

Caring for One Another

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Introduction.

- A. In the Lord's church, we necessarily spend a lot of time talking about ideals. We study how our lives should be like the life of Jesus, the only perfect man ever to live. We discuss all the other lofty goals and aspirations that other parts of the Bible set for us, things that are designed to lead us on to perfection as well. Those are things that we are commanded to do, but if we're not careful, they can distort our perspective on Christianity. We can start believing that all the other Christians with whom we worship not only believe in those ideals and strive to attain them, but have already succeeded in attaining them and leading perfect lives.
- B. I think that all of us, to one extent or another, fall into that trap, and it can have disastrous consequences. We come into the building on Sunday morning, we look around, we see all these happy families in their beautiful church clothes, the husband's got his arm around his wife like they have a perfect marriage, and there's not a sign anywhere that anything in their lives has ever been anything but perfect. We see these awe-inspiring visions of Christian perfection, and they intimidate us, because we know that our lives aren't perfect. We know that we got into a fuss with our spouse last night. We know that we carry a credit-card balance the size of Godzilla. We know all about our own daily struggles with sin. But because everybody else has got us convinced that Christianity is only for perfect people, we hide the struggles we've been having, put on our perfect-people face, and we become part of the illusion that so intimidates us.
- C. Brethren, that's not what God set up the church to be like. The church isn't a place for perfect people. If we were already perfect and didn't need help, we wouldn't need other Christians. Instead, the church is the place for imperfect people, for people who struggle with daily challenges, for people who constantly fight against sin and lose. It's the place for people like us because all of us are imperfect. This morning, let's look past that illusion of perfection and look instead at our need for help and what we can do to care for one another.

I. The Problem and the Plan.

- A. As part of this process, one of the first things we need to do is to recognize **THE INEVITABILITY OF PROBLEMS**. Consider, for instance, the message implicit in James 1:2. Notice that James doesn't say "IF you fall into various trials." He says, "WHEN you fall into various trials." Notice also that when the Bible talks about trial, it isn't talking about hangnails and stubbed toes. It's talking about things like famine, persecution, and martyrdom. It's talking about things that Christians could not be expected to overcome by themselves.
- B. This kind of major, serious trial is just as inevitable in our lives today. Hopefully, we aren't going to spend every waking moment until the end of our lives staggering beneath massive trials, but sooner or later, something big and bad is going to happen to us. We're going to be smitten by a severe illness, we're going to lose our jobs, a family member or close friend in the Lord is going to fall away, or any of a million and one other disasters is going to strike. When that time comes, folks, we may well be pressed beyond our endurance, just like Paul said he was. That doesn't mean that we're weak. It just means that we're human.
- C. Nor are these external challenges that come upon us when we are blameless the only problems that will arise in the life of the Christian. We are going to have to wrestle with the consequences of the sins we commit too. Look at what John tells us in 1 John 1:8. If we say that we are without sin, at the very least, we have the sin of lying to our discredit. That means, that when we limp into the assembly, knowing that our battle with sin over the past week hasn't gone so well, that there isn't a single person here who can stand up and condemn us for it. All of us who are Christians have been perfected by the blood of Christ, but on our own merits, we are immeasurably far from being perfect people. The songleader is nothing more than a redeemed sinner. The men who serve the Lord's Supper are nothing more than redeemed sinners. And yes, the preacher up in the pulpit, he's nothing more than a redeemed sinner either, and that's all any of us can hope to be. If we find ourselves pressed beyond endurance by our sins, there's nothing outlandish about that. In fact, we became Christians precisely BECAUSE our sin problem was too big for us to handle. If we acknowledge our sin and seek help, then, we are acknowledging only our sharing in the problem that every human being has.
- D. Thankfully, these problems of trial and sin are amply addressed by **GOD'S DESIGN FOR THE CHURCH**. Look at Paul's description of the way the church is supposed to function in 1 Corinthians 12:24-25. The parts of our human bodies are interdependent. Our hands cannot survive without our heart. Our heart cannot survive without our lungs, and so on. In just the same way, the members of a church are interdependent. God has arranged us together in this way because we can't survive without help from each other. What we are supposed to do as we are brought together in this group is to look out for and care for one another. A lot of Christians really struggle against this. They'll do anything to avoid being helped. The fact of the matter is, though, that when we acknowledge our weakness, admit our inability to go it alone, and look for help from our brethren is when God's plan for helping us works to perfection.

