

FELLOWSHIP: MORE THAN COFFEE AND DOUGHNUTS
ACTS 4:32 - 5:11

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

M.I. FELLOWSHIP IN THE BIBLE IS MORE THAN COFFEE AND DOUGHNUTS. IT HAS TO DO WITH MEETING ONE ANOTHER'S SPIRITUAL, PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MATERIAL NEEDS. IT IS A VERY DIFFICULT CONCEPT TO PUT INTO PRACTICE AND TAKES A LOT OF THOUGHT, PRAYER, AND WISDOM.

I. GODLY ATTITUDES (4:32-36)

FELLOWSHIP IS AN ATTITUDE THAT ENCOMPASSES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER.

- A. UNITED IN CHRIST (Vs. 32-33)
- B. DEDICATED TO ONE ANOTHER (Vs. 34-35)
- C. COMMITTED TO THE LORD AND ONE ANOTHER (V. 36)

II. WRONG ATTITUDES FOR GIVING (5:1-11)

GIVING AND HELPING FOR WRONG REASONS IS HARMFUL TO INDIVIDUALS AND TO THE BODY OF CHRIST.

- A. WRONG MOTIVES (Vs. 1-2)
- B. WRONG RESULTS (Vs. 3-6)
- C. WRONG RELATIONSHIPS (Vs. 7-10)
- D. RIGHT ATTITUDES (Vs. 5b & 10)

III. WRONG ATTITUDES FOR RECEIVING

WE ARE CALLED TO EXERCISE WISDOM IN GIVING. WE SHOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEET EVERY NEED THAT IS PRESENTED TO US. WE CAN ACTUALLY FIND OURSELVES WORKING AGAINST GOD.

- A. SHORT CIRCUITING GOD'S WORK (GALATIANS 6:7)
- B. AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY (I TIMOTHY 5:9-16)
- C. REFUSING TO WORK (II THESSALONIANS 3:6-10)

FELLOWSHIP: MORE THAN COFFEE AND DOUGHNUTS

ACTS 4:32 - 5:11

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

We are in the fourth week of our series. We are attempting to understand what our purpose in life is as believers in Jesus Christ. In addition, we as individuals are the church, and these purposes can be applied to us as a church body. So far, we have said that God created us for worship, evangelism, and discipleship. In other words, we are to love Him with all our hearts, souls, minds, and bodies. That is worship. Secondly, we are to actively tell others how to be in a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. That is evangelism. And thirdly, we are to grow in our relationship with God and coach others in their growth process. That is discipleship. This morning, we are going to discuss a fourth purpose: fellowship. We have come to think of fellowship as drinking coffee and eating doughnuts and bagels. However, that is probably the furthest idea of what fellowship was all about according to the New Testament.

In the Bible, fellowship had to do with meeting the physical, spiritual, emotional, and material needs of fellow believers and it had everything to do with intimacy within the community of faith.

Unfortunately, the Christian church has gained a reputation for shooting its wounded in direct opposition of the Bible's command to heal and restore the wounded.

That reminds me of a story I heard. A farmer was coming out of his field along the back roads of a remote area. Just as he pulled out on the road, a city slicker came speeding over the hilltop and hit his cart. The farmer was lying there, pinned under the wagon, his dog not far away, and his mule across the road in the other ditch.

About that time a car pulled up and the farmer thought, "Thank God, someone is going to help me." When he saw that it was the sheriff, he was even more relieved. The sheriff

looked the situation over with a glance. Seeing the mule had a broken leg and suffering, he pulled out his revolver and shot it to end its misery. He walked across the road and saw the dog was just as bad off, so he also shot him to end his misery. Then he walked over to the farmer and asked if he was in pain. "Never felt better in my life!" exclaimed the farmer.

I know that sounds funny but you would be surprised to know how many hurting people come to church each week pretending everything is fine. Let us see how God defines fellowship as one of our purposes in life.

