



Oakwood Small Group Bible Study
Lesson Sunday, September 25th

***We're Better
Together: The
Example of Early
Christian Disciples***

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Introduction

Some people like going to events called Tractor Pulls. This is when they cover the floor of an arena with dirt and guys in souped-up tractors compete to see who can pull the heaviest loads. That's nothing new because long before the internal combustion engine, farmers were competing with animals to see which one was strongest. They still have competitions in which workhorses compete. The beautiful Clydesdales breed has always been one of the strongest horses. Long before the Budweiser wagon, Clydesdales were pulling heavy loads. In these competitions, competitors made an interesting discovery. A single horse could pull a heavy load, but when yoked with another horse, together, they could pull more than the sum of the amount that each horse could pull alone.

For instance, let's say a single Clydesdale can pull a sled holding two tons of weight. And another Clydesdale can pull three tons. You would think that when yoked together, the most they could pull would be five tons. But in reality when these two horses are yoked together, they can actually pull seven tons! You may think that's not possible, but this phenomenon has been proven many times. It's called synergy. Two pulling together can accomplish more than the sum of the two parts.

Opening Question

What are some examples of people working together to accomplish more than one person alone could accomplish?

There are many examples from the Scripture we could study of people who worked together to accomplish a common goal. For example, Jesus and His disciples; Paul, Barnabas and Timothy, etc.

However, today as we come to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Oakwood, we are going to look at the 1st century Christian believers and be reminded by them how *We're Better Together!*

The Big Idea

In his book, *A Resilient Life*, Dr. Gordon MacDonald says, "The Bible is about relationships and no one is a complete human being apart from the context of those relationships. It is the truly Christian perspective. *In Christian relationships...we are much more likely to hear God speak the truth we need to hear.*"

Here are some key questions that we will be answering today:

Immediately after the ascension of Jesus, what was the pattern set by believers for "doing church" with one another?

As the gospel spread and the Christian community grew, what were the duties of believers toward one another?

As established churches grew, what obligations did the individual believers have toward one another?

The answers to these questions will reveal this important truth... *You and I as believers in Christ need each other to grow as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ; that We're Better Together!*

We're Better Together In Fellowship

Immediately after the ascension of Jesus, what was the pattern set by believers for “doing church” with one another?

Scripture Passage

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Peter had just given his first sermon on the day of Pentecost and three thousand people had become believers and had been baptized. These new believers along with those who already were believers devoted themselves to some specific and regular practices. These practices gave us a pattern that believers follow to this day.

These early Christians were better together in fellowship. What is fellowship? It has been defined as an, “Association based upon the sharing of something in common. Believers have fellowship with one another on the basis of their common fellowship with God, their participation in the blessings of the gospel and their common task of mission. True fellowship is demonstrated in concern for, and practical commitment to, one another.”¹

The Apostles, who had lived and learned with Jesus for the last three or so years, were leading these 1st century believers in certain practices that they believed were consistent with God's purposes.

Discovery

The Scripture says they were devoted which means to have profound dedication; consecration; to have an earnest attachment to a cause. The point is that they were fully committed as believers to these specific practices in their lives together. They had a steadfast and single-minded loyalty to a definite course of action.

These early Christians were devoted to three important practices:

- *Devoted to the apostles' teaching is the first practice.* This teaching or doctrine is what the Apostles had learned from Christ before and after His resurrection as well as the truth that the Holy Spirit was revealing to them. These believers were part of a church that studied and learned God's truth. They are not focusing on their past experiences. Instead, we find them focusing on the Word of God as taught by the Apostles.

Today, two thousand years later we are so blessed to have all this apostolic teaching recorded for us in the completed Scriptures. A Spirit-controlled church is always going to be a Bible-studying church. Wherever the church has been greatly blessed, where the Spirit of

¹ Manser, M. H. (2009). *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies*. London: Martin Manser.

God has come upon God's people and the gospel has gone forth in great power and people have responded to it, these have always been ages in which the Bible has been studied carefully. Why? It is because the closer men and women come to God the closer they want to get to where He speaks to their hearts, and that speaking is to be found in the Bible. What is true of the church is true for individuals also.

- *Devoted to the fellowship is the second practice.* Christian fellowship means “common participation in God,” which is what had drawn the early Christians together. The Greek word for “fellowship” has to do with holding something in common. The fellowship of the church was a common fellowship because of the great spiritual realities the believers shared in together.

