



FOCUS VERSE

I John 1:7

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 2:37–47

37 Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

40 And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.



FOCUS THOUGHT

God has an eternal desire for fellowship with humans and has ordained fellowship among believers.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Solidarity, Not Division

It is not difficult to see that the noun *solidarity* comes from the word *solid*, while *division* comes from the verb *to divide*. Nothing can be divided that was not previously a whole. Division in this sense can be a destructive process. Paradoxically, social solidarity can be a leading cause of division. Social divisions arise when differences rather than commonalities between groups are emphasized. The more solidarity we have with our group, the more likely we are to notice and disapprove of differences with other groups. Even within our group, minor differences appear to be major distinctions worthy of division. On a personal scale, this can lead to an uncooperative, hypocritical, and judgmental spirit, while on a larger scale it can manifest as negative prejudice, intimidation, and violence.

For the last several years there has been a worldwide increase in anti-Semitism, racism, and classism. In the Western democracies, the politics of division is cynically being used to manipulate the electorate for political power. Elsewhere, social hatreds are largely being driven by Islamic fanaticism, both in its ideological and its violent form. Because of and in reaction to radical Islamic extremism, Christians worldwide face the strongest social disapproval accompanied by the harshest physical persecution of the church age. There has never been a greater need for sons of consolation who can see the brotherhood of humanity, the grandeur of variety, and the sacredness of difference. As believers in Christ, let us seek solidarity and shun division.

OUTLINE

- I. FELLOWSHIP WITH THE LORD
 - A. God Desired Fellowship with Humans
 - B. Humans Desired Fellowship with God
- II. FELLOWSHIP AMONG BELIEVERS
 - A. Obligation of Fellowship
 - B. Benefits of Fellowship
- III. CORPORATE FELLOWSHIP
 - A. Forsake Not Assembling Together
 - B. Opportunities in Fellowship
- IV. FELLOWSHIP'S GRAND MEETING

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The message preached on the Day of Pentecost anticipated the church would be a fellowship of believers. It may be easy to imagine an isolated individual being saved, even though that person exists on a lonely island in the sea. Certainly, anyone can be

saved regardless of social connections or the lack of them, but there is nothing in Scripture to suggest isolation is God's intention or that it is spiritually healthy. Just as the people of Israel thought of themselves as a collective, so the church is presented in the New Testament as a community of believers. Compare, for example, the following texts.

"Tell ye your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation" (Joel 1:3).

"For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39).

In addition to his direct quotations from Joel recorded in Acts 2:17–21, it seems clear that Peter was influenced by the larger context of Joel even when he did not quote verbatim from that prophet of old. Acts 1 also reflects textual connections with Joel. In addition to Joel 1:3 and Acts 2:39, compare the following references from Joel and Acts:

Joel	Acts
2:32	1:4
2:28	1:5, 8
2:28–29	1:14
3:1–2	2:5
1:5, 10; 2:24; 3:18	2:13
2:28–32	2:16–22

The plural nouns and pronouns used in the text of this lesson and in the above references indicate the community characteristics not only of ancient Israel but also of the church.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The Creation account immediately indicates the need for people to exist in community. Before the creation of humans, God evaluated His creative work as good. (See Genesis 1:18, 21, 25, 31.) But after the creation of Adam, “the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18). A comparison of this verse with Genesis 1:27, 31 suggests that God did not designate “every thing that he had made” as “very good” until both male and female were created. Genesis 2:7–22 offers further reflection on the sixth day of Creation, including a period of time when Adam existed alone.

I. FELLOWSHIP WITH THE LORD

A. God Desired Fellowship with Humans

After God created Adam and Eve—the first human community, making fellowship possible—He demonstrated His interest in entering that community by visiting their home, the Garden of Eden.

“And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD

God amongst the trees of the garden. And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:8–9).