Right up front, I need to tell you that I have some strong biases on this topic. I do not think that Biblical fellowship can happen in the context of the church as an organization or an institution. In other words, I don't think that fellowship can happen at Devon Church, as a church. I think you will see as I preach through this morning's passage and some other related passages, I feel that it is almost impossible for fellowship to happen in a large group context such as Sunday morning church.

Fellowship has a much better chance of succeeding in small groups. That is why I have tried to push us into small group ministries. Here is the main idea of fellowship.

FELLOWSHIP IN THE BIBLE IS MORE THAN COFFEE AND DOUGHNUTS. IT HAS TO DO WITH MEETING ONE ANOTHER'S SPIRITUAL, PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MATERIAL NEEDS. IT IS A VERY DIFFICULT CONCEPT TO PUT INTO PRACTICE AND TAKES A LOT OF THOUGHT, PRAYER, AND WISDOM.

You see, in order to pull this off, we have to know one another, really know one another. We have to be in a close relationship to make fellowship happen.

I. GODLY ATTITUDES (4:32-36)

FELLOWSHIP IS AN ATTITUDE THAT ENCOMPASSES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER.

Good fellowship starts with Godly attitudes as described in Acts chapter 4, verses 32-36.

FELLOWSHIP IS AN ATTITUDE THAT ENCOMPASSES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH

GOD AND ONE ANOTHER. Jesus summarized the Christian life by saying, "Love the Lord

your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength,

and love your neighbor as yourself." That is an attitude of fellowship. The New Testament

word for fellowship is koinonia, and it is often used as a verb. In other words, we are to

fellowship with one another. As we read through the New Testament we can see that people

often met in house churches. In the Old Testament, fellowship centered around extended family

situations in the context of clans. Since both the Old and New Testaments take this concept of

caring for one another's needs so seriously, I think it is safe to assume that God sees this as an

important purpose for our lives. Last week we said that Christ's command for us to grow was

NOT optional, it was a command, and we can say the same about fellowship, it is NOT optional.

It is part of what it means to be a Christian.

A. UNITED IN CHRIST (Vs. 32-33)

As verses 32-33 point out, fellowship begins by being united with Christ. Let's start

with verse 33. This community was built on the truth that Jesus is Lord. The apostles spent

their time preaching that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. There is no other way to be

reconciled with God except to place our faith and trust in Jesus. There are many clubs we

belong to in today's society, just as there are many religions that one can also belong to. But to

be reconciled and in a right relationship with God, one must surrender their lives to Jesus. This

is how we become part of the church.

That's why in verse 32 the believers were one in heart and mind. Look at their attitudes.

No one claimed that possessions were his own; they shared everything they had with one another.

It's not just sharing money and property; it's sharing our gifts, our talents, our time, and our love. This is an attitude of love. We belong to one another because we have the same Father and Lord, we have the same Holy Spirit. We are family.

I had a church ask me once in an interview, "Pastor, you know we are educated and independent thinkers. How would you make us get along?"

My answer to them was, "I can't make you get along. It is only if you have the Holy Spirit, and are humble enough to let Him have His way with you, will you get along. If you submit to Jesus as Lord, you will come to be of one heart and one mind. Only as you humble yourselves will God the Holy Spirit make that happen in you."

So in order to be able to fellowship, we must have the Holy Spirit. And we receive the Holy Spirit when we are united with Christ in faith.

B. DEDICATED TO ONE ANOTHER (Vs. 34-35)

When we submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit and as He renews our thinking, we become dedicated to one another as described in verses 34-35.

I want you to really hear the first sentence of verse 34. There were no needy persons among them. Did you hear that? No one fell through the cracks. Everybody that needed to be cared for ... was cared for. Whatever it took to make sure people's needs were met, they did it. They loved one another because they came to realize that God loved them first.

I think the problem most of us have in our Christian walk is that we really don't take the time to think about what God did for us. I know we all confess that Jesus died for our sins, but do we really realize what that means? God the Father loved Jesus, God the Son and it was the

overflow of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that caused God to create us in the first place. God created us in His image so we could be in a relationship with Him.

