

# Jesus' Family - A Community

## Introduction

Genuine followers of Jesus have much in common. They are part of a *community* that exists not only among themselves, but also with God. Entry into this community is offered to all, with all of its privileges and responsibilities. But choosing to become a part of it means there are other things we *cannot* be a part of - things that are *incompatible* with the community of God.

### *How we will go about this study*

In this study, we will look at some of the aspects of this community. Our study will be like a survey, rather than a complete description, because this concept is as large as life itself. We will focus on New Testament words that are often translated as: *fellowship*, *partner*, *sharing*, *common*, etc. The specific word (regardless of how it is translated from the language of the New Testament) will be underlined, when present in Scripture passages that are quoted.

The Scripture passages we will be examining are arranged under the following topics:

1. Fellowship with God
2. Blessings Related to Fellowship with God
3. Fellowship and Sharing among God's People
4. God's People - Working Together
5. Sharing in Suffering and in Encouragement
6. Situations in which We Must Avoid Fellowship or Sharing

Most people will find it best to read these topics one section at a time, and then to stop and think about how they apply to their lives. It may take longer than reading straight through, but application is an important part of studying Scripture!

### *The concept illustrated (examples from everyday life)*

This "community" concept can be illustrated by everyday human relationships, and can range from situations that are strictly voluntary, to those that are part of one's very existence. In some instances, we may *choose* to be part of a community; in other instances, it just "happens" - there is *no choice* involved. There are many other concepts that fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Consider this example, taken from Scripture:

... *James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners*. (Luke 5:10a)

James, John and Simon Peter shared a common occupation and worked together. In modern terms, we might call them "business partners," with the goal of catching fish. This was a voluntary association - nobody *forced* them to work together - and it illustrates the one end of this "community" concept. It made sense to have this association, since they had so much in common and would benefit mutually from it. But this was an association that was voluntarily formed; and in their case, it would come to an end (or at least become less significant), when Jesus called them into a *different* community.

*Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:10b-11)*

The other end of this "community" spectrum is seen here:

*Since the children have [= "have in common"] flesh and blood, he [Jesus] too shared in their humanity... (Hebrews 2:14a)*

The author of Hebrews is describing the glorious nature of our salvation. In previous verses, he has described us as "sons" (v. 10), "brothers" (of Jesus, v. 11-12) and "children" (v. 13). In this context, we read that the "children" all have (share) something in common - "flesh and blood." We read that Jesus also chose to take on "flesh and blood," so that (having become one of us) he could rescue us from the power of death and bring us into his glorious kingdom of life.

This verse represents the "involuntary" end of the "community" concept. We were *born* into it, with no opportunity to choose what type of "flesh and blood" we would have. Only Jesus had a choice!

### ***Application in matters related to salvation***

In terms of our relationship to (and with) the "community of God," both of these concepts (voluntary and involuntary) are significant, beginning the very moment that God calls us into his kingdom. The transition from darkness to light is called "being born again" - something we can describe as *involuntary*, because it is something the Holy Spirit does to a person, when the *Spirit* decides to do so.

*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)*

This work of the Spirit results in our willingness to repent and trust Jesus for salvation - and these are *voluntary* choices on our part.

This community, which the *Spirit* brings us into, is the starting point. It is the basis for all the other forms of community that we gain a part of - whether voluntary or not. It is because of this "birth" (and the repentance and trust that are part of it) that we have fellowship with God. This is why we have things in common with other members of the community, and the reason we share things with them.

## Fellowship with God

Salvation is wonderful and glorious, and there are many dimensions to it. From the perspective of what *humans* must do, there is repentance, trust, and obedience. From the perspective of what *God* does, there is (among many things) new birth and entrance into the family of God, with all the aspects of community that belong to it.

It is because of what *God* does, that we belong in God's family; it wasn't our doing. Yet there are some voluntary aspects of community, in which we choose to demonstrate our connection. Indeed, we *will* choose, for the Spirit of God (who is present in all who are part of the family) gives us the desire and the power to do so.

*... for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:13)*

### ***How to know if our fellowship is genuine***

Words can be easy to say. It's easy to *claim* that we have fellowship with God. But Scripture tells us that by our "fruit" we will be recognized (Luke 6:43-45; etc.); and God gives specific ways to know if our claim to having fellowship is legitimate.

*If we claim to have fellowship with him [God] and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:6-7)*

"Walking in the light" has to do with *actions* - moral conduct - based on God's Word. Those who are in the light live according the truth of Scripture. Those in darkness don't do so, though they may have deceived themselves and may lie about their condition (as described in v. 6).

Various other passages show us that our fellowship is with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the examples given below, we will have a greater emphasis on our fellowship with the Son, since Scripture gives it a greater emphasis (probably because the Son is the *visible* manifestation of God).

### ***Fellowship with the Father and the Son - enables fellowship with other believers***

This verse mentions the connection between our fellowship with the Father and Son, and our fellowship with other followers of God.

*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)*

These two "fellowships" - with other believers and with the Father and Son - are interrelated. The fellowship that exists between believers (people who have accepted the good news that was proclaimed

by the apostles - v. 1-4) has its foundation or basis in the fellowship they have with God. (The verse also expresses a desire to proclaim the good news - the message "we have seen and heard." This is how fellowship becomes possible.)

### ***Our fellowship and connection to the Son - made possible by God***

*God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)*

In this passage, we see that God did the calling into fellowship. The previous verse shows us that he will do what is necessary to keep us in that fellowship - not just now, but *forever*.

*He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:8)*

The context of these verses tells us about God's gracious kindness (v. 5) and his provision of gifts that bring about spiritual growth (v. 6-7). God uses such things to keep us strong.

### ***The depth of our fellowship or "oneness" with the Son***

There are several dimensions to our fellowship or connection with Jesus Christ. For instance, as humans who are being made perfect (by the work of Jesus Christ - Hebrews 10:14), we have become part of Jesus' family (Hebrews 2:11). Having become heirs together with Christ (Romans 8:17), we will for all eternity share the glory that belongs to Christ.

