

#181 “Paul’s Three Relationship Tips”

by Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

It is easy to give up on people or to write them off. Some people change quickly, while others move very slowly. Some are relatively easy to love, while others require a lot of patience. That is just the reality of life, people, and Christianity. Relationships are central to church life, and, of the many tasks we have on earth, relationships probably require the most work.

If we want godly relationships, we need to heed the principles of 1 Thessalonians 5:14, which says, “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” This verse really has three central admonitions followed by a summary exhortation that calls us to be patient with everyone. In other words, if we have learned to be longsuffering, forgiving, and willing to bear the burdens of others, we are probably doing the three prior admonitions as well. Taking them one at a time, Paul says, first of all, that we are to “admonish the unruly.” This speaks to those in our fellowship and friend circles who profess to know Christ yet have developed an attitude that is callous toward sin and toward God. In New Testament Greek circles, the word for “unruly” spoke of those who didn’t show up for work. In other words, those that need correction, warning, and exhortation to repentance and right behavior are those who are veering off course spiritually because they are bailing out on what God loves and values. These who are in open sin or who have turned in bitterness against God and/or His people need correction. Being willing to call a brother or sister out on his or her sin is part of being in relationship with others. If we truly value a relationship in which a person has become unruly, we must not gloss over the sin and fail to talk about it. If we really care for the person, we will recognize that sin is a deadly poison that divides and destroys, and we will confront the one in sin in grace and in truth, not as one who is superior, but as one who recognizes our own vulnerability as well. This is how we finish the race, pulling one another up, pushing one another forward, and never being quick to reject and cast off. This is because relationships require patience, and our call is to be patient with everyone, including those who are stubborn and undisciplined.

Second, Paul says that we are to “encourage the fainthearted.” The word for encourage could still involve admonishment or calling to action and change, but it implies a gentler approach that may involve consolation as well. In other words, the method of interaction in a relationship with a loved one who is fainthearted is not so much of a direct confrontation because of sin as it is a coming alongside to help carry and propel the person forward in Christ. Fainthearted implies fatigue, a being worn down by a variety of life events, and a need not so much of exhortation as caring and comfort. Sometimes we will find ourselves and those whom we love being just worn down, and we need to be willing to go beyond just preaching at them and rather sympathizing, empathizing, and caring. But it doesn’t stop with just feeling what they feel, for we must encourage them to continue doing right and persevering to the finish line in Christ. Like a coach, while he understands that his players are tired, he calls them to keep fighting until the whistle blows. When we are fainthearted, we need others to stand by us, to believe in us, and to

encourage us to press toward the finish line. This again requires patience, remembering that there will be times when we, too, need to be encouraged because we, too, will be faint at heart.

Finally, Paul says that we are to “help the weak.” In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we learn that God had ordained for Paul to be in a weakened state, being afflicted and hurting. Whatever was happening to him, whether a physical ailment or spiritual attack, it was sapping his strength such that he was weakened in the flesh. This was for the purpose of keeping him humble and so that God’s strength could be seen in and through Paul’s weakness. So if God ordained weakness for Paul, we can expect to experience times of weakness ourselves, some more than others. There will be times whether due to health problems or various stressful situations that our strength will leave us. We will be severely weakened and made vulnerable, and this is when we need others to help us through our time of need. Perhaps this will involve bringing others a meal, driving them somewhere, helping them with their homework, or whatever else they might need. Relationships are not just for the easy times, but they are tested in the hard times when those whom we care for are hurting and in need. What we do in those times is a test of our ability to be patient with them and to truly show our love for them.

When people are there for us in our time of need to correct us, to listen to us, and to help us out, it shows us who it is that really cares. Of course, we must ask ourselves if we are there for others as well. Relationships are, after all, a two way street, requiring investment from both parties. Though relationships are difficult and require discernment, they are worth the effort because of the joy and life that they give. There is great strength in godly relationships, but they must be fought for and maintained. May God give us the willingness and strength to sustain relationships as much as is possible and to love others as Christ would have us.