II. Four Solutions.

- A. Let's look now at **FOUR SOLUTIONS** in the context of the church for the problems in our lives, four things that need to happen for God's plan to work. The first solution is **TRUST**. We see trust advised by James' words in James 5:16. This is a verse that every ounce of our Christians-must-be-perfect being screams against obeying. There are few things that we fear more than going to a brother and telling him about our sin. After all, once we do that, the cat's out of the bag. Our perfect-Christian mask has been ripped off forever, and we are exposed as the flawed, struggling people we actually are. But we need to ask ourselves, friends, which we would rather be: the struggling Christian who needs help, admits that he needs help, and gets it, or the struggling Christian who needs help, doesn't admit it, never gets the help he needs, and ends up falling away because of it? We need to trust God's wisdom, trust our brethren, and confess our sins to one another.
- B. Even though the Bible doesn't discuss it specifically, this can be just as important in trials. Often, the trials that we face are much more shameful to us than they are to anybody else, and so we hide how badly we need help rather than reaching out for it. We saw a marvelous example of this in this congregation just a few weeks ago. When Lois was in the hospital all the time and John was running himself ragged trying to take care of her, he simply didn't have the time to take care of his backyard the way he normally would. Now, the backyard that John hasn't been taking care of for a month is still neater than a lot of our backyards that we HAVE been taking care of. But John didn't see it that way. He thought it was disgraceful, and he didn't want anybody else to know about his untidy backyard until he had a chance to take care of it. Friends, I fear that many of us are just the same way. We don't let our brethren into the untidy backyards of our lives because we're afraid that they'll look down on us once they see how messy it is. Let's trust and let them in instead.
- C. Of course, the trust extended by the brother who needs help must be matched by the **TRUSTWORTHINESS** of the congregation. I can remember talking about this subject a year or two ago in Bible class, and John Copley remarked that Christians are a lot less likely to practice James 5:16 when they confess their sins in confidence, and the next day, the whole church knows about their dirty laundry. That's absolutely true, and that's why we must pay special attention to Ephesians 4:29. We like to think of gossip as one of those "little sins," but in reality, a gossip can do as much damage to the fabric of a church as an adulterer. When we maliciously talk about our brethren and their problems, we are doing nothing less than betraying them and betraying God by destroying His church. Now, this doesn't mean that we can't discuss the problems that a brother or sister is having, at least, if that brother or sister has given us permission to do so. However, it does mean that when we talk about them, we have to be speaking with love in our hearts and a desire to help.
- D. It is exactly this **HELP** that all Christians must be willing to extend to their struggling brethren. In the case of sin, Paul advances some useful advice about how we should do this in Galatians 6:1. Notice first of all what Paul says the object should be. When a brother is entrapped in sin, we shouldn't seek to shun him and mock him. We should seek to restore him to full fellowship with all the rest of us repentant sinners. Likewise, we shouldn't do this harshly or self-righteously. Instead, we should be motivated by a spirit of gentleness. This only makes sense. When one of our soldiers is wounded in combat in Iraq, his fellow soldiers don't drag him around the streets for a while and dump him off at the field hospital when it's convenient. Instead, they take him to that hospital as quickly, yet as carefully as they can, to cause him as little pain as possible and give him the best chance for survival. That's the way we should treat wounded Christians too.
- E. Paul also describes a tool that we can use to help others who are hurting because of sin or because of trial in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. Pay attention to what this tells us about our lives. When we undergo trial and God helps and comforts us, it's not just for the sake of making us feel better. Instead, God is actually equipping us, so that when we see somebody else walking the same hard road we've walked, we can go to them and share with them the comfort that God gave to us. I know, brethren, that the members of this church have seen a lot of trials. Christians here have had to deal with the death of their parents, the death of their spouses, the death of their children, family members falling away, child abuse, spousal abuse, physical illness, mental illness, and on and on and on. That doesn't just make us a battle-scarred bunch. That makes us a storehouse of spiritual knowledge that we can use to help one another out. Let me challenge each one of you, then: When you see a brother or a sister undergoing a trial that you've already faced, don't make them go through it alone. Go to them. Let them know that you've been where they are. Let them know that you understand, and that you can help them to get through it. As we do that, we carry out God's plan for the church.
- F. The success of this plan, though, ultimately depends on **LOVE**. Remember, folks, *agape*, the love of the Bible, isn't just an emotion, nor is it just an intellectual decision. Instead it is intellect, emotion, will, everything we have, directed toward seeking the good of another person. This is the kind of love under discussion in Ephesians 5:1-2. We are to love one another as Christ has loved us. Just as He gave Himself as a sacrifice for all of us, so we are to devote our lives to loving and serving one another. When Jesus sees our sin, when Jesus sees our trials, He doesn't recoil in horror or laugh in contempt. Instead, His heart goes out to us, and He helps us whenever we give Him the opportunity. We need to treat one another just the same way. Without this kind of love, we can't hope to care for one another. With it, we cannot fail.

Conclusion. If you want to be part of this Christian family, you can be today.