But we also have a deeper connection with Christ, one that is illustrated by the union of male and female in marriage (Ephesians 5:31-32). We who have been called to salvation are *united* to Christ in a way that the world cannot comprehend or experience. Even we, the ones to whom this truth belongs, often have difficulty comprehending it; but this union with Christ is the very foundation on which our salvation is built (Romans 6:5; etc.).

*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)*

For those who are genuine followers of Jesus, the bread and the cup represent this union with Christ - his body and blood, and all they signify. When we share or participate in eating of the bread and drinking from the cup, we are pointing to our union with him. Yet the fact that we, the church, are doing this as a *group* also points to our union with *each other*!

Sadly, there are many people who claim to follow Jesus, but are *fakes*. As we saw in 1 John 1:6-7, such people do *not* have part in this fellowship. So this passage in 1 Corinthians 10 has no real significance to them. Neither do the things mentioned in this next section:

## *Sharing in the Son's suffering and glory*

For those who have it, this deep-rooted union with Christ affects all areas of life. It causes us to want to be *like* Christ. It causes us to look forward to the sharing we will have with him in *eternity* - a sharing of his glory. But it also affects our outlook in the "here and now." We want to be like him in eternity, but we also want to be like him *now*.

What is the significance of this? If we choose to be like him *now*, then the world (which does *not* want to be like him) will treat us the way it treated him. The world *hated* Jesus; so the world will also *hate* us. Because of this, we will not only be united with him in *glory* in eternity, but we will also be united with him in *suffering* in the present time. The world will make sure it happens.

Jesus tells us that we should not be surprised when the world hates us. After all, they don't know God, or recognize anything that comes from God. Consider what the following passages teach us:

*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. (John 15:18-21)*

*Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. (1 John 3:13)*

*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:16-17)*

*Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. (Colossians 1:24)*

There is an interaction between God's work in us (which makes us belong to Christ), and our *willingness* to belong to Jesus (and all that is a part of that belonging).

If we truly *are* connected (united) to Jesus, we will be willing to share with him in *both* of the ways described in the following passages.

*But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. / To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed ... (1 Peter 4:13; 5:1)*

*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11)*

The "somehow," in the Philippians passage, doesn't mean Paul was afraid it wouldn't happen! Rather, it indicates that it's accomplishment was beyond his own power. "Attaining" is something that *God* accomplishes in us. God enables this to happen; yet he uses things such as "participation in his sufferings" to do so.

One final issue has to do with *motives*. The reason we are willing to share with Christ is because of who *he* is, not because of what *we* can get from the relationship. (Motives are an important issue!)

### ***Fellowship with the Holy Spirit - it will influence how we live***

The following passages mention our fellowship with the Holy Spirit, and show us how this fellowship is to influence the way we live.

This first verse is a *blessing* given by Paul to his readers. It was his desire that all who received this letter would be the recipients of grace, love and fellowship, and everything that is implied by these concepts.

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* (2 Corinthians 13:14)

These three characteristics mark the difference between the genuine follower of Jesus and a "church-goer" who does not know God. The one who is genuine will have these characteristics, because *God* initiates them. The church-going fake won't.

For us who are followers of Jesus, the Spirit is the *power* by which we live. Any other way of "living" is an expression of death! If we, as a group, share this power (the Spirit), then it will influence how we interact with each other.

*Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.*  
(Philippians 2:1-2)

The Philippians didn't understand this fact, until Paul explained it. They were *new* disciples of Jesus, still learning what it meant to follow him. But now, since God has given it to us in Scripture, we now know what to do. Unlike them, we have no excuse! In the verses that follow this passage (v. 3-11), we find examples of how we can do this, as well as a role model who we can imitate (Jesus Christ).

We must emphasize that these characteristics (unity, love and a common bond in and with the Spirit) *will* be present among the genuine followers of Jesus. But they must *grow* as we grow in the faith, and their "fruit" must be *developed*. We need to remember that words are not enough: We can claim to have unity with Christ (etc.), but this unity must be based on the Scripture's definition of unity, and evidenced by the way we interact with others! It's not our *words*, but our *actions* (our willingness to do what these verses exhort us to do), that is a demonstration of what is in our hearts.

## Blessings Related to Fellowship with God - Shared by God's People

We, God's people, have many differences. We have varying gifts and abilities, with which we are to work together for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). Yet at the same time, the *salvation* that binds us together is something we share in common. There are no distinctions between groups, no "levels" of salvation; but all are saved the same way and to the same extent.

Because of this common salvation, there are many spiritual blessings that we all share. Below we will look at some of these blessings. But first, we will have a "reality check" - a reminder that we don't deserve the blessings we now enjoy.

### *Undeserved blessings - once given to the Jews, now made available to all*

Scripture tells us that many blessings were given to the Jews. It wasn't because they had personally earned them, or had somehow deserved them. Rather, it was because of promises made to Abraham, their ancestor. The book of Romans explains that it was because of *Abraham's* trust in God, that the Jews, his offspring, received the blessings.

Some of these blessings are described here:

*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God. (Romans 3:1-2)*

*... the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. (Romans 9:4-5)*

Sadly, most of the Jews were quite unlike their forefather Abraham. They did not trust God; and so they forfeited those blessings. Because of this, God has offered the blessings to any Gentiles (non-Jews) who are willing to trust him - not because the Gentiles are any better than the Jews, but because most of the Jews threw away their opportunity to enjoy the blessings. (In the Old Testament era, Gentiles occasionally became followers of the true God and shared in the Jew's blessings. But now this opportunity is expanded to worldwide proportions.)

The following passages tell us about this opportunity that Gentiles now have, to share in blessings that were not originally intended for them. Here, we will be focusing on the *fact* that they were getting something that did not belong to them. Later, under the topic of "*sharing with God's people*," we will look at the implied *obligations* - how this fact should have an impact on their conduct.

The first of these passages uses an analogy, comparing the Jewish race to a *cultivated* olive branch, with the root representing their ancestors who trusted God (such as Abraham). The Gentiles (non-Jews) are represented as a *wild* olive branch (shoot).

*... some of the branches [Jews] have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot [non-Jews], have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ... (Romans 11:17)*

*... the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, ... (Romans 15:27)*

The end result is that *all* who trust Jesus Christ for salvation share *equally* in these blessings - even we Gentiles for whom the blessings were not originally intended. In this matter, there are no differences.