Here is what relationship means to God. Even when we sinned and rebelled against Him, and He knew that we were hopelessly lost, it was then that He decided, with the consent of Jesus, to sacrifice His One and Only beloved Son. Jesus dedicated Himself to winning our salvation by leaving heaven, living on this dirty, sinful earth, and dying in the most horrible way for our sins. I don't think we anywhere near come close to understanding that the God of all creation suffered and died for you and for me.

God dedicated Himself to us. Think about this! Look at me! God dedicated Himself to me in death. Look at your neighbors! God dedicated Himself to them in death. If that's the case, then it seems to me that God died for my brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, it seems reasonable to me that I should dedicate myself to my brothers and sisters in Christ because that is where God's heart is.

Look at how seriously the early church took this. From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money to the apostles, who made sure people were cared for. They were dedicated to this proposition, "No one in my family will go hungry."

Later on we'll see that this job becomes too big for the apostles and they have to appoint deacons to administer this fund.

C. COMMITTED TO THE LORD AND ONE ANOTHER (V. 36)

Verse 36 summarizes the fact that we must be committed to both the Lord and one another. Barnabas was such a man. He loved the Lord and he loved people. His name means Son of encouragement. His spiritual gift certainly was encouragement. When everybody was suspicious of Paul, Barnabas came alongside Paul and brought him safely into the inner circle.

When Paul refused to give John Mark a second chance after he screwed up, Barnabas came alongside John Mark and encouraged him, Mark then became the author of the gospel of Mark. Barnabas gave up a comfortable lifestyle to go on dangerous evangelism trips with Paul and others. Barnabas had a love for God and people; therefore, he was one of the people who sold his personal property to help the poor.

But I want to point out one thing here. It was not just about handing out money or food. As Baranbas' life will demonstrate throughout the book of Acts, and as we see the church develop throughout the New Testament, fellowship has to do with ensuring physical, emotional, and spiritual well being as well as meeting material needs.

So you see, fellowship starts with a Godly attitude. In other words, **FELLOWSHIP IS AN ATTITUDE THAT ENCOMPASSES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER.**

II. WRONG ATTITUDES FOR GIVING (5:1-11)

GIVING AND HELPING FOR WRONG REASONS IS HARMFUL TO INDIVIDUALS AND TO THE BODY OF CHRIST.

I think it is fairly evident and accepted that we should be doing acts of mercy, serving in the church, and giving our talents, abilities, gifts, and money to the church. But I also think that many people serve, give, and help for the wrong reasons. Acts: chapter 5, verses 1-11 describe some of these wrong attitudes for giving. Why is it necessary to talk about the wrong attitudes for giving? Because **GIVING AND HELPING FOR WRONG REASONS IS HARMFUL TO INDIVIDUALS AND TO THE BODY OF CHRIST.**

A. WRONG MOTIVES (Vs. 1-2)

Let's examine some wrong motives in verses 1-2. Here's the scenario. People were selling off property and helping the church meet all sorts of human needs and the people were

getting recognition for it. In fact, Barnabas was singled out for his generosity. But not wanting to be left out of the spotlight, a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira came up with a plan. They would sell a piece of property they owned, however, they would hold some of the profit for themselves, put it in a bank, and then give the rest to the church.

Listen! There are people who serve in church because they want others to revere them. People serve so others will think they are good, noble, intelligent or holy. Some people give and serve because they think it's a religious duty, ... that somehow if they don't, ... God will be displeased with them and punish them. Other people serve because they want to control things. People give and serve in the church for all kinds of reasons: pride, fear, guilt, power, notoriety, expectations of others, and many other reasons.

We already said that the only proper motivation to give or to serve is love: love for God and love for God's people. That's why from time to time we invite people who come to church not to give money when the basket is passed. Giving money has to do with a love response to God and God's people. It really doesn't have anything to do with unbelievers or immature believers.

B. WRONG RESULTS (Vs. 3-6)

Look what happens when we give for the wrong motives. Verses 3-6 describe some wrong results. That's putting it mildly. Let's just recap this for a moment lest you think this may be a little harsh. No one told or expected people to sell their property and give it to the church, in fact no one ever asked for this.

