

“See How They Love One Another!” The Fellowship Of The Church

The fellowship in the early Christian church was truly something to behold!

In the *Book of Acts* we are told that Jesus' disciples continually devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and joined together in table fellowship at each others' homes.

They had glad and sincere hearts and never stopped thanking and praising God.

Having received God's forgiveness and love they wanted to share it with one another.

They were living out the commands of the *Torah* to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Their fellowship was so noticeable that people were saying, “See how they love one another!”

We are not born with this kind of love for each other; we are born loving ourselves

There's a word for that kind of love: it's called narcissism.

The word derived from a Greek myth about a man named Narcissus who was the handsomest man who ever lived

He was so handsome that he fell in love with himself and spent all of his time gazing at his own reflection in a pool of water.

He became so enamored of his own beauty that he forgot to drink the water in front of him and he died of thirst.

Such is the fate of those who reserve their love for themselves.

You can't love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength if you love yourself more than the Lord.

And you can't love your neighbor as yourself if you love yourself more than your neighbor.

Self-love is the mortal enemy of Biblical love and it takes many different forms.

One form—maybe the most common form—is the love of accumulating as much money as you can.

Money itself is not the problem: it's the love or worship of money that is the root of all sorts of evil.

People worship money because they believe it will bring them happiness.

I listen to FM 91.5 - WKRP – which plays oldies—mostly music from the 30's and 40's.

I heard a novelty song the other day entitled “Money Is a Funny Thing.”

Two lines I remember from the song are: “Those who got it don't need it and those who need it don't got it.”

And, “The poor man wants more money so he can pay the bills and the rich man wants more money so he sends the bills.”

The key word when it comes to money is “more.”

There's a story about Samuel Gompers, the great 19th century labor union leader.

Once after a particularly difficult contract negotiation, a reporter asked Gompers. “What does the working man really want?”

Gompers took his ever-present cigar out of his mouth and simply said, “More.”

He was a man of few words.

I would submit that it is not only the working man who wants more money: everyone wants more money.

And no one ever has enough.

A book called *American Colossus*, documents the prodigious growth of the American economy that took place between the Civil War and 1900.

New inventions were springing up every day and industry was thriving.

Everybody was making out—the working man's income rose rapidly as well as the income of company owners and managers.

But the income of the owners and managers rose more than the working man's income, which made the working man jealous and led to the rapid growth of labor unions.

It's not so much **what** you make as it is **how** it compares with what **other people** make.

I vividly recall how the president of Stouffer frozen foods threw an outright temper tantrum when he found out that the president of Heinz Food Company made more than he did.

In the *Book of Acts* there is an account of a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who sold some land and gave most of the proceeds to the disciples to support their ministry.

It was a generous gift, but they claimed that it was the entire proceeds from the sale of the land while they secretly kept back part of it for themselves.

They wanted credit for more than they gave and as a result what could have been a good and loving deed was turned sour.

Even in an act of generosity, money had a hold on them.

Another form self-love takes is the love of possessions.

Not necessarily because of their financial value, but because people identify with their possessions and they want other people to notice them.

Look at my house, my swimming pool, my expensive car, my clothes: see? That's me!

In extreme cases the love of possessions can take the form of hoarding—the disease of “possession-itis,

The disciples of the early church abolished the ownership of possessions and shared everything in common because they were aware of the power of possessions to interfere with love and fellowship.

As we get older, the Lord seems to help us abandon our love of possessions:and we begin to love getting rid of them rather than acquiring more of them.

My personal slogan has become: "when in doubt throw it out."

A third form self-love takes is competitiveness: the love of *winning*.

When our original parents rebelled against God, the triune harmony between man and God and creation was shattered.

Adam and Eve's desire to love and serve each other was driven out by a desire to control each other.

A win/lose mentality was born and began to rule in the human heart.

One obvious example of man's love of competition is the popularity of competitive sports.

\$230,000,000 for throwing a football?

To a great extent, sports heroes have replaced Jesus and the stadium has replaced the church in the religious worship of America.

If you doubt that, just let a school sporting event conflict with a child's confirmation class and see which one the parents choose to honor.

So there you have it: money, possessions and competition: three forms of narcissism that get in the way of Biblical love.

But what nourishes Biblical love and fellowship in the church?

Well, what is the source of love?

And the answer, of course, is God.

God is not only the source of all love: God IS love.

The fountainhead of love is God and we have to drink of God's love before we can love God or our neighbor.

We first have to receive before we can give.

And how do we receive God's love?

We receive God's love through Jesus Christ and His body in this world—the church—where He distributes his love through His word and worship and prayer.

First of all, we receive God's love through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever...I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we are fed with the bread of heaven.

As St. Augustine said, "Believe in Him and you have eaten."

We also receive God's love through His word.

Jeremiah said, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight."

God spoke to Ezekiel: "Then I looked and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll [and] on both sides of it were written words...And he said to me, 'Son of man eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. And it was as sweet as honey in my mouth.'"

God's word is manna from heaven.

Jesus said, "Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is bread that comes down from heaven which a man may eat and never die."

We are nourished unto eternal life by the word of God.

Then there is worship—the divine service of Jesus Christ to His disciples.

Of all God's ways of distributing His love to mankind, the one most misunderstood and neglected by Christians is Sabbath worship.

My experience has been that most Christians regard worship on the Sabbath as an obligation or duty—something that they **ought** to do.

They don't understand that it is a gift, an opportunity and not a duty.

Worship is divine service—the loving service of Jesus Christ to His people—not his people's service to Him.

God gave us the sabbath as a day of blessing, of resting in the arms of the One Who created you and who loves you.

In worship, your sins are forgiven and you are nourished by the word of God as it is read aloud and expounded in the sermon.

In worship you are fed with the body and blood of your Savior which strengthens your faith and your love of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

In worship you are gladdened and consoled by fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Worship is for **you**—not for God!

God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow: He is not increased by our worship.

It is we who are increased—in faith, in love, in hope and in fellowship.

The sabbath was made for man—not man for the sabbath.

And it is nothing less than a tragedy that much of the younger generation of Christians tend to regard worship as an option rather than a gift, a duty that can be discharged at Easter and Christmas, rather than a gift from God.

Finally, God gives his love through our prayers.

Like worship, many Christians think of prayer as a duty or obligation rather than a gift.

Think of it: the Lord of heaven and earth, who created the earth, the moon, the stars, the planets and the galaxies along with the ice caps and oceans of the earth, the rivers, lakes and streams, the mountains, hills and valleys, the pastures and the plains; who created all vegetable, animal and human life—**that same God wants to hear your prayers!**

St. Augustine said, "God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love."

God's love for us is a river and our self-love dams up that river and keeps his love from reaching us.

All it takes to break down the dam is for us to repent and open up our hearts and minds to receive His love.

Christians who are loved and nourished by God's love, find it easy to share that love and nourishment with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And it is with great joy that I can honestly tell you that this congregation is a wonderful example of Christian fellowship—of the love of brothers and sisters in Christ for each other.

It's the only congregation I've ever been around where the passing of the peace takes more time than the confession of sins.

And that's something we can rejoice about.

This afternoon we will gather together in loving fellowship with Cheryl and Nick and Jeff Tomaselli and the rest of their family to show our love for them and for George, and to show our thanks for the love they have shared with us.

I pray that there are other congregations out there that are blessed with the kind of fellowship we have here at Hope.

Amen.

