

Alive and Well
Relationships in the Body of Christ

We are in the midst of a sermon series entitled “Alive and Well”; we are talking about how to thrive in the core relationships in our lives. Last week we discussed the topic of deep spiritual friendships. In such friendships we connect with a few others on a heart-level in ways that have the potential of being life-giving and even life-saving.

Today we are going to talk about our relationships in the broader body of Christ beyond our close circle of deep spiritual friendship. Last week we read Faith’s statement about “authentic community”:

God created us to live in community with one another. We seek to cultivate deep spiritual friendships and other healthy relationships of accountability, belonging, and care.

Today we’re going to discuss the last phrase in our statement: “other healthy relationships of accountability, belonging, and care.” As satisfying as they might be, deep spiritual friendships are not enough; we also need a network of healthy relationships that address other spiritual, emotional, and material needs.

One of the ways that the NT describes and encourages such relationships is through the “One Another” commands. If you google “the one another commands in Scripture” you will find them listed. Depending on the translation used and whether they group together identical commands, you’ll find anywhere between 39 and 59 one anothers listed. I want to give a quick overview of the one another commands and then we’ll look at two specific one anothers in some detail.

As we go along, consider how obeying these commands would build healthy relationships of accountability, belonging, and care.

Overview of the “One Another” Commands in Scripture

Here’s a quick run-down (we’ll look at two of these in some detail).

- Love one another (approx. 15x - see John 13:34, 15:12, 15:17, 1 Peter 3:8, 1 John 3:11, etc.)
- Be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50)
- Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you (Romans 15:7)
- Greet one another with a holy kiss (4x - see Romans 16:16; this greeting will look different in different cultures, but the idea is to acknowledge your common set-apartness in Christ [as opposed to thinking your common relationship with Him is trivial/insignificant])
- Forgive each other (Ephesians 4:32)
- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21)
- Encourage one another (Hebrews 3:13, 10:25)
- Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
- Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9)
- Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5)

With only a couple of exceptions, these commands reflect how God in Christ has treated us. [An exception would be “confess your sins to one another” since God is sinless.] He has loved us, made peace with us, accepted us, forgiven us, encouraged us, shown hospitality toward us, shown humility toward us (the incarnation - see Philippians 2), etc. The one another commands basically tell us to treat each other the way God has treated us.

Ray Ortlund wrote a column entitled “One Others I Can’t Find in the New Testament.” His comments are insightful (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/one-others-i-cant-find-in-the-new-testament-2/>):

The beautiful “one another” commands of the New Testament are famous. But it is also striking to notice the “one others” that do *not* appear there.

For example, sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, marginalize one another, exclude one another, judge one another, run one another’s lives, confess one another’s sins

The kind of God we really believe in is revealed in how we treat one another. The lovely gospel of Jesus positions us to treat one another like royalty, and every non-gospel positions us to treat one another like dirt. But we *will* follow through horizontally on whatever we really believe vertically.

In other words, what we really believe about the gospel (what God has done in Christ) will come out in our relationships.

In addition to these positive one another commands (telling us how we ***should*** treat each other), we have quite a few negative commands (telling us how we ***shouldn’t*** treat one another). This is a teaching technique throughout Scripture (giving positive and negative commands, as in the Ten Commandments).

- Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:2)
- Do not lie to each other (Colossians 3:9)
- Do not slander one another (James 4:11)
- Don’t grumble against each other (James 5:9)

If a church or any grouping of Christians (whether a family or a campus ministry, or a life group) took these commands seriously and learned to embody them, they would experience a type of wholeness and life that would be undeniable. They would thrive as a church or campus ministry or family.

These commands require us to be very intentional; obeying them will be costly. My hunch is that most Christians have a much more passive approach to the body of Christ. We (myself included sometimes) show up to life group or worship without a thought about the potential influence we might have in others’ lives. Sometimes it’s the busying of life; just showing up seems like a heroic achievement. But sometimes we

lack a vision for the impact we could have in each others' lives. Consider two specific examples; try to catch a vision for the one another of Scripture.

Spur one another on to love and good deeds (*Hebrews 10:24–25*) The book of Hebrews stresses that because of His death, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of God, we have confidence to enter into the very presence of God. The commands in this passage flow from that confidence.