Secondly, there were no rules. If Ananias and Sapphira wanted to sell their property and keep some of the money for themselves, it would have been perfectly all right for them to do so. They could have given whatever they chose to give.

The problem was their motivation. They didn't do it out of love they did it out of pride. But Peter calls Ananias out and says something to the effect, "You have come here to deceive your fellow brothers and sisters. You want them to think you are pious, and righteous, and holy, and generous. But in fact, you have lied to and cheated the Holy Spirit. You have not lied to your fellow humans, you have lied to God." No sooner did the words come out of Peter's mouth than God strikes Ananias dead. Please, do not miss this. God sees the heart. Think about the life of Jesus. Jesus had compassion for all types of sinners, but He had no compassion for the religious hypocrites.

God does not tolerate hypocrisy. If you are giving or serving for personal reasons, or if you are serving because it makes you look good to others, be very careful. God took a pretender and struck him dead on the spot.

Let me give you a few examples. Let's say I go visit the sick and help the less fortunate because I have issues going on in my life, or I have some unresolved issues from my childhood, these are not good or healthy motives for helping. What will happen is, I will be controlling and people around me won't feel the grace and love of Jesus. They will feel used. I will in essence be helping myself, not others. I've said this before, a lot of people in the helping professions are in those professions because they are trying to solve their own problems and deal with their own issues. That is not a good place to be.

Any motive for giving or serving other than love for God and His people will bring bad results to the individuals involved and to their church.

Everybody that saw what happened to Ananias, freaked out, and fear seized them. Especially when some young men came into the church to carry the dead body out.

If we are doing ministry for the wrong motives, there will be a lot of dead bodies lying

around the church, those we are trying to minister to, and those of us ministering from the wrong motives. Ananias was a literal death. I'm talking figuratively, but not ruling out literal judgment by God for hypocrisy. It's something to think about.

C. WRONG RELATIONSHIPS (Vs. 7-10)

Verses 7-10 warn us against wrong relationships. Ananias' wife has returned from the beauty shop with her new hairdo, her nails done and with a new expensive dress, and let's not forget about her new shoes. After all she doesn't want to look less than her best when everyone congratulates her.

She has no clue what happened to her husband. Peter gives her a chance to come clean. But she's wanted to be on the "A" list in church for years. This is her chance at high society. So she lies also. Peter reminds her that she has lied to God, just like her husband. She may look good on the outside, but God sees her rotten insides.

Here is a danger that we have to always look out for. Oftentimes in church, people who have issues or feel as if they don't fit, start to find each other and form groups. The groups are often built on negativity and this negative energy can form into religiosity. People learn to speak and act Christian, but if they were to really look inside themselves, they would see that they are not becoming more Christ-like. It is good for us to be involved in groups of mixed people. It is much easier to hide out in a group of outcasts than it is to be involved in mainstream groups. Mainstream groups are bound to have healthy, mature believers in them. I know that when we did the "Crackpots group" here, we made sure to mix it up by race, age, culture, and gender. We had both married and unmarried. It was one of the best and most productive and life-changing groups I have been involved in. There was a high degree of accountability and we truly fellowshiped in every way.

D. RIGHT ATTITUDES (Vs. 5b & 11)

Right attitudes are described in the second portion of verse 5 and all of verse 11. We are going to start the book of Proverbs in October. Very early on in this book, and repeated throughout, it says, "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Now people try to soften these words to say that fear means respect, but the word means shake in your boots, pee in your pants fear. The text here says that fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. In other words, you don't mess with the One true and living God. He does not play with hypocrites. The right attitude is one of love and humility. We serve one another because we love God and love one another. We better check every other motive at the door.

Let me just summarize this section of wrong attitudes for us. **GIVING AND HELPING FOR THE WRONG REASONS IS HARMFUL TO INDIVIDUALS AND TO THE BODY OF CHRIST.**

III. WRONG ATTITUDES FOR RECEIVING

WE ARE CALLED TO EXERCISE WISDOM IN GIVING. WE SHOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEET EVERY NEED THAT IS PRESENTED TO US. WE CAN ACTUALLY FIND OURSELVES WORKING AGAINST GOD.