This event revealed God’s desire to fellowship with people under normal circumstances, for there is no textual indication that God visited the Garden only because of the first sin. It also, however, shows that God did not abandon His interest in communing with people as a consequence of their sin. Rather than immediately recoiling at the discovery of sin, God conversed with Adam and Eve, discussed the consequences of their sin, and announced an arrangement that would result in the possibility of full reconciliation between people and God.

“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

This verse, widely recognized as the first messianic promise in Scripture, is better understood when the translation recognizes the presence of the singular masculine pronoun: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15, NKJV).

These words, spoken by God directly to the serpent, which was an instrument of deception and temptation, anticipated the coming of a single masculine descendant of Eve who, in His own death, would deal a death blow to the serpent.

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

The intensity of God’s desire to fellowship with people is demonstrated by His willingness to give His only begotten Son to make reconciliation possible between humans and Himself.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:16–17).

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Timothy 3:16).

B. Humans Desired Fellowship with God

Since human beings were created in the image of God, there is within them a natural desire for fellowship with God.

David. David, whom God described as “a man after mine own heart” (Acts 13:22), desired to be in the presence of the Lord.

“One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple” (Psalm 27:4).

“I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Psalm 122:1).

However, when David lost his focus on the Lord, he fell into sin with Bathsheba. During the time after David’s sin and before his repentance, he lost the joy of salvation and the ability to offer genuine praise to the Lord. The desire for these lost blessings remained with him, however, and in his prayer of repentance he sought their restoration.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. . . . Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise” (Psalm 51:12, 14–15).

David’s sin held him in the bondage of a sense of isolation from God; his repentance

freed him from that oppression, restoring his ability to encourage others who were separated from God to find fellowship with the Lord.

“Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. . . . Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee” (Psalm 51:11, 13).

Isaiah. Isaiah recorded a communal song that is transformed into a personal expression of yearning for fellowship with God. The collective nature of the community of faith does not erase the identity of the individual, but the spiritual health of each person contributes to the well-being of the body as a whole.

“In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. . . . Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O LORD, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness” (Isaiah 26:1, 8–9).

II. FELLOWSHIP AMONG BELIEVERS

The word *fellowship* implies both obligation and benefit. It is at least a two-way street. An old adage defines it as “two fellows in one ship.”

A. Obligation of Fellowship

Transparency. There can be no hidden agendas among those who seek fellowship. A key metaphor for the believing community is the “body of Christ.” This idea implies the openness of relationships between the various members of the body as required by the interaction between the members of the human body.

“For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Romans 12:4–5).

“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. . . . That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. . . . Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (I Corinthians 12:12–14, 25, 27).

A key word here is *allēlōn*, translated “one of another” in Romans 12:5. This word is used at least a dozen times in the New Testament to describe various aspects of mutuality that exist among believers. In the context of relationships between believers who disagree, Paul prayed that God would give his readers the ability to “be likeminded one toward another” (Romans 15:5).

In Mark 9:50, the word is used to call believers to “peace one with another.” Jesus also used the word to define identity as a disciple of Christ: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

Paul employed *allēlōn* to describe “mutual faith” (Romans 1:12). He made use of it again in Galatians 5:13 to explain that believers “serve one another” as they are motivated by love. In Ephesians 4:32, Paul commanded his readers to be “kind one to another,” using the same word. Further in Ephesians, he used *allēlōn* to urge mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21).

James used the word twice in the same verse to command the twelve tribes scattered abroad to confess their faults one to another and to pray for one another (James 5:16). Peter used it to command his readers to submit to one another (I Peter 5:5).

Nurturing. Another key word found in the New Testament that develops the idea of fellowship is *oikodomē*, often translated with some form of the verb *edify*. When it is used in the context of interpersonal relationships, this word involves strengthening and in some way building up fellow believers. Here are some examples:

“Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification” (Romans 15:2).

“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. . . . How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (I Corinthians 14:3, 26).

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–12).

“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29).

Romans 15:2 shows that Christian fellowship is to include sensitivity to differing views. In this, we seek to please our neighbors. (See Romans 14; 15:1–4.) Then we are to exercise our spiritual gifts to build up and strengthen our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our words should enlighten and uplift those to whom we speak. *Nurture* is a good word here because it captures the idea of caring for and encouraging growth in an individual.

