significance to notice that these congregations did not change their assembly period to accommodate Paul's tight schedule! Paul waited until they were having their assemblies, met with them, and then traveled on. He saw the need to be with brethren, and planned accordingly.

We need to place importance on assembling with the saints, not because it is something we have to do, but rather because of what is accomplished through that action. While the instruction is given to us in the form of a negative statement ("*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some*") we can see that this instruction or command is given with reasons. He didn't tell us to assemble just because God wanted to mess up one of our free days on the weekend! No, instead, he was telling us that we have responsibilities to others, which can only be fulfilled when we assemble together. This should never be viewed as some rote action, required for fulfilling our Christian checklist. It should be viewed as a our service to God and to our fellow Christians.

Some say that we can encourage one another outside of the assemblies. This is true, and we should be encouraging one another in other areas. However, our ability to "*consider one another in order to stir up love and good works*" in other areas does not relieve us of doing so in the time and manner that God has directed! When God has given specific instructions for how something is to be accomplished, we have no right to change His will. He said that we are to assemble together for the purpose of stirring up love and good works. So, let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves Together...like some people do! Instead, let us assemble, and encourage one another. As we grow more and more in the faith (through the assemblies we have together) we can encourage one another more "*as we see the day approaching*." Part of what we do when we assemble together is help one another prepare for the coming of the Lord. As we grow in faith, that day His return grows clearer and clearer. Even though we have no way of knowing when that day will literally be, it does not change the fact that we can encourage one another to prepare for it. As we see that day of judgment approaching, we can make sure that we are participating in every single opportunity

to help others be prepared for it! God's plan for how we are to work together to help one another is, of course, phenomenal. We have a built in support group to assist us in our daily struggles to remain faithful and to continue doing the work that God has assigned us to do.

Then Peter began to say to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You." So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:28–31).

This promise is fulfilled in the church! We receive "a hundredfold now in this time..." these blessings because of the family that we have in the church. Part of our obligation to this spiritual family is to assemble together to fulfill the responsibilities we have to one another!

The importance of "together"... Throughout the pages of the New Testament, we are reminded of how important it is for us to have a relationship with one another that brings us together. Earlier, we considered how Paul adjusted his travel plans to be able to assemble together with saints in various places. The importance of being together also appears throughout his writings. For example, notice how he addresses the topic of partaking of the Lord's Supper:

Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you (1 Corinthians 11:17–22).

Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come (1 Corinthians 11:33–34).

Paul, as he was correcting the poor practices of the Corinthian brethren told them that they were not coming together for the right purpose. Paul was giving instructions for how to properly partake of the Lord's Supper, and a significant part of the pattern was that they were to do it when they had "come together in one place." To partake in the proper manner, Paul's instructions were clear. They were to assemble in one place, waiting for one another. The idea was that they were to consider one another, and therefore assemble together, in one place, to partake of this special meal together. They could not simply dismiss the instructions given because it was difficult, or because there was some danger. Assembling was not something that was done as long as it was easy to do. It was a crucial part of the first century church's activity together, and should be a crucial part of our work together today as well.

Paul addressed other issues concerning the time that the brethren "came together" in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians:

Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you. How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpreta-

tion. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:23–26)

There are many things that the church does when it assembles together. Paul was addressing some issues that were specific to the first century church in the direct applications but which clearly have principles that we need to be implementing in the church today as well. While we do not have the spiritual gifts, we do still have a responsibility of conducting ourselves in a manner that will cause people to see the truth, and accept God's instructions for them if and when they visit in our assemblies. The instructions Paul gave would be pointless if the Christians were not coming together!

Being together was a priority of the early church. In Acts 2, when the church was first being formed, we see that the brethren met together for its formal responsibilities (worship) and also made sure that they spent time together outside of those assemblies.

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 (Acts 2:46–47).

Whether inside or outside the formal assemblies of the congregation, the Christians of the first century had a desire to be together with one another. They took advantage of the opportunities presented to spend time with brethren. While they were not removing themselves completely from the world, we do see them make a change in the way that they viewed those who were "outside" as opposed to those "within". They were no longer making the people of the world their close associates, but rather turned to those who held to similar faith and practice. They didn't attend the assemblies simply because they wanted to check it off their list and move on. Rather the assemblies became a part of who they were, and what they wanted to do on a regular basis.

This emphasis on togetherness is at the heart of the relationships that Christians are supposed to have with one another. The familial relationships that God expects of His people do not miraculously appear. It takes work on everyone's part to be able to develop close relationships. It takes time spent together. We have opportunity to be together when the church assembles, and the Hebrew writer told us that we are not "forsake the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some." But, even that is just the beginning of what we should be doing to build relationship with one another. Outside of those assemblies, we should be making opportunity to spend time with those who are also truly seeking to serve and please the Lord. Like the first century Christians we cannot separate ourselves completely from the world, nor should we want to. We have a responsibility to those who are outside the faith as well. We should be striving to make opportunities to teach those who have not yet heard the truth of the gospel message, and that will mean spending time with those who are not yet Christians. We should, however, be very careful that we do not allow those who are of the world to cause us to stumble under the guise of trying to create a relationship to share the gospel with them. We should want to spend as much time as we can surrounding ourselves with godly people who will help us in our journey towards heaven! Paul warned:

Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits." (1 Corinthians 15:33)

If we make those who are evil our close companions, they will most certainly corrupt our good habits. So, let us focus more on our spiritual wellbeing, and draw close to those who will be able to help us in our journey. As the Hebrew writer said, let us work to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works." We cannot do this unless we are spending time together. Togetherness is such an important aspect of all of the work that God has given to us as Christians, both in the assemblies and outside of them. So, let us come together to fulfill our obligations in assembling. But let us also spend time with one another together in other areas as well. Our time spent "from house to house" is a vitally important part of our spiritual well being and development!

Questions

1. How does Paul describe the interactions of the various members of a local church? How does this speak to relationship?
2. What language is used throughout the New Testament to indicate the type of relationship God expects Christians to have with one another?
3. What responsibilities do Christians have toward one another because of the relationships that exist?
4. We are given instructions to “love one another.” How is this love shown? Does this mean we will never do anything that makes others “feel bad”?
5. What is the importance of the assemblies of the saints? How should the faithful Christian view the assemblies?
6. What is the importance of being together? In what ways do we see the first century Christians emphasizing the need to be together?
7. Who should be the closest companions for Christians? Why is this so important?