*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ... There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26, 28)*

Below are listed some of the blessings we share - whether Jew or non-Jew. Some of the passages are merely statements of fact - wonderful facts at that! Other passages show us obligations we have, related to these facts.

## ***Grace and salvation***

We who are followers of Jesus all share in God's grace. We are all recipients of his *undeserved kindness* (which is what the word "grace" means).

*... all of you share in God's grace with me. (Philippians 1:7b)*

This is what Paul told the Philippians, since there was evidence in their lives that God had begun a good work in them (something that we can call the "fruit of salvation"). Paul was confident that God would complete the work he had begun in them (v. 6); and this left him filled with thankfulness and joy.

*[I pray] ... confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)*

Because of this grace (which all followers of Jesus share in common), we all share the same kind of salvation - one that we receive by the grace of God.

*I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, ... (Jude 1:3a)*

Jude had wanted to write more about this salvation, but he ended up having to warn his readers about imposters who were attempting to tear them away from it. (We can read more about this salvation - the things Jude didn't write about - in Romans and other books of the New Testament.)

## ***"The faith" (and its impact on how we live)***

All followers of Jesus have been called into this relationship through the same act of trust - "faith" - in what Jesus did on the cross. We have all been called to accept the same teachings - "the faith" - as we grow in our salvation. In the following passage, both of these concepts appear to be included in the word "faith":

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* (Ephesians 4:4-6)

All the teachings of Scripture belong to those who follow Jesus. This "body of truth," the *content* of the "Christian faith," is common to *all* of Jesus' followers, no matter who they are. This is why Paul could say:

*To Titus, my true son in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.* (Titus 1:4)

It was through Paul's ministry that God saved Titus. Paul was a Jew; Titus was a Gentile. Yet they, and all followers of Jesus, share a *common* faith.

This faith is not something we only share *intellectually*; but it is something that we share by the way we live - our actions.

*I hear about your love for all [God's] holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.* (Philemon 1:5-6)

There are some difficulties in knowing the precise way to translate verse 6. But taken in context, all options point to a connection between our *faith* (what we believe), our *actions* (what we do), and our *understanding* of the blessings we have in Christ.

The emphasis in this passage is on the faith that we, *as a group of believers*, share (or have in common) with each other. This *faith* that we share expresses itself (*actions*), influencing the way that we, as members of Jesus' family, interact with each other. This sharing and interacting causes us to grow in our *understanding* or awareness of the blessings we have in Christ.

Later in the book, Paul uses this common bond (based on "the faith" and how it expresses itself) as the basis for his appeal to Philemon about Onesimus (Philemon's runaway slave). It is also the reason that Paul could expect Philemon to do what he asked.

*So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.* (Philemon 1:17)

## ***God's moral character***

In the following passage, the phrase "divine nature" does not refer to God's *being*. (We cannot become uncreated deities, as God is!) Rather, it refers to God's *moral character* or *nature*, which we are now able to share in, because of what God has done in us and for us. As we escape the world's corruption (because of God's power), we can grow in godliness, holiness and righteousness.

It is because of the work of the Spirit, that we can share in God's moral nature. We are no longer rebels, with values that are hostile to God! (Having new values is part of what it means to "follow Jesus.")

*His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3-4)*

Because of this *participation* in God's moral nature, we have some responsibilities that we *cannot* ignore. In fact, these responsibilities are the means that God uses, to enable us to become more like him.

*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.*

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-11)*

## ***A desire for others to share in these blessings***

Those who are part of God's family want others to become a part of it. Rather than *hoarding* the blessings which are in Christ, they want to *share* them!

For this to happen, people must first accept the good news. And this is possible only if we, the followers of Jesus, are willing to tell the good news to them (Romans 10:14).

Yet there is something else we may also need to do: We may have to be willing to put aside our "rights" for the sake of others, if those "rights" are a barrier to their salvation. Only then (after they have accepted the good news) will we be able *as a group* to share in the blessings of God's family.

*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel [= good news], that I may share [with others] in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:22b-23)*

Another way we can help people to accept the good news is by helping *others* who are doing the proclaiming. The church at Philippi demonstrated this, when they helped the apostle Paul in his work.

*In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ... (Philippians 1:4-5)*

In this context, the "partnership" probably involved financial support - compare to Philippians 4:10-19 (especially v. 15-16).

# Fellowship and Sharing among God's People

## *Fellowship - the result of entering into God's family*

In the following passage, the scope of the word "fellowship" is undefined, and probably refers to the general concept of community, with everything it implies.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)*

The people described here were those who had paid attention to what Peter had said; and they had done what he told them to do:

*Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)*

Because of the work of the Holy Spirit, they had become united into a single family, the family of God. This was a union that would continue past death and into eternity; but it would also result in a number of immediate changes in the way they lived.

Nobody had to force these people to have this fellowship, for it was the natural consequence of being part of the God's family. They were controlled by the Holy Spirit, as Peter had promised.

## *It results in sharing*

The statement in Acts 2:42 shows us the general reaction of those who had accepted the good news. Acts 2:43-47 follows with a more in-depth explanation of what these new members of God's family did (things that were the *result* of being in the family, not the *cause* of it). The passage ends with a statement about what *God* was doing (i.e., he was bringing more people into the family - they were being *born* into it, according to John 1:13; 3:5, 7; etc.).

*Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47)*

Those who did *not* accept the good news began to persecute the Christians (as Jesus warned they would do, in John 16:33). When this happened, the believers looked to God for strength to do what was right. The persecution didn't weaken them; rather, God strengthened them. And they continued to live out the life they had been given (as described in Acts 2).

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35)*

After this passage, we read about some people who shared their possessions. In these verses, we learn about the importance of *motives* and *integrity* in our sharing.

- The first example involved Joseph (also called Barnabas). His sharing was an expression of integrity, and is presented as a praiseworthy example. (Acts 4:36-37)
- Sadly, this is followed by a second example, involving Ananias and Sapphira. Although they did share some things, it was an expression of pretension and lying. The Holy Spirit, who had brought the community together as a family, kept it pure by purging the pretension from its midst. (Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead - Acts 5:1-11.)