19 Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

Verses 24 and 25 give two more commands in the form of one-anothers.

24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The command here is to spend time considering things you might say and do that would influence others to love better and to do good deeds. Implicit in this command is the reality that God actually wants you to influence other people's behavior. As a result of the things you say and do, others are supposed to have greater motivation and resolve to show love and engage in good deeds.

Let me give an example from my own life. About eight years ago I read a book called *The Fatherless Generation* (by John Sowers) that described the fallout in the lives of kids who don't have a dad present in their lives. The book advocates becoming a mentor and investing in the life of a kid. I was vaguely familiar with Big Brothers Big Sisters, so I read everything I could find online and went down to the local BBBS office and talked with one of the staff members. I had a growing conviction that I should become a Big. I kept talking about becoming a Big . . . for several months . . . I kept talking and talking and talking. Finally, one of my friends said, "You should go down and sign up to be a Big." The next week I went down and signed up. His simple, direct comment moved me from talking to doing.

That is what Hebrews 10:24 urges us to do: influence each other to **do** the will of God (which at the core involves love and good deeds). You can't do this with everybody, but you can do it with a few.

Notice as well the warning against "forsaking our own assembling together." When a person quits gathering with other believers - whether in corporate worship or Bible study or some other type of fellowship - s/he is no longer in a position to be influenced by them. In light of our time in history (the day of the Lord is drawing near; we are living in

the last chapter of history before the consummation of all things), we should encourage one another all the more. At the heart of encouragement is “coming alongside” others to help them walk with God.

As a simple discipline, before you gather with other believers, take two minutes to prayerfully consider, “God, how do you want to use me to spur others on to love and good deeds? How do you want me to come alongside someone else?” If ten or twelve people in a life group each showed up with this mind, the relationships in that group would thrive. There would be an anticipation and commitment to each other that would be powerful and beautiful.

A second example involves:

Bearing one another’s burdens (*Galatians 6:1-2*) Verse 1 sets the context for “bearing one another’s burdens” in verse 2.

1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Paul is probably addressing the scenario in which a person is entrapped in some sin (not that they’ve “gotten caught”). One aspect of “walking in the light” (1 John 1) involves confessing our sins to one another (our close spiritual friends). Instead of skulking around in the darkness, we bring our sin out into the light so that others who are in the light can help us.

Paul says that when it comes to light that someone is trapped in some trespass, “you who are spiritual” should respond. When Paul calls someone “spiritual” he is talking about someone who is led by the Spirit, someone who keeps in step with the Spirit, someone who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. Only a “Spirit-led person” is helpful in this type of situation. A person who walks by the flesh will make things worse.

Paul says “restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” The goal is always restoration; the goal is never punishment. The term “restore” is interesting. Just like a doctor sets a broken bone (restores it) or the way fishermen would “mend” (restore) their fishing nets, those who are spiritual help ***restore a person back to a condition of wholeness and usefulness***. The goal is not to shame the other person or to prove that the church is serious about sin. The goal is to bring the person back to a place of wholeness and usefulness.

Therefore, it makes perfect sense that Paul writes that those who are spiritual should restore such a one ***“in a spirit of gentleness.”*** Harshness will only harden the person entrapped in sin and will often drive him/her farther away from God and from other believers. But when we are gentle, we imitate Jesus who invited weary, burdened people to come to Him because He was “gentle and humble in heart.”

Paul also mentions, “*each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” Helping restore another person should be a very humbling experience. In this context Paul writes verse 2:

2 Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

We can bear one another’s burdens in many different ways: talking with others, praying for others, serving others (mowing their grass, watching their kids, taking them food, etc.) But helping restore someone overtaken by some sin is a core way that we as believers “bear one another’s burdens.” In this metaphor, sin is a burden that the person doesn’t have the strength to carry alone. If you’ve ever been involved in helping someone else deal with his/her sin, you know that it can be burdensome; your load would be lighter if you didn’t get involved. But you care too much to keep your distance and just hope things work out okay.

Back in Galatians 5:14 Paul wrote that if you love your neighbor as yourself you’ve fulfilled the OT Law. Here he says that if you bear others’ burdens you’ve fulfilled “the law of Christ” - which is elsewhere called “the law of love.” When we love each other by bearing one another’s burdens, we’re actually fulfilling the intent of Jesus’ teachings.

