

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Companionship

Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun. There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail. Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12)

I recently had a rather extended conversation with a member of a church in a different fellowship than my own. This person's church, though somewhat small by contemporary mega-church norms, appeared to be healthy and gracious. Then the senior pastor retired, and the church began trying to reach agreement to name the younger associate pastor to the senior post. Intense polarity abruptly invaded the church's culture, and an apparently healthy church quickly degenerated into a deadly political body, far more interested in each side getting their way than seeking God's will and vision for a New Testament church. The change so discouraged my friend that he is threatening to drop out of not only this church, but any church at all. The frequency of this scenario is rather disheartening. Rather than seeking God's will and instructions first, fallen humans, even regenerate humans who profess faith in Christ, easily slip into a "me first" attitude that puts self at the center of their world and rejects anyone or anything that does not support their world view of self-at-the-heart-of-everything.

Having just concluded his assessment of the rat race (one rat striving for mastery and the other striving to drop out), Solomon's transition to this topic follows a rather logical progression. Intense ambition, typically in the form of a fiercely competitive spirit, tends to isolate people. Instead of building relationship bridges with others, it seems more inclined to move onto the island of self-first and burn all bridges to and from its lonely fortress. It often even alienates

immediate family members and close friends. A dead-give-away to this attitude is the cynical question, "Why am I doing all of this?" or as Solomon frames the question, "For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good?" You see self at the center of this attitude. The speaker focuses on all that "I" have done.

Then in somewhat more rapid fashion that his typical Ecclesiastes strategy Solomon moves to his wise insight, the better alternative to the lonely world of ambition and personal gain. "Two are better than one." The simplest interpretation of the passage is "Companionship is better than loneliness." The lonely person who has difficulty making and maintaining close relationships should examine self carefully. What is he/she doing that so quickly erodes what appeared to be a solid friendship?

In the Old Testament God instituted a community form of worship through the nation of Israel. God rejected Elijah's "I am left alone..." self-pity and directed him to leave the cave and get busy doing what God wanted him to do, not what his own self-pity determined to do.

In the New Testament the Lord Jesus instituted a community form of worship in the New Testament church. Long before the first formal church began its function, Jesus anticipated its formation and function. He promised to build His "church" on the foundational rock of His deity. He instructed individuals with interpersonal problems to work through their personal and private efforts to resolve their problems, but, if those efforts failed, to "tell it to the church." Here

the church is to function as a wise judge, not as a disciplinarian.

We could apply the companionship principles of this lesson to marriage and families, as well as to churches. I've observed a number of marriages in which the couple lived under the same roof, but were seldom really "on the same page," resulting in a lonely life, even in the marriage. There is a certain compromise involved in any harmonious relationship. You give up the privilege of doing things your way in favor of living in sensitive harmony with your companion.

Equally a minister or church that turns from gracious and cooperative interaction with other ministers or churches is crossing an ethical line of godly fellowship that contradicts the New Testament model for a church and its Founder's example. While we have no example of one New Testament church invading the internal business of another New Testament church, we find a consistent pattern of one New Testament church interacting respectfully and graciously with other New Testament churches, not ignoring them or acting in ways that offended them. Churches or ministers that isolate themselves from the body of their fellowship are in every bit as much spiritual danger as an individual who strikes out on his own and deludes himself into thinking he is God's last bastion of faithfulness and truth. Pride and the "I am left alone" arrogance that God rebuked in Elijah will eventually consume the healthy spirit and lead to ever-increasing departure from the New Testament model for church and minister alike. Local churches or ministers who isolate themselves from regular and intimate interaction with their fellows are prime targets for Satan, doomed to personal failure. The cunning lion stalks the strays in a herd of wildebeests. He seldom goes after the pack. "Two are better than one."

In Matthew 18 Jesus outlined an extended strategy for His disciples to follow when they encountered personal conflict with other believers. Sadly, this simple model of godly conduct is seldom practiced. Sinful pride hinders our willingness to be open and respectful toward others, especially when their judgment might well require us to make some changes in our way of thinking and acting. However, Jesus

added a bright encouragement to the lesson. "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" (Matthew 18:20) The gathering in His name in this context specifically refers to individuals who follow His instructions as they work through their personal disagreements. When we follow Jesus' way as outlined in the passage, He promises to add His presence (I believe a similar point to Solomon's reference to the "three-fold cord;" when we violate God's way, loneliness and broken relationships are sure to follow. When we follow His way, He adds His presence and blessing to ensure a wise and godly resolution to the problem.), and to be in their midst. I am amazed at the frequency with which professing Christians resort to gossip, backbiting, and any number of other ungodly attitudes and habits; yet seem to sincerely expect God to bless them despite their flagrant breach of His teaching. His promise of blessing is a direct corollary to our obedience in this passage. To the extent that we follow His instructions, He promises to add His third strand to the cord of our relationships. To the extent that we fail to obey His instructions, we must live with the tenuous strength of two rotten cords, tangled and not smoothly stranded at that. We should not be surprised when relationships fail after we refuse to follow Jesus' teachings. How else could they go?

Lonely people are typically full of great rationalizations, and the most frequent explanation they will give for a broken relationship will point the blaming finger at the other person. The broken relationship is all due to what "he did" or what "she said." Like the ambitious and overly competitive person in the prior lesson, folks who consciously choose to avoid Jesus' instructions in favor of their own way will work hard and long to avoid accepting any responsibility for their failures.

Gracious partnership will constantly consider one's partner and seek to build strength and integrity into the relationship. It will seek the benefit of the other person more than self-interest. The godly and wise Christian understands that Jesus had wise intentions when He instituted community fellowship and worship.

The supreme example of wise relationship is Jesus Himself. Study the entire second chapter of Philipians, but

note especially 2:4, "*Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.*" The next step in Paul's progression exemplifies Jesus' personal submission to the Father in the Incarnation. The number of professing Christians who exhibit the courage to practice this verse seems fairly small. Professing believers abound who claim to have all the answers and to be constantly and infallibly right, but few indeed can be found who make conscious decisions that are in the best interest of another, not self.

Would you like to see the strength of a godly "three-fold cord"? It can happen so easily, and it will bless you immensely. God promises the third strand in the cord as we submit our lives to Him and to His teaching in Scripture. Obedience, not impunity, assures His blessing and the third strand in the cord of our relationships, be they personal, family, ministerial, or interchurch.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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