I think by now we know that we are called to give and serve in the church. As far as fellowship goes, we know that we are to give to the needy, help one another with food, shelter, and clothing, and help meet the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of one another as well.

But it takes wisdom because to just take this thought without the guidance of the rest of the Bible would not only be tragic, it would sinful. There are some strict guidelines about giving and receiving. There are some very wrong attitudes for receiving that need to be dealt with as well. **WE ARE CALLED TO EXERCISE WISDOM IN GIVING. WE SHOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEET EVERY NEED THAT IS PRESENTED TO US. WE**

CAN ACTUALLY FIND OURSELVES WORKING AGAINST GOD.

Doesn't that sound strange to you? That by feeding the poor or donating money to people in need we can actually be working against God? Believe me. I have seen it. Now as we go through this section, I want to remind us that we are not to judge, but we are to be wise.

Further, this is the very reason why I believe it is almost impossible to do this at the institutional level of Devon Church and why I think the best context for fellowship is in a small group setting. And this is why I strongly believe everyone, in order to fulfill their purpose as a believer should be in a small group dedicated to fulfilling all our purposes; worship, fellowship, discipleship, evangelism, and ministry.

A. SHORT CIRCUITING GOD'S WORK (GALATIANS 6:7)

The first way we can work against God in giving or helping is found in Galatians 6:7. By helping, we can actually be short circuiting God's work. In that verse Paul sets out the principle that we must reap what we sow. In other words, God has devised a learning method for us. We learn by consequence. Usually when we do things the right way, good consequences will follow. Now notice, I said usually. On the other hand, when we disobey God's laws, there are consequences.

Now most of us parents can't stand to see our kids suffer. So to teach them, we yell, we manipulate, we do all sorts of crazy stuff. But whenever they get in a bind, we don't let God teach them through consequences. We almost always step in to rescue them. Maybe we do it because we feel sorry for them and don't want them to suffer. Or perhaps we rescue them because we feel guilty, or because we think we may look bad.

But the best way to parent is to let God's law of consequences kick in. Now let's not confuse this with grace. There is always a time to forgive and move on. But consequences

must kick in before learning can happen.

Every person in need is not automatically entitled to help. For example, I have seen too many times in churches where someone presents a need the church immediately jumps in to help that person. I think from the community's heart, it was a Godly gesture.

However, I know that God was disciplining some of these people because of their pride and rebellion. Because we rescued them, they never matured or grew as a result of the incident. I have seen too many times where we have prayed that God teach our children or bring adults to maturity in faith, then when God started to bring them face to face with the consequences of their behavior, we jump in and rescue them. The point is, they will never learn. For example, I have friends and classmates that just blow their money on stupid stuff. When it comes time for us to go to a conference or something and they say, "I can't go because I don't have the money," I don't jump in and say, "I'll pay." Now even though I have the spiritual gift of giving, thankfully God has also given me the gift of wisdom. I feed almost everyone who comes to church and asks for something to eat. However, I don't give money to everyone who presents a request for money. I look to guidance from God for that. You see it takes real involvement in someone's life to know what the need is. If they were in a bad position because God is teaching them something, then it would be harmful for us to rescue them. That's why I think when needs are presented, small groups and individuals should take care of them. For the most part we do that at Devon Church. It would be almost impossible for the Church as an organization to be that involved in each person's life.

B. AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY (I TIMOTHY 5:9-16)

In I Timothy 5:9-16, Paul instructs the young pastor not to help people who are avoiding responsibility. I think this is a critical passage to examine. In the Old Testament, God judged

the nation of Israel because it neglected widows and orphans. God has a special place in His hearts for widows. They are vulnerable. The New Testament church felt that it was important to care for widows. There was a list that widows in need were put on and from that list the church would distribute money.