Discipling. The nurturing involved with fellowship has an end goal—to make disciples. This idea is often described today by the term *mentoring*. The Great Commission includes our responsibility to teach both before and after baptism. (See Matthew 28:19–20.)

Two words are used in Jesus’ command that describe teaching from different perspectives. The first, *mathēteuō*, involves making disciples. To be someone’s disciple is to adhere to the teachings and to promote the cause of that person. The second, *didaskō*, has to do with providing instruction in either a formal or an informal setting, but it does not denote merely classroom activity (Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

As it relates to Jesus’ command, it is first our responsibility to teach sufficient content to prepare people for baptism. After baptism, it is

our further responsibility to continue to teach, both in formal settings and by example, so those who have been baptized will develop into mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

Acceptance. One of the most helpful, but challenging, passages as it relates to fellowship among believers is Romans 14; 15:1–7. This text is helpful because it so clearly points out the relationship that should exist between believers who have differing understandings. It is challenging because each of us is tempted to think our views are right and all other views are wrong. Consider some key verses from this section of Paul’s letter.

“Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. . . . One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself” (Romans 14:1–3, 5–7).

This text is specific in that it identifies signs of whether one’s faith is strong or weak. But the specific nature of the text carries with it principles that can be applied in other contexts. In other words, to believe that one must eat only vegetables to please God is not the only indication of weak faith. Neither is the freedom to eat anything necessarily a sign of strong faith.

Paul did not write these words to approve of anything identified in Scripture as sin. The main point is seen in these words: “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Romans 14:19). This includes the responsibility of the strong to “bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please [themselves]” (Romans 15:1).

Acceptance calls for inclusivity, not exclusivity. As Paul put it, “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God” (Romans 15:7). This is not a call to approve of behavior identified in Scripture as sin but to be willing to embrace one another in fellowship even when there are differing opinions on matters not specifically addressed in the Word of God.

B. Benefits of Fellowship

The strength of mutual support. The obligations of fellowship naturally result in benefits. The nurture of mutual edification by definition strengthens and builds up those involved in this process. This is essential to spiritual well-being and anticipates the biblical calls for corporate fellowship. Any notion that we can be spiritually healthy without experiencing the benefits of fellowship is faulty.

“Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong. Let all your things be done with charity. I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,) that ye submit yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with us, and laboureth” (I Corinthians 16:13–16).

Paul’s words begin with a command (verses 13–14) and move to an appeal (verses 15–16). Throughout, Paul wrote to the believing community except in the final phrase, translated, “to every one that helpeth with us, and laboureth.” Even these words, however, reach out to embrace the entire community.

Intimacy. Beginning at Acts 1:16, the word *brethren* is used nearly two hundred times in the New Testament, indicating the spiritual intimacy existing among those who follow Christ. As many contexts indicate, the word is not intended to refer only to male followers of Jesus. For instance, Paul wrote, “Do thy diligence to come before winter. Eubulus greeteth thee, and Pudens, and Linus, and Claudia, and all the brethren” (II Timothy 4:21). Claudia was a woman, but she is included among “the brethren.”

To avoid any notion that the church is only for men, some translations render this phrase “all the brothers and sisters” (NLT). This is a legitimate idea, for elsewhere Paul wrote that believers should treat the “elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity” (I Timothy 5:2). The use of “brothers” and “sisters” demonstrates the intimate family relationship that exists among all disciples of Christ.

Unity. The church had its origin on the Day of Pentecost as the disciples were gathered “with one accord in one place” (Acts 2:1). The word translated “one accord” (*homothumadon*) appears with some frequency to describe the idea that the believers were of “one mind, by common consent” (Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). (See Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25; Romans 15:6.)

Where there is mutuality of faith and brotherhood of fellowship, there should be no division. If this abnormality does occur, believers must do what needs to be done to restore unity. (See I Corinthians 1:10.)