Fellowship with God and true fellowship with others go together. But, the stronger your vertical fellowship is with God, the stronger your horizontal fellowship will be with other believers. *Consequently, if you find yourself out of fellowship with God, you will begin to find yourself out of fellowship with other Christians.*

- *Devoted to the breaking of bread and the prayers, that is, worship is the third practice.* This likely means that this practice of the early Christian church was *worship* or what we think of as going to church service together. There was “the breaking of bread” and “the prayers.” The use of the definite article “the” indicates a ceremonial format, i.e., a worship service. “Breaking of bread” stands for the communion service, and prayer, although it is something we can do individually and at different times, but as is in this passage it may be the formal exercise of prayer in the assembly.

Application

Why do you think devotion to the apostles teaching is listed first?

What could happen to us as individuals if we neglected these practices? To Oakwood?

How do these practices make us better together?

We're Better Together In Love and Service

As the gospel spread and the Christian community grew, what were the duties of believers toward one another?

Scripture Passage

Heb. 10:24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25a not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another

Discovery

Since the priestly work of Christ had given those early Christians (and us) access directly to God, the Holy Spirit through the writer of Hebrews exhorts them (and us) to approach God faithfully, to firmly maintain Christian beliefs, and to find ways to encourage one another as we regularly meet together.

In verse 24, the writer encourages believers to consider some duties that they have. The word “consider” means attentive, continuous care for a purpose. To “stir up” means to provoke, or to

encourage and is an exhortation to take careful note of each other's spiritual welfare. It's our duty!

- *Stirring each other up to exercise love is our first duty.* Love is an all important part of the Christian life. The Apostles, Peter, John and Paul in their writings – inspired by the Holy Spirit – record the “love one another” command over 20 times. This imperative to love one another is obviously important to the Holy Spirit, and so we would do well to obey Him and “stir up” other believers to do the same.

This is that kind of love that is not self-seeking. This is a most important Christian duty, and believers are to help one another attain it. It is interesting that this kind of love is therefore a product of community activity. It is a virtue that requires others for its exercise! One may practice faith or hope alone, but not love. These believers are to urge one another to exercise this kind of love toward each other.

- *Stirring each other up to exercise good deeds is our second duty.* The idea here is to warn one another of the sin and danger of backsliding, to put ourselves and our fellow-Christians in mind of our duty, of our failures and corruptions, to watch over one another, and be jealous of ourselves and one another with a godly jealousy. *It is critical to understand that carrying out this duty is not to be in any way judgmental but truly looking after the wellbeing of one another lovingly and humbly.*

We Christians need to be stirred up to love and good deeds toward others, because we don't naturally do these things. We are more concerned with ourselves and what benefits us! “It was only *after* sin that planet Earth became infected with Satan's principle of self-first...” – Dr. Timothy Jennings

Consider that you as a believer can stir up other believers toward either good or *bad* works. Consequently, a good example – a holy lifestyle – shown to others is the best and most effectual provocation to love and good works! *Love and good deeds.... These are the true fruits of Christianity!*

- *Not neglecting to meet together is our third duty.* In other words, don't stop going to church or to small groups where other believers are! Community encouragement and stirring one another up to exercise love and good deeds does have a fundamental requirement...being together! *Assembling with other believers is an important and indispensable part of Christian life!* This must be of first importance no matter how busy our lives become!

Spending time together regularly to deepen relationships and serve one another is a significant challenge facing the church – especially in the larger churches of heavily populated areas. Work schedules, the pull of entertainment, and the proliferation of various activities including social media undermine community. The result is that believers sometimes feel disconnected, uncared for, and unloved. Many Christians see church as something you do when it's convenient or when nothing else is going on.

Christians who meet together with the aim of promoting godliness and love for one another can be remarkably successful in their ventures. Regular fellowship with believers is an essential ingredient in Christian growth. John Wesley said, “*There is nothing more unchristian than a solitary Christian.*”

Application

What are some ways that believers can encourage one another to exercise self-sacrificing love toward other believers?

If we are to encourage other believers to exercise good deeds, then what are some examples of good deeds that would be acceptable to God?

What could be some *valid* reasons a believer might give for not coming to church or small group on a regular basis?

Better Together In Holy Living

As established churches grew, what obligations did the individual believers have toward one another?

Scripture Passage

Col. 3:12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16a Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.

Discovery

In the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul has been talking about the freedom we have from human religious regulations and the harmful legalistic teachings and traditions of men that have no support from Scripture. This freedom has come because we have been liberated by Jesus Christ, and now Paul gives us some practices for holy living.

Some of these practices are described using metaphors or images to help us understand them more clearly. Many of these practices are considered to be as it were a piece of clothing that we are to put on or to be covered with, that is, plainly displayed for other believers to observe.

In this passage we are directed to take up three obligations we have as believers that benefit one another.