### ***Something to consider***

As a group of people who claim to follow Jesus, do these things characterize your lives? If not, then the best thing to do is to consider the context in which these things occurred, the verses that come before those quoted in Acts 2 and 4. It wasn't that the apostles *demand*ed the people to start doing these things. Rather, the people repented, trusted God, and (as a result of this) received the Holy Spirit. Even though many of them had been followers of God (i.e., they were "God-fearing Jews" - Acts 2:5), they still needed to deal with sin in their lives. Then, with the Spirit present, these things began to occur among them.

You may claim that you are following Jesus; but if there are sins you are unwilling to repent of, or if you are not allowing the Spirit to use the *Scriptures* to change you (which requires a willingness on your part to find out what God's Word says), then you really have no reason to expect the things mentioned in these verses to characterize your life.

Below are some verses which describe the fellowship and sharing that will occur among members of God's family. Some of these things are voluntary, but we can expect them to occur *because of what God has done in us*. He has given us a love for God and neighbor that *surpasses* the love we may have for self. (If that love for God and neighbor is not present, we have no reason to expect these things. Nor do we have reason to believe that God is at work among us.)

### ***The sharing of material blessings; also a clarification***

If we have the love of God within us, we will *want* to express this love in our relationships with other people. This would include the various types of fellowship and sharing that have already been described - many of which could be called "spiritual blessings." But it also includes sharing in ways we often call "material" or "physical" (such as helping the needy), for the two cannot be separated.

We first need to clarify the issue of sharing material blessings. There are two issues to consider.

*Who we share with:* Though there are some passages that focus on helping the helpless, regardless of who they are, the primary emphasis in Scripture is on sharing with those who belong to the *community of God*. Scripture does *not* endorse the modern concept of "humanitarianism" - the indiscriminate giving of one's possessions to people who reject God, and who will then use those things in ways that do not bring honor to God! In this type of situation, the warning in Matthew 7 is more appropriate:

*Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)*

*Why we share:*

- Some Scripture passages describe sharing with other believers as simply an expression of love and joy.
- Other passages describe it as an expression of a person's gratitude for the blessings he himself has received.

In this second group of passages, those who had previously been *recipients* of blessings (they were "shared" with) are now *givers* of blessings. Yet, we must be careful to *not* interpret their giving as a mere "payback" - motives are an issue here! Though in one sense, this giving could be described as an *obligation*, it is also a *joyful expression of gratitude*. There is an *eagerness* in the giving.

In the next two sections, we will look at some specific obligations that people tend to overlook.

### ***An obligation for the non-Jews***

In general, people tend to take for granted the blessings they enjoy. We tend to *not* think about how undeserving we are, and we fail to consider ways that we can (or *ought*) to express gratitude - to God, as well as to God's people.

In this section, we are going to focus on an obligation that most Christians rarely think about. It is a specific situation that is applicable to non-Jews.

In the book of Romans, Paul reminds the Gentiles (non-Jews) that the blessings they now enjoy did not originally belong to them, but to the Jews:

*... the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, ... (Romans 15:27)*

These blessings (which we have already looked at, in a previous section) were the result of what Abraham, the Jew's ancestor, did. It is because of the disobedience of the Jews, that the Gentiles were given the opportunity to receive the blessings.

*... some of the branches [= Jews] have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot [= non-Jews], have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ... (Romans 11:17; this "nourishing sap" refers to the blessings that came because of what the Jews' ancestors did.)*

The Jews who were "broken off" are those who did not accept the message of the Old Testament - a message which points to Jesus Christ. The saved Jews were *not* broken off.

What are the implications for us who are Gentiles? Paul shows us in the following passage:

*For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. (Romans 15:26-27)*

We Gentiles get to enjoy the spiritual blessings that originally belonged to the Jews. Because of this, we ought to be willing to provide material help to the saved Jews, if they need it. (In the quoted passage, the second word "share" is often translated as "minister" or "help." It has a greater emphasis on the *way* we ought to share.)

Two important observations can be made about this passage:

- The help described in this passage was not an indiscriminate giving to anyone simply because he claimed to be Jewish. Rather, it involved taking care of *family*.
- The word "owe" in the passage points to the *debt* we have toward them. *Paul considered this to be a moral obligation!* Even so, our attitude should be like those described in this passage, who considered doing this to be a *pleasing* activity! When God changes our hearts, our values and the reasons we do things change. So instead of seeing these obligations as something we *have* to do (which they *are*), they become something we *delight* to do.

### ***An obligation for people who are taught God's Word***

Many Christians do not have the opportunity to express love to saved Jews who are in need. In contrast, this second example can apply anywhere that people are being taught God's Word by others!

*The one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor. (Galatians 6:6)*

What is included in this "all things"? The passage doesn't tell us. But it does imply a visible expression of appreciation; and at times it may be material or financial in nature. This passage in Galatians is left "open-ended," and we can apply it in whatever way that may be appropriate.

Some passages *do* mention material and financial help - 1 Corinthians 9:14, as well as some of the passages listed below. But Scripture also records situations in which leaders chose to *not* receive financial help (1 Corinthians 9:12). In such cases, there are *other* ways this passage in Galatians can be applied.

## ***Sharing described as a joyfully-offered "sacrifice" to God***

As we have seen, some expressions of sharing can be described as obligations; yet the motivation for the sharing would be love and joy, rather than a need to fulfil a "payback." The love of Christ, which is in us, changes our perspective on such issues. Because of this love, we *delight* in fulfilling obligations, and even in going beyond what obligation might demand.

Below, we will see a different focus, an example in which our sharing is simply an expression of love for God and neighbor, *without* any implied obligation (other than the ongoing obligation to "love one another" - Romans 13:8). We do this sharing simply because the love of God is in us, and because, in most instances, the recipients are part of our spiritual family. We do it *as to God*, who views it as an expression of worship and devotion.

*Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:15-16)*

Two types of activities are mentioned in this passage, both of which are worthy of being called "sacrifices" to God. The first is the public expression of one's allegiance to God (i.e., openly professing his name). The second is doing good and sharing with others.