But Paul tells Timothy, don't put widows on this list unless they're over 60, if they are young enough to work, they should work. In addition to being over 60, they have to have a proven character. They had to have been faithful wives while their husbands were alive, a good mother, and a good member of the church, being hospitable and serving in the church, a Godly woman with proven character.

People come in off the street with all sorts of stories and many of the stories are very creative. However, our primary concern is for people in our church family. I don't know who these people are. Sometimes I help, sometimes I don't. I never second-guess the people I help and I never feel guilty about the ones that I don't.

If we are involved in a small group setting, the group will know the character of the person in need. The requirement to help is that the person is part of the church family and is in good standing with God and with the community. You just don't give to every appeal. Can you imagine if we did that as a church? Word would get out that we are handing money out, and there would be a line for a mile down the road.

C. REFUSING TO WORK (II THESSALONIANS 3:6-10)

And in II Thessalonians 3:6-10, Paul lays down the law. If you don't work you don't eat. This would be a difficult decision for the church as an organization. Why? Because we live in a very difficult economic situation in the United States. It is a very precarious market for jobs. Remember that everyone who is not working wants to be unemployed. Many of these

people are really trying to find work.

Let me say something about Paul. In this passage he makes it clear that even though he was entitled not to work, and even though he was highly educated, he worked as a tent-maker so he was not a burden on the community.

Again, some people won't take jobs because they feel the job is beneath them. Some people won't stay in shelters because they feel that is beneath them. When our kids were small, in order to be home with them, and because there were no suitable jobs in my field, I dug ditches and cleaned toilets in a school. In their reports to the state, they counted my Masters Degree in their total count for school staff. I was more educated than most of the teachers, yet I was content to work at manual labor. Paul was content to make tents to not to need financial help from others.

Again, we need to help people who are in need. But it takes wisdom to make sure we are not working against God's design. **WE ARE CALLED TO EXERCISE WISDOM IN GIVING. WE SHOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEET EVERY NEED THAT IS PRESENTED TO US. WE CAN ACTUALLY FIND OURSELVES WORKING AGAINST GOD.**

I think we are doing a pretty good job here at Devon Church in meeting needs. So far we have been doing it at the small groups and as individuals. However, I feel we're not doing as much as we could. I strongly believe that fellowship in today's modern church can only realistically take place in the context of small groups: and those groups need to be very diverse. If you are not involved in a healthy small group, then it will be difficult to fellowship according to the biblical definition of fellowship. You see, **FELLOWSHIP IN THE BIBLE IS MORE THAN COFFEE AND DOUGHNUTS. IT HAS TO DO WITH MEETING ONE**

ANOTHER'S SPIRITUAL, PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MATERIAL NEEDS. IT IS A VERY DIFFICULT CONCEPT TO PUT INTO PRACTICE AND TAKES A LOT OF THOUGHT, PRAYER, AND WISDOM.

I know all of you. And I know that all of you have good hearts. Your desire is to participate in true fellowship. Listen to this story. I'm sure all of us would like something like this to happen to us. But we first have to have vision.

I don't know who the author of this story is, but it nicely describes how we are to be.

"Several years ago a group of salesmen went to a regional sales meeting in Chicago. They assured their wives that they would be home in plenty of time for supper on Friday night. One thing led to another and the meeting ran overtime. The men had to race to the airport, tickets in hand. As they barged through the terminal, one man inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping they all reached the plane in time and boarded it with a sigh of relief ... all but one. He paused, got in touch with his feelings, and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand had been overturned. He waved good-bye to his companions and returned to the terminal. He was glad he did the ten-year-old girl was blind. The salesman gathered up the apples and noticed that several of the apples were battered and bruised. He reached into his wallet and said to the girl, 'Here, please take this ten dollars for the damage we did. I hope it didn't spoil your day.' As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered girl called out to him, 'Are you Jesus?' He stopped in mid-stride ... and wondered."

The New Testament describes us as the Body of Christ. If we are truly going to be Jesus to one another, then somehow we are going to have to find a way to be intimately involved with one another. What a calling. What would our church be like if we were Jesus to one another? It kind of makes you stop and say, "I wonder."