- *Live holy lives that profit each other is the first obligation. Col. 3:12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

Let's remember that the Lord, who is Himself holy, calls his people to consecrate themselves, i.e., dedicate themselves to holiness and to be holy, i.e., practice a holy lifestyle. Moses recorded this command in Lev. 11:44 and Peter repeated it again in 1 Pet. 1:16. Consequently, believers from all time are commanded to live a holy, set-apart life.

In these initial verses, Paul is exhorting Christians to live a holy life. He exhorted his readers and us to put off the grave clothes of sin and the old life, and to put on the “grace clothes” of holiness and the new life in Christ. These are the evidences of true holiness. The words “put on”, as used in these verses, denote urgency and an absolute necessity. Putting on these holy virtues is *not* an option for the believer. So, what are these godly garments that believers are to clothe themselves in?

Compassionate hearts. An emotional, caring relationship with those whose lives are hurt and broken.

Kindness. Readiness to do good, even when it may be undeserved.

Humility. A posture of lowliness and servanthood.

Meekness. Or, “gentleness” in offering help, a non-coercive approach to encouraging change in others’ lives.

Patience. Willingness to be long-suffering in consideration of human frailty.

Love. Christians are called on to love one another above all else. Love, it seems, unites all these other virtues.

Love is the most important of the Christian virtues, and it acts like a “girdle” that ties all the other virtues together. All of the spiritual qualities Paul has named are aspects of true Christian love. When love rules in our lives, it unites all these spiritual virtues so that there is beauty and harmony, indicating spiritual maturity. This harmony and maturity keep the believer’s life balanced and growing. *Please note that all of these virtues directly benefit others!*

- *Put up with and forgive each other is the second obligation. Col. 3:13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

We are to put up with others even when they fail or act differently from what is expected. “Forgiving” is based on the root word for “grace.” It carries the idea of a free forgiveness, perhaps because of grace. These two qualities were linked in Paul’s mind as they often are in practice.

Putting up with and forgiving are especially appropriate when one is offended. The text says, “if one has a complaint against another.” It obviously speaks to the offended party, not the offending one. It may be that the offending person had little, if any, awareness of what he had done. The offended should take initiative in enduring and forgiving, rather than waiting for the offender to apologize.

By putting up with and forgiving, the conscience is cleansed and the matter forgotten. The burden is lifted, and the offended can think and act like Christ even toward the offender. Harboring resentment and ill will toward another does little good, and to do so is beneath Christians.

Believers must have patience with one another, even while enduring a difficult situation. Even in the community of believers, the actions of some offend or hurt others; how believers respond is critical. Experiencing God's forgiveness shows that believers must forgive one another.

- *Teach and admonish each other is the third obligation. Col. 3:16a Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.*

The *positive* command from this verse is that believers are to teach each other. Teaching is just the orderly arrangement of Biblical truth and telling it clearly to another believer. What would they teach each other? Perhaps what they heard from the Apostles, that is, those things that Christ commanded and taught or those things that the Holy Spirit was now revealing to the Apostles.

We are on the same spiritual journey as believers. Some have been on this journey longer than others, but all have come from different paths or life experiences. Consequently, all believers can learn spiritual truth from each other regardless of how long they have been Christians. The great thing is that with every encounter of teaching each other there is a positive outcome, that is, learning happens!

The *negative* command in this verse is that we are to admonish each other. The word "admonish" contains the ideas of encouragement, reproof, blame, warning, etc. Admonishing differs from teaching. Admonishing has the element of strong encouragement. It is generally practical and moral, rather than abstract or theological. It is the way teaching is reinforced in the lives of the hearers. Such orderly arrangement of truth and strong practical encouragement are to be done *in wisdom*.

The obligations of *teaching* and *admonishing* are used as imperatives meaning that they are of utmost importance.

Application

Which one of these do you think is the most difficult for a believer to put into practice: a compassionate heart, kindness, humility, meekness (gentleness), or patience? Why?

What are some examples of how you have put up with and/or forgave other believers who didn't act as you expected?

How might you equip yourself to be able to teach and admonish other believers?

Conclusion

It's called synergy!

You and I as believers in Christ need each other to grow as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're better together...

- When we are devoted to the practices of studying the Word and participating in worship with one another.

- When we do our duties of provoking and encouraging each other to exercise love and to exercise good deeds.
- When we fulfill our obligations to live holy lives, put up with, forgive, teach and admonish one another.

You and I as part of Oakwood need each other as a growing family of believers.

We're better together...

- When we gather for worship on Sunday mornings...praying, singing, and hearing a message from God's Word.
- When we gather for small group meetings...connecting people, studying God's Word, and serving others.
- When we gather to go outside the walls of Oakwood serving our community, state, country, and the world while meeting needs and sharing the gospel as we go.