These people had already demonstrated their allegiance to God. They were also doing good and sharing with others, as shown in a previous verse:

*God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. (Heb 6:10)*

This follows the pattern of most, if not all, of the Scripture passages that directly mention this type of sharing. It was directed toward other followers of Jesus. They were helping *God's people*; and it was done as an expression of love to God.

## ***Sharing with the needy (and further clarification)***

Here is another verse that reminds us of our obligation to help needy family members (i.e., other followers of Jesus):

*Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (Romans 12:13)*

There are limits, however, even in this matter. Scripture tells us that some people should *not* be helped, *even if they claim to be Christians*. Here is one example:

*For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."*

*We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-13; the whole context is v. 6-15.)*

No follower of Jesus was to consider himself entitled to "free handouts." Nor were followers of Jesus to encourage such an attitude in others. They had a moral obligation to "never tire of doing what is good." But enabling the lazy to sin (by giving them "free handouts") was *not* an option.

### ***The obligations of the rich***

Some people have been given a greater ability to share with others. Because of this, there are several commands in Scripture that are directed specifically to the rich. After all, God did not give them their riches so that they could hoard it for themselves!

The book of Acts gives us some examples of rich people who became followers of Jesus and shared with those who were in need. (We already looked at an example in Acts 4:36-37.) However, giving to the needy is not the *normal* response of a rich person. Most rich people would rather *hoard* riches, or even *take them from the poor*, as James shows us:

*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. (James 5:1-6)*

Consider also the teachings of Jesus:

*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)*

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ... But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. (Luke 6:20b, 24)*

Because of these issues, Paul singles out the rich in the following passage. He warns them that there are *eternal* consequences for their conduct. After all, what they do will be influenced by what they put their hope (trust) in - whether it is *wealth* or *God*!

*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)*

## ***The poor can also share... with God's blessing!***

In the New Testament, we discover that the rich who became *genuine* followers of Jesus were not the only ones to become generous in their giving. The *poor* who became followers of Jesus did the same! In fact, there were times that the poor seemed to be *more* generous than some of the rich people were!

Take the example of the churches of Macedonia - the Christians who lived in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, etc. Their example was so praiseworthy that Paul used it to teach *others* how to give. This is seen in the following passage, which gives us his instructions to the Corinthians. When they wanted to help the poor Christians in Judea, he told them to follow the Macedonian's good example!

*And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)*

Their attitude was the result of God's grace working within them (verse 1). Their giving wasn't by force; it was a voluntary expression of *love* on their part. As for their priorities, they had such an understanding of God's will, that the apostles were surprised! (The people had grown in their spiritual maturity more than the apostles realized.)

This passage illustrates the relationship between the obligations to "love God" and "love neighbor." Love for neighbor is important, and should not be neglected. But love for God should come *first*. Then love for neighbor can be done in a way that is sincere (not hypocritical) and honoring to God.

The Macedonian churches are also an example of sharing as a *way of life*; for this wasn't the *only* time they generously shared with someone. They were constantly helping Paul in many ways. They always had an *eagerness* to help, even though they were extremely poor. This is an example that even the *rich* ought to follow!

*Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. (Philippians 4:14-16, written while Paul was in prison.)*

We may wonder how they managed to do this, since they were so poor. They did it because God's work in salvation resulted in changed *values*. They loved others more than they loved themselves; and they also trusted God to take care of their needs.

There are also practical ways to prepare for giving and sharing. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul advises the Corinthians to plan ahead. In this way, their giving would be spread out over time, rather than being done all at once.

## ***The end result of all this sharing***

When God's people share in the manner that God instructs, the end results are wonderful, surpassing anything the world can boast. This is illustrated by what Paul told the Corinthians: Their giving would not only help God's people - those who received the gifts - but it would result in praise and gratitude toward God!

*This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. (2 Corinthians 9:12-13)*

Other verses in the context of this passage show us an additional outcome of this sharing: God would bless the Corinthians who gave, just as he blessed the Macedonians (2 Corinthians 9:8-11 and Philippians 4:19).

We could ask what the outcome would be if they *hadn't* been willing to share. Obviously, the wonderful results described here would not have occurred. (Nor would they have occurred if the recipients of the sharing cared nothing about God.) But note that Paul also describes their sharing as an act of *obedience* that goes along with their confession of the good news ("gospel") of Christ. The implication is that *not* sharing would have been disobedience and *not* compatible with the good news.

## God's People - Working Together

The fellowship and sharing that occurs among God's people involves *many* aspects of life. We have already noted some of the ways we share *blessings* - both spiritual and material. Here we will look at some passages which show us how this sharing influences the way we work together, as members of one family.

We who are part of the family of God have different gifts, abilities and interests. But we all have the same ultimate goal - to seek first the kingdom of God, or (to say it a different way) to follow Jesus. Our ultimate desire is that God be honored in the world, and we want other people to join us as Jesus' followers. (We have seen this in some of the passages we already studied - for instance, 1 John 1:3 and 1 Corinthians 9:22b-23.)

Such an attitude does not characterize the fakes. They do not have these values, nor do they repent of not having them. The genuine followers of Jesus may not be "perfect" in this matter, but as they become aware of their imperfections, they repent and draw closer to God and his ways.

Since we (the genuine followers of Jesus) are all one family and ultimately have a common goal, it is quite natural for us to work together. Yet this "working together" does not have to be at the same location; for we work with the same goal *anywhere we may be*. We may be thousands of miles apart, or we may be in the same room. We might be close friends, or we might not even know each other.

### ***Partners by nature - the "involuntary" aspect***

All followers of Jesus, by nature of being "united in Christ" (Romans 6:5; Philippians 2:1), are "partners" for the cause of Christ. We may also, by choice, work together at the same location. The first could be described as an *involuntary* cooperation, whereas the second would be described as *voluntary*.

