

17. Developing Structure to Equip for Ministry to One Another

In Galatians 6:2 we read, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” In this verse, we see that it is the plan of Christ for every Christian to learn how to bear the burdens of other Christians. This verse says that is how we fulfill the law of Christ. Christ gave us that law the night before He was crucified. In John 13:34-35, we read, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Here, we see that we are commanded to love one another as Christ loved us.

Christians do not automatically learn how to love one another, as Christ loved us, just because they become Christians. The reason for that is simple. Once Adam and Eve sinned, they were separated from God. In addition, once they sinned, every person was controlled by fear and acted out of fear, guilt, and shame. That is illustrated for us so well by the answer Adam gave to God after he sinned. Genesis 3:10 says, “So he said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.” In this verse, we see that Adam was filled with fear, and he had to admit to that fear. We see that Adam was filled with shame, because of the fact he was naked before God. We see that Adam was filled with guilt, and the first way he tried to handle that guilt was to try to hide from God. The only other way Adam knew how to handle his fear, guilt, and shame was to blame Eve. These things have been the pattern of the world from the time of Adam.

That is why the new commandment Christ gave is not something that automatically happens when a person becomes a Christian. Salvation does reverse the separation from God, because it brings a person back into a relationship with God. John 1:12 says, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” However, a new Christian still needs to learn to have daily fellowship with the Father, and with Christ. That is why John also wrote, in 1 John 1:3-4, “That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” From these verses, we see that complete reversal of the original effects of separation includes both relationship, through salvation, and fellowship with other Christians, the Father, and Christ.

We mentioned, in a previous topic, that the new Christians in Acts 2 immediately began gathering for Bible study and fellowship. Acts 2:42 says, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Here, we see that the early church immediately began meeting in small groups for Bible study and fellowship to help the new Christians grow in their relationship with God and with one another. The Lord led the early church to develop the structure of small groups to help the new Christians get into a Bible study and fellowship group led by one of the hundred and twenty disciples mentioned in Acts 1:15. That structure provided both a spiritual parent for each small group and a spiritual family in which to grow and learn to love one another as Christ loved them. A spiritual parent and a spiritual family are the two things every Christian needs in order to learn to minister to one another.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul wrote, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people

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but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?" In these verses, we see that the Christians in Corinth had not learned to love one another as Christ had loved them. Paul explains the reason for this in 1 Corinthians 4:14-17, where we read: "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church."

In the first passage, we see that the Christians in Corinth had not learned to love. Instead, they were acting like people who were not Christians. In the second passage, we see that the Corinthian Christians had lots of instructors but few spiritual parents. The word translated "instructor" in this verse is only used two other times in the New Testament. That is in Galatians 3:24-25, where we read: "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." In these verses, we see that the word is translated "tutor". An instructor or tutor was mentioned by the Greek poet Homer in his book, *the Odyssey*. The name of that instructor, or tutor, was "Mentor" which has become a widely used word by the world today.

By comparing these verses, we might summarize them this way. The law was our "mentor" to bring us to Christ, but, after we come to Christ, we are no longer under our "mentor". Instead we need spiritual parents to show us how to live and love as Christ loved us. A mentor was a slave that raised a child by severe discipline and did not have the love and concern of a parent. Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 4:14-17, that he was a loving parent and had a great love and concern for the Corinthians. He invited them to imitate his example. Paul repeated this same thought in 1 Corinthians 11:1, when he said, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." Paul could say imitate me, because he was imitating Christ. A spiritual parent is one who is imitating Christ and giving others an example to follow.

All new Christians need spiritual parents they can imitate. Paul, Silas, and Timothy said to the Thessalonians, in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6, "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit." For children that grow up in a Christian family, the physical parents may also become the spiritual parents when that child becomes a Christian.

However, if a person does not have godly Christian parents, or becomes a Christian as an adult, that person needs one or more spiritual parents that spend time with them in a wide variety of situations to show them, by example, how to love others as Christ loved us. Christ walked with the twelve for three years to show them how much He loved them. In the new commandment, He pointed to His own example as the example of how to love others. Then, He promised to send

them the Holy Spirit to give them the power to love others as He had loved them.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy explained what it means to be spiritual parents in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, where we read: “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”

In these verses, we see that spiritual parents provide the loving care of a nursing mother and the example of a godly father. They share their lives with new or struggling Christians. They give them an example to follow. They encourage them just as a physical father encourages his physical children. Spiritual parents show new and immature Christians how to walk in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. Every church needs to develop a structure that provides spiritual parents to new and struggling Christians. As we saw, the early church did that by developing small group Bible studies led by a spiritual parent.

The Biblical definition of a disciple is given in Matthew 13:52. That verse says, “Then He said to them, “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.” A “householder” is a person who is a head of a spiritual household (has a spiritual family). He has a treasure – the Word of God. He is able to bring out of that treasure things that are new (he continues to learn more himself). He brings out of that treasure things that are old (he is able to teach the basics of Christianity and provide an example to follow). All Christian leaders need to ask themselves the question, “Am I a just a mentor that tells others what to do, or am I a spiritual parent who takes responsibility for a group of new or struggling Christians and shows them how to live by my example?”

If a church has few or no spiritual parents, that church is not equipping Christians to minister to one another. If a church has many spiritual parents who are walking alongside each new and struggling Christian to show them how to live, that church has an effective ministry of equipping Christians to minister to one another. What are you doing, and how is the Lord using you to equip others to serve one another in love? May the Lord richly bless you as you show people, by your example, how to become spiritual parents to others.