

## Lesson 11

# Caring For One Another

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things, Galatians 5.22-23.

## Introduction

Over the course of our study in being knit together we have asserted the great value of the church and its vital connection to a healthy spiritual life. As we read the passage above, we see the natural result of the Spirit's work inside us leads to a growing awareness and care for others inside our church family. Every one of these virtues direct our minds away from ourselves, moving our focus toward Jesus and the ones He loves.

One of the best places to see these virtues coming to life so quickly after conversion is to read Luke's account of the life of the Acts 2 church. The text clearly reveals a church where the members genuinely cared for each other:

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved, Acts 2.44-47.

The type of care described here is one of the things that fueled the growth of the early church. People from every possible background, geographical and language difference, etc., were drawn together by their common love for Jesus, which expressed itself in loving others as themselves. A study of the New Testament will show more examples than space allows providing us with a blueprint to follow.

No matter how loving and warm a congregation is, there is always room to excel even more. This lesson is written with that spirit as we work to examine ourselves and look for even more ways to *not get tired of doing good* and embrace the promise that *we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith,* Galatians 6.9-10.

As we go through this lesson, let's look at the example of three Christians who excelled in caring for one another.

## Dorcas, Acts 9

Her story is found in Acts 9:36-37. From it we can see she was a person who demonstrated her faith by her actions. She used her talents in the service of our King and did what she could for others. The fact that she made a difference in the lives of her fellow saints is seen in verse 39:

Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they led him to the room upstairs. And all the widows approached him, weeping and showing him the robes and clothes that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

She realized life is not about fame, preeminence, or recognition. She found fulfillment in serving others. Dorcas was not a famous person in her time or involved in some great project to benefit the whole world. She was just a disciple living a very ordinary life serving others in the spirit of Christ. What an incredible honor that she received recognition by having her deeds summarized in Scripture. She is certainly a great example of what it means to care for others.

## Paul and the Philippians

The relationship between Paul and the Philippian church was special. Nothing bonds people together like shared experiences, and especially great difficulty. Acts 16 records the establishment of the church in Philippi. The work was immediately met by criticism and outright persecution. Paul and his associates were urged to leave the city, but his relationship with the brethren there only grew. Writing from Ephesus, note Paul's great affection for the Philippian church:

Indeed, it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus, Philippians 1.7-8.

Philippians 1.7-8 sheds light on the type of relationship Paul had with the church in Philippi. Paul had them *in his heart*. He loved them with the affection of Christ. This wasn't the love of attraction as his love for them went far deeper. His was a love given by Christ through the Spirit. Paul was bonded together with them in the most unique way possible. This love endured through all the ups and downs, tests and trials, separation, and disappointments. His love for them had staying power.

This is the kind of love that should describe the type of love in the church. As it functions it becomes something beautiful to behold. When we think of the church, we should not think of it as a club or community organization. It is not a sports team or bowling league. While you may have friends and associates in each of these things, and be bound by common interests, your life is not tightly intertwined with the other members of those groups. When our daughter played sports at our local high school, the parents would all gather in the stands and speak superficially about their lives. Once the game was over, we all went back to our regular lives. Certainly, there are pleasant memories we have by associating with that team and all those people, but that's about it.

The relationships we are blessed with in the church are intended to run much deeper. In fact, God has designed them to be life altering. Life changing. Life impacting. This is why Paul uses the term "affection" in Philippians 1.8. That is the strongest word he could have used to express the level of His compassion and love for them. The word means "from the bowels." Everything within him longed for them. They were woven into his heart. This is one of the sweetest things about being part of the church.

And notice the natural result of this deep relationship: constant prayer on behalf of the other person:

And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so that you may approve the things that are superior and may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God, Philippians 1.9-11.

Continuing to read through Philippians we get other insight into the kind of relationship Paul had with these Christians:

- Philippians 1.3-5 – *I give thanks for every remembrance of you, always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* They enjoyed active participation in the work of the lord. a.k.a., fellowship. It was not a one-time thing, rather it was ongoing.
- Philippians 2.12: the Philippian brethren were *dear friends* to Paul.
- Philippians 4.1: Paul *dearly loved them* and *longed for* them. He regarded them as his *joy and crown*.
- Philippians 4.10, 14-20: The Philippians church demonstrated true care for others through their active responses to the various needs of Paul ... even out of their own meager resources.

Paul's relationship with the Philippian church provides us with one of the best New Testament examples of seeing what it means to care for others.

## Epaphroditus

Epaphroditus provides Bible students with a great example of *fellowship*. He is identified as a Christian sent by the Philippians to help Paul during a time of need, Philippians 2.25; 4.18.

Understanding who Epaphroditus was, is best understood by seeing him inside his relationship to Paul and the Philippians. Paul uses three significant terms in 2.25 to characterize his bond with him:

- “My brother” - He was one in the faith with Paul.
- “My fellow worker” - He was a colleague of Paul in evangelizing.
- “My fellow soldier” - He struggled side by side with Paul against adversaries of the gospel. *This military metaphor suggests that Epaphroditus experienced suffering and conflict in his ministry.*<sup>23</sup>

Epaphroditus (in the case of the context of Philippians) served as a minister to Paul's material needs by bringing him monetary gifts the Philippian church entrusted him with. Notice how Paul describes these gifts in 4.18:

- “A fragrant offering”
- “A sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God”

Epaphroditus completed his mission. Note 2.30: *for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.* Look again at 4.18. What did receipt of these gifts do for Paul? *I have received full payment, **and more. I am well supplied...***

## For Today

What can we learn? Here are some takeaways:

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<sup>23</sup> Freedman, David Noel, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, and Astrid B. Beck, eds. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

1. You can live just an ordinary life and make an extraordinary difference in the lives of others by simply doing what you can, just like Dorcas.
2. There is something sweet about the deep relationships we develop with others in the church, in many cases these becoming closer to us than our own family or relatives. The warmth we share with others propels us and those we love into more meaningful relationships with Christ.
3. We need to see the potential in the far-reaching impact our sacrifice and acts of service can have on the lives of others. I'm sure Paul never forgot Epaphroditus, who nearly lost his life caring for his needs.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. What is so impressive about Dorcas? What are some ways she can inspire you to greater acts of care and service?
2. How do the shared experiences of life bring us together with others? Cite some examples.
3. How does prayer strengthen the bond you have with other Christians?
4. What stands out to you in the relationship between the Philippians and Paul? What can we learn from it?
5. What level of care did Epaphroditus express to Paul? How do you think this made Paul feel? What level of care and sacrifice are you willing to go?