This first passage is an example of involuntary cooperation:

*As for those [leaders at Jerusalem] who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they recognized that I [Paul] had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised [= Gentiles], just as Peter had been to the circumcised [= Jews]. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles.*

*James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along. (Galatians 2:6-10)*

The leaders at Jerusalem welcomed Paul and Barnabas into their group. Why? Because they recognized what *God* was doing in their lives. Since it was *God* who was doing it, the apostles at Jerusalem had no

other choice, but to acknowledge the fact, and to welcome them - Paul and Barnabas, the ones through whom God was working.

This passage shows us the agreement they made, that they would work among two different groups of people. James, Cephas and John would work among the Jews; Paul and Barnabas would work among the Gentiles. Paul also agreed to help the *poor* among the Jews (the "poor" who are referred to in v. 10; also in Acts 24:17); for he understood that we Gentiles have a *moral obligation* to help them (Romans 15:27).

### ***Working together - partners by choice***

*As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. (2 Corinthians 8:23-24)*

This passage shows us that Paul and Titus voluntarily worked together to proclaim the good news and to teach the people. Sometimes they were working at the same location; but in this instance, they were not.

The Philippian church illustrates a different way that people can choose to work together. They had a desire for *others* to become members of God's family, and were willing to do anything they could to make it possible. This included the help they gave to the apostle Paul, which enabled *him* to share the good news with others. (We have already seen that this included *financial* help - Philippians 4:14-16.)

*In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ... (Philippians 1:4-5)*

### ***Working together as a diverse family***

We need to remember that it was *God* who brought us into the family of God. We have no right to "pick and choose" who in the family we will associate with - it's "all or none." This is illustrated by the instructions Paul gave to Philemon - who, from the *world's* perspective, would have good reasons to *not* treat Onesimus (his run-away slave) like a brother!

*So if you consider me [= Paul] a partner, welcome him [= Onesimus, the slave] as you would welcome me. (Philemon 1:17)*

Consider these facts:

- In Christ, Paul and Philemon both belonged to the *same* community of believers - after all, there is only *one* community. They were *partners* (as well as brothers in Christ).
- Later, the Holy Spirit "birthed" Onesimus into the same community - a community in which all are *equally* a part. ("*There is... neither slave nor free... for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" - Galatians 3:28.)

- Because of this, Onesimus was a *genuine* follower of Jesus, not a fake who was trying to push his way into the group. (Paul would have already recognized the "fruit of salvation" in him, before he made this request.)
- Since *all* are equally a part of the community, the acceptance we give to *one* member must be offered to *all*. This meant that Philemon would have to accept Onesimus as a brother (v. 15-16) the same way he accepted Paul.

If Philemon had refused to do this, he would have been living in open rebellion and sin against God, the one who had turned Onesimus into a brother! Because God had done this, the relationship between the two could never be the same as it was before, even if Onesimus continued to work for Philemon.

In this specific situation, one in which wrongs may have been committed, the apostle Paul volunteered to make amends. This is also an expression of the commitment of one family member to another.

### ***Something to consider***

How do *you* cooperate (or not) with others who are genuine followers of Jesus (based on the Bible's definition of who is "genuine")? Take into consideration the various issues examined in this section, for cooperation does not always mean working directly together.

If cooperation does not exist between you and others, make sure that *you* are not the one who is guilty of this sin! If you are, *now* is the time to repent and change.

## Sharing in Suffering and in Encouragement

We have already looked at passages related to our sharing in *Christ's* sufferings. Now we are going to look at the issue of sharing in the suffering experienced by *people* who follow Jesus. (These two concepts are related.) We will also see the role of encouragement in this matter.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the members of God's family are described as a "body" - one body with many parts. God has designed the "body" in such a way, "*so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other*" (1 Corinthians 12:25). Because of this, what happens to *one* part has an effect on *all* parts. As Scripture tells us, "*If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it*" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Our focus here is on the "suffering" part of this passage - the part that people often tend to ignore. It is just as much a reality as the "rejoicing" part, and as much an obligation. To *not* share in this matter is like claiming that we (or they) are *not* part of the body! And since God has made all members to be equally part of the body, doing this is like denying Christ himself - who is the *head* of the body (Ephesians 5:23b)!

There are many types of suffering, including the types that may result in the need to share material possessions (examined in a previous section). The following passages have a greater emphasis on the suffering that occurs simply because a person has become a follower of Jesus - suffering that is the result of opposition and persecution for the sake of Christ.

In these situations, our sharing with those who are suffering or being persecuted can be active (doing something for them) or passive (just "being there"). Actively, we can encourage and comfort them. Passively, we can show our willingness to associate with them and to *not* abandon them.

### ***Suffering will come***

The following passage reminds us that this type of suffering *is* a "fact of life" for the follower of Jesus - not eternally, but at the present time, when wicked people oppose and persecute us. It also shows us that, in addition to the suffering, there is hope and strength: There is the *kingdom* we look forward to in the *future* (though some aspects of it are already here), and there is the *patient endurance* that enables us to get through the suffering *now*.

*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*  
(Revelation 1:9)

All of us who have become followers of Jesus share these things. They are "*ours in Jesus.*" Why? "*Because of the word (message) of God and the testimony of Jesus,*" which brought us all into the family.

## ***Suffering and encouragement***

Before Jesus went to the cross, he warned us that suffering would come - because the world hates Jesus, as well as those who belong to him. But he also provided the encouragement we need, so that we can endure the suffering: *"I have told you these things [read chapters 14-16], so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

The following passage acknowledges that "the sufferings of Christ" are part of our lives, because we have become followers of Jesus. But it also shows us that comfort (or encouragement) can also be a part of our lives - also because we are followers of Jesus. The suffering comes because the world hates us; but because we *are* in Jesus, God sends comfort - often through other members of the family of God.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)*

Below are two examples of people sharing or being "one" with someone who was suffering for Jesus' sake. They are examples of encouragement for us to follow; but each passage sheds a different light on the issue.

### ***Example #1 - Different ways of sharing; our attitude toward help received***

The book of Philippians contains many insights into the issue of sharing and matters related to giving and receiving. The Philippian church was often involved in these things, as seen by Paul's comments near the end of his letter:

*Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ... (Philippians 4:14-15)*

When Paul was experiencing "troubles" (prison), the Philippians prayed for his deliverance (1:19). While waiting for God to answer their prayer, they sent one of themselves to encourage Paul (2:25-30). They also sent a financial gift to help take care of his physical needs.