Jim Kallam is now an E-Free pastor in Charlotte, NC. I’ve gotten to know Jim through a pastor’s meeting I attend each year. In his book *Risking Church* he describes a time in his life when he needed others to restore him to a place of wholeness and usefulness. Jim he had a good job (a businessman who travelled a lot), a wife, and three great kids; people referred to them as an all-American family. But after eighteen years of marriage he began to pull away from his wife and his circle of close friends. Due to his own selfishness, he walked away from everything. In his words, “I betrayed my wife, my family, my friends, and most important, my God.”

Jim writes that some individuals responded with a truth-only approach: they pointed out his sin (of which he was already painfully aware) and then refused to associate with him when he didn’t quickly respond. Others didn’t know what to say or do, so they stayed away (no contact at all). A third group of people entered into the situation with grace and truth.

Fortunately for me, some in my community displayed God’s love and made a choice to stay involved. To each of them I remain eternally grateful. I was encouraged by their kind words and loving deeds. While I continued to remain attached to the world and its pleasures, this community prayed for me - for my restoration with God, my wife, and my family. They also came alongside and took care of my family - something I’m ashamed to admit I had refused to do. . .

Their support for my wife and family was incredible. Several of our closest friends stepped in and loved my family in tangible ways. They stayed close to them, providing support in every way, even financially when needed. They played with my children and took them places that I should have been taking them. Close friends provided the core Christian values and role modeling for them. Their

encouragement helped my wife stay strong in the Lord and to seek Him even in the darkest of times. This community stepped in and became Christ to my family.

While I was clearly out of God's will and not very lovable, they continued to pray for me and love me. I didn't realize just how unrelenting my community was. Several men continued to reach out to me. They didn't condone my actions but in love pursued me, keeping the doors open for restoration and fellowship. (pp. 136-138)

After eighteen months, God began answering the prayers of this faithful community. Divorce proceedings were moving forward when God softened Jim's heart and moved him to humble himself before God and his family. His wife extended forgiveness and they began the slow, difficult work of rebuilding their life together. Through this faithful community Jim was restored to a place of wholeness and usefulness to God. They experienced the power and beauty of Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."

Not all marriages are restored, and not everyone responds with humble repentance. But such things **are possible** when we're in relationship with a community of people committed to bearing one another's burdens. We have experienced this type healing and restoration here at Faith on many occasions. Some of you excel at this. I know because some of you have helped bear my burdens through prayer, encouragement, notes, a kind word, etc.

In light of Galatians 6:2, I have two questions: 1) Are you willing to bear others' burdens? 2) Are you willing to let others bear your burdens? A burden could be any number of things:

- As we've been discussing, sometimes a burden involves a sin issue that you can't overcome on your own.
- Your burden might be a deep-seated grief over a relationship that has deteriorated.
- An illness or physical limitation.
- Unemployment or underemployment.
- Your burden might be a decision that is weighing heavy on your mind.

Galatians 6:2 requires that we be willing to bear others' burdens **and** that we allow others to bear ours.

Most often we bear one another's burdens in the normal flow of relationships. But I also want to let you know that here at Faith we also have available a team of compassionate people who have been trained to walk alongside people who have heavy burdens. If you have a burden that is weighing you down, you can sign up for a Stephen Minister who will meet with you for an hour a week to talk and pray. Stephen Ministers aren't counselors, but they are skillful in listening and helping you move forward. You might already be receiving counseling for some issue; a Stephen Minister could provide additional support and encouragement. We currently have 25 trained Stephen Ministers and about 7-8 of them are available to be paired with someone.

Next week we are going to wrap up this sermon series on relationships by discussing our relationships with people who don't yet know Christ. It's interesting to note that our

relationships **inside** the church can provide the foundation for relationships **outside** the church. In John 13 Jesus told His followers this:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus let His followers know that how we treat each other is on display for the rest of the world to see. And they will be able to judge whether or not we are truly Jesus disciples (or just church people or religious people). The one another are not only a pathway to healthy relationships within the church; they also provide the foundation of our influence in the larger world.