III. CORPORATE FELLOWSHIP

A. Forsake Not Assembling Together

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25).

One of the first and most frequent visible signs of the Christian faith is the frequent gathering of believers for worship and mutual encouragement. Where faith wanes, it is characterized by a loss of commitment to the community of worship and exhortation. There is something about belief in Jesus that thrives in mutuality. It is not meant to be experienced in isolation. When people choose isolation, it is the sign of a deeper spiritual crisis.

B. Opportunities in Fellowship

Prayer and worship. “And they continued stedfastly in . . . fellowship, and . . . in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

The first expressions of the Christian faith reflected the realization that the church was a community of believers. This is captured in the word *fellowship*. The result of this awareness was the behavior native to this new identity, including shared worship and prayer. While a believer can and should pray and worship alone, there is another dimension of prayer and worship when it is communal. This can be seen in Acts 4:23–30, where the believers prayed together, even using the same words.

Stewardship. “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (Acts 2:44–45).

One may at first think these verses describe a Christian form of communism, but that is not the case as can be seen in Acts 2:46. The believers still practiced home ownership. They did not sell all their possessions. What we can see from these verses is that the early believers had a generosity of spirit that resulted in a willingness to do whatever needed to be done to help those who were in need. (See Romans 15:25–28; I Corinthians 16:1–4.)

People of faith have always been givers. There is something about trust in God that issues forth in trusting Him with our finances. This is seen as far back as Abraham, who gave tithes to Melchizedek. (See Genesis 14:17–20.) In the church setting, giving is typically engaged in when we meet in community, although it can certainly be done by an individual at any time.

Doctrine. “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42). The word translated *doctrine* (*didachē*) means “teaching.” This teaching was the apostles’ response to Christ’s commands given in what is commonly called the Great Commission. (See Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15.)

There can be no community where there is no continuity of teaching, no body of belief to identify a common core of faith. Although this body of doctrine can be transmitted in a variety of ways, the Holy Spirit has especially equipped pastors and teachers for this task. (See Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11; I Corinthians 12:28–29.)

Breaking of bread. “And they continued stedfastly in . . . breaking of bread” (Acts

2:42). This probably is not a reference merely to communal meals. Instead, this is the language of the Lord's Supper, which follows the language of the Last Supper.

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26). There are many references in the New Testament to the simple act of eating, but the language of "breaking bread" seems to say more than that.

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (I Corinthians 10:16). (See also I Corinthians 11:24; Acts 2:46.)

IV. FELLOWSHIP'S GRAND MEETING

The ultimate outworking of the fellowship of believers on earth is the final, glorious meeting of the saints of all ages before Heaven's throne.

"After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9–10).

This numberless multitude will be made up of those whose faith led them to identify with

much smaller communities of believers from all over the world. The blessings they enjoyed in these small communities will come to a grand culmination in an eternal celebration of salvation.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

What specific steps are we taking to fulfill the obligations of fellowship? Are we convinced that the Christian life is meant to be lived within a community of believers? Do we feel assured that God wants fellowship with us, even if we are not perfect?



Many years ago, a church member called the pastor and said, "I won't be coming back to this church. The people are so unfriendly."

The pastor quoted Proverbs 18:24: "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly." As kindly as possible, the pastor told the caller to take the initiative in friendship.

About a week later, the pastor received a call from the same person, who said, "The people in this church are so friendly!"

The point of this little story is that the benefits of fellowship come only from embracing the obligations of fellowship. This includes our relationship with God. He has already done all that needed to be done to be reconciled to us. All that remains is our willingness to be reconciled to Him. (See II Corinthians 5:18–21.) ■

REFLECTIONS

- What clues are seen in Acts 2 indicating the church would be a community of believers?
- How does the Creation account indicate people are to live in community?
- Why is transparency important in fellowship?
- Discuss the various ways believers are to edify one another.
- How is teaching involved in fulfilling the Great Commission?
- Is it possible to develop into a mature Christian while living in isolation from other believers?

Why or why not?