This sharing in Paul's prison "troubles" was not a unique happening in the life of the Philippian church. It was just an extension of what they normally did. As we have previously observed, sharing was their *way of life*, beginning back when they first became followers of Jesus.

Paul's attitude toward the Philippians' gifts also teaches some important lessons. The context of the passage quoted above begins in v. 10, and shows us that Paul was content in whatever circumstances he happened to be. He greatly appreciated their gifts; but the benefit he would get out of receiving them was *not* his primary focus! Rather, he was more interested in *their* spiritual well-being and growth. Love for God and neighbor was more important to him than love for his own well-being.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the Philippians, we must remember that part of spiritual growth involves the expression of love for God and neighbor. Their giving, being an expression of love, was a means for this growth. It was also a pleasing "sacrifice" in God's sight (Hebrews 13:16).

### ***Example #2 - The one who encourages may also need encouraged (at a later time)***

Below is another praiseworthy example of sharing in someone's suffering. But it also illustrates an important fact, that the one who encourages may at a later time *need* encouragement.

People who encourage are not "super people," untouched by the cares that others experience. Rather, they are just like other people (who are willing to take seriously the moral obligation to love God and neighbor), and at a later time may be in a situation in which *they* need to be encouraged. Even people who have a special God-given ability to encourage - Romans 12:8 - may at times have their own discouraging moments.

*Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (Hebrews 10:32-34)*

In the past, these people were excellent examples of how to respond when *others* were suffering. They were willing to stand "side by side" with them, and were a great source of encouragement. In all of this, they themselves were experiencing suffering and had remained strong.

But now, things were different. A new situation arose, in which they were quickly becoming discouraged. Though previously, they had been strong and had strengthened others; now they were weak, and others (who were at this time strong) would strengthen them.

*So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (Hebrews 10:35-36)*

## Situations in which We Must Avoid Fellowship or Sharing

Hopefully, all the passages we have seen makes it obvious that words such as "sharing" and "fellowship" *will* characterize the follower of Jesus; and that a person who's life is *not* characterized by these words is *not* following Jesus. But there are certain things that God *forbids* us from sharing with or having fellowship with. These things *cannot* be a part of our lives, because they are incompatible with the family of God. We have nothing in common with them. Below are a few examples.

### *Having nothing to do with demons*

1 Corinthians 10 shows us that certain activities can symbolize or represent one's *participation* (sharing or fellowship) in something. We have already looked at a verse that applied this principle to our participation in Christ's body and blood.

*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)*

This principle of "participation" applies in other matters as well. For instance, when the people in the Old Testament ate part of the sacrifice that had been placed on the altar, they were participating in the altar.

*Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? (1 Corinthians 10:18)*

Sadly, this principle also applies to doing things that represent participation with *demons* - and this is what we are to avoid.

*Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Corinthians 10:19-22)*

The context of this passage focuses on the issue of eating meat that has been offered to an idol - a practice that was common in Paul's day. Paul explains that the meat itself was not the issue, and that there was nothing inherently wrong with eating it. Furthermore, the gods represented by the idols are fakes. However, behind all this idolatry, there are demonic forces at work; and we are not to have anything to do with them!

Ultimately, whether or not we eat the meat is dependent on circumstances - such as whether or not it will reinforce the work of the demons. For example:

*If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:27-28; this refers to the effects it would have on the other person's conscience, since you personally know that the sacrifice is meaningless.)*

In all of this, the guiding principle is whether or not the act will result in "participation" with the demons. Will your actions reinforce the work of the demons or of God? Will the demons or God be honored? We, as followers of Jesus, who now participate in Jesus' body and blood (as already described), have only one option - and this option applies to *all* of life, not just food:

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)*

### ***Avoiding sinful conduct - the "deeds of darkness"***

Going further, Scripture warns us that we are to have nothing to do with *any* type of sinful conduct - here described as "the fruitless deeds of darkness."

*Have nothing to do with [= have no fellowship with] the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. (Ephesians 5:11)*

This verse could be considered a summary of the entire passage, beginning with verse 1 of the chapter. If we are followers of God, we are to walk in love (following Christ's example, v. 2), and *not* walk in the ways of darkness. After all, such ways result in eternal *death*, not life in Christ! The world may think that such deeds are perfectly acceptable, but we are to expose such things for what they are - expressions of "darkness" - and have nothing to do with them.

Galatians 5:19-25 has a similar focus, contrasting "the works of the flesh" (practiced by those who will not inherit the kingdom of God) to "the fruit of the Spirit" (practiced by those who live by the Spirit). Lists such as these help us to distinguish between the actual "deeds of darkness" (which are incompatible with following Jesus and must be avoided) and the man-made rules of false teachers (which we must denounce and refuse to follow).

### ***Limits on how we interact with unbelievers***

Not being participants (or not "having fellowship") with demons may be obvious; not practicing "deeds of darkness" may be obvious. But Scripture also tells us to not have fellowship with *unbelievers* - and this is a command that many people find quite unacceptable.

The issue is this: When a person becomes a disciple, a genuine follower of Jesus, it results in radical changes to his very nature. It may take time, but since God's Word becomes the basis by which he interprets all of life, his entire perspective of reality changes. This includes changes in values and choices.

Because of this, when it comes to interaction with the unsaved, we can have things in common in *surface* issues; but there will be nothing in common *at the deepest levels of existence*.

This does not mean that we cease to interact with unbelievers, for there are many necessary and legitimate ways in which we *can* do so. (To *not* do so would require us to leave the world, as we discover in 1 Corinthians 5:10!) But there are limits to the way we can interact with them. There is a closeness or cooperation that we *cannot* have, without compromising our walk with Christ. *This is what we are to avoid.*

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.*

*As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

*Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."*

*And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."*

*Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)*

## ***The sins of leaders***

Some verses have a specific application to leaders, and the way we interact with them. The following examples show us how to respond to leaders who sin, as well as to false teachers. (The verses may also illustrate principles that can apply to other situations, though here they focus on leadership.)

*Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. (1 Timothy 5:22)*

The obligation to "not share in the sins of others" is a command that could be applied to many types of situations. But in this passage, it seems to have a special application to leaders within the church who are guilty of sin. (The context of this verse, beginning in v. 17, focuses on leadership issues.)

Two of the ways that we could become guilty of sharing in a leader's sins are:

- Improper response when leaders are accused of sin (reacting without sufficient evidence, or else being unwilling to deal with sin that is known to have occurred - compare to vs. 19-20).
- Ordaining people to be leaders when they are not qualified for the position (the "laying on of hands" in v. 22).

This next passage shows us another way we could become guilty of sharing in the sins of leaders - in this case, the sins of a *false teacher*:

*... many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. ... Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.*

*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. (2 John 7, 9-11)*

In John's day, the Christians often met in homes to worship and study the Scriptures. In this passage, John warns against welcoming into the group any teacher who does not speak the truth about Jesus. A person who does so becomes as guilty as the false teacher is - he *shares* in the false teacher's sin.

### ***Anything that is a part of the "world system"***

In Scripture, the name "Babylon" is often used to refer to a city (now located in Iraq). It is also used symbolically as the embodiment of all the religious, political and economic systems of the world that stand in opposition to God - the whole "world system." Down through history, the various aspects of this system have not always cooperated with each other; but they all have had one thing in common: their opposition to the God of the Bible. (Even when "Christianized," this system compromises Scripture and often persecutes those who attempt to remain faithful to the Word of God.)

Depending on the context, different passages about this symbolic "Babylon" may emphasize different aspects of the system. For instance, Revelation 17 and 18 both describe its final judgment; but chapter 17 emphasizes the religious element (all false religions, as well as apostate "Christianity"), and chapter 18 focuses on the economic aspect. Both chapters mention political elements of the system.

The following prohibition, found in the end times prophecy of Revelation, focuses on our interaction with this "world system." Though found in the book of Revelation, the concept described here is relevant to people in any era, for it is an application of a basic principle we have already seen in 2 Corinthians: "*Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 6:17a). Here in Revelation, God commands his people to *not* share in the sins of this evil system.

*Then I heard another voice from heaven say: " 'Come out of her [= Babylon], my people,' so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes." (Revelation 18:4-5)*

Contextually, this passage is located just before a description of the final judgment, when the system is most blatantly *anti-Christian*. But the same principle is relevant to God's people at *all* times, even when that system (in other passages described as the "world" - 1 John 2:15-17) is less hostile to God's people, or even acts friendly toward them.

## ***A warning against having a self-righteous attitude!***

All of the issues we have studied are important, and *must* be a part of our lives. We must not only *know* these things, but we must also *do* them. We need to affirm and teach these things; but at the same time, we must remember that our actions and conduct are just as important as our words.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day failed in this matter. Because of this, they now serve as a warning to us, providing us with an example of what *not* to be like.

Many of these leaders spoke enough truth that Jesus could tell people to pay attention to what they said.

*"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you." (Matthew 23:2-3a)*

But when it came to applying truth to life, they had gotten sidetracked by other things. In the end, some of Jesus' strongest condemnation would be directed toward them.

*"But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (Matthew 23:3b)*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!*

*"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation. (Matthew 23:29-36)*

Pay attention to what these religious leaders said: *"If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, ..."* These leaders looked at the *bad* leaders from previous centuries, and claimed that they would never be like them.

Is not this the same type of claim that *we* would tend to make? After all, don't we all know examples of bad leaders, who we would not want to be like? We could even choose the very leaders Jesus quoted as the example of people *we* don't want to follow!

These leaders were confident that they were on the right path. Yet in the end, they became just like the former leaders they spoke against. How could this be? No Pharisee began his career by saying, "I want to be a bad leader" (or a false teacher). Rather, it was through years of "small" sins and compromises, that they finally reached this point.

The easiest way for us to become like them is to think that it can never happen to us. Once we begin to feel spiritually "secure" and begin to get lax in our pursuit of the kingdom of God, it becomes easy to fall into the devil's trap and to be led astray. The only way to prevent this is to recognize that it *can* happen to us, to admit our spiritual weakness (as in Matthew 5:3), and to rely on the Spirit of God to keep us strong.

If we fail in this matter, the only cure is recognition of the fact and repentance. This cure rarely happens though, for people who have taken their eyes off God's kingdom tend to become blind to what they are doing. More often, they are doomed to repeat the past - thus becoming the "bad example" that future generations point to.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

This study shows us part of what it means to follow Jesus; and hopefully those who read it will have a desire to do so. However, those of us who *do* attempt to practice these things may find ourselves quite frustrated: We may discover that we are surrounded by people who have no interest in doing such things, yet *still* claim to follow Jesus. In such a case, what are we to do?

First of all, there are Christians in many parts of the world who *are* doing these things - the Spirit of God is alive in them! But if this does not characterize the people *you* know, then you need to follow *Scripture*, not people. Interpret *their* claim to be saved by what *Scripture* says, rather than changing Scripture to make it more accommodating to them.

It may be difficult to put into practice something that others have no interest in doing. It may be discouraging to try doing these things with others who are interested only on a superficial level - a level that does not require the presence of God's Spirit. But you can keep on trying.

Start by finding out what Scripture teaches and attempting to do what it says. Let the Holy Spirit use the Word of God to change you and your values. Then the Holy Spirit will enable you to do these things. You will find out that, in your *own* strength, you are weak; but you will also discover that, in the power of the Spirit, you are strong.

There are two things you must avoid:

- First, don't become like those who disobey God in this matter. (Those who choose to share in their disobedience will also share in their judgment.)
- Second, don't develop an attitude of superiority over them. (It's *God's* power - not *yours* - that makes it possible for you to do what is right.)

Don't be surprised if you find few "Christians" doing these things. Perhaps some are growing in the faith and will change, once they learn the truth. But you must remember that we live in the "last days," in which most people who claim to follow Jesus *won't* actually be following him. Jesus himself warns us that, "*Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" (Matthew 24:12-13)

Those who's love has "grown cold" may oppose you and speak against you. But that doesn't mean you have to stop doing what is right. Let *them* say what they want. Make sure *you* remain a follower of Jesus.