

In the Second World War Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsy were imprisoned for hiding Jews in their home. Their relationship with God carried them through that ordeal and was a great benefit to others.

Listen as I read a tiny excerpt from Corrie's book, *The Hiding Place*. 'It grew harder and harder. Even within these four walls, there was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. Every day something else failed to make sense; something else grew too heavy. But as the rest of the world grew stranger, one thing became increasingly clear. And that was the reason the two of us were here. Why others should suffer, we were not shown. As for us, from morning until lights-out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll call, our Bible was the center of an ever-widening circle of health and hope. Like waifs clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding out our hearts to its warmth and light. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the Word of God. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... Nay, in all things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.'

Betsy and Corrie happened to be biological sisters and also sisters in Christ.

One thing that helped them to endure was the realization of their purpose. They came to see that as image bearers; they were to reflect Christ and teach others about Him.

Yesterday, Dorsey did a great job reminding us of the privileges and responsibilities of being a daughter of God.

Today, I'm going to talk about the relationship we share as Sisters in Christ.

When I call us Sisters in Christ, all of us understand that we are not merely a social group with a shared interest and mutual appreciation for one another.

Our relationship is much deeper than that. Through faith in Jesus Christ and by His atoning work we have been adopted into His family.

We are born by the will of God, who is our Father. (John 1:13)

Jesus is our elder brother (Heb. 2:11; Rom. 8:28; Mark 3:34.)

We are siblings and the offspring of God.

Our relationship with each other is eternal. No matter what happens in this Life, we will never stop being family. Our bond is unbreakable. Nothing can separate us from our union with Christ or our union with each other.

We share the same destiny! We will always be with the Lord!

All of God's children are siblings with the common purpose of living for His glory and loving Him and our neighbor.

The way we as sisters walk may be different in some ways than the role of our brothers in Christ. But Christ equally values our role and gives us particular ways to express our identity.

It was God who chose your gender and just the way you should glorify Him best. The Local church is where we walk out our family relationships as a daughter of God and sisters In Christ.

PRAYER

In the book of Romans, Paul has a lot to say about how we live out our relationships with each other. In Romans 1-11, Paul explains the Gospel and in the rest of Romans Paul appeals to us to live as those transformed by the Gospel.

In Romans 15:1-7, there are some specific ways those who have been adopted by God should live. (handout)

Let's read that passage:

15 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God

Here are three ideas to share:

1. As Sisters In Christ, We Build Up (Rom. 1-3).
2. As Sisters In Christ, We Encourage (Rom. 15:4-5).
3. As Sisters In Christ, We Welcome (Rom. 15:7).

Point 1: As Sisters In Christ, We Build up! (Rom. 15:1-3)

Let's define build-up this way: To edify or lift up, to fortify or cause to prosper.

In our passage, Paul calls us to please our neighbor for his good to build him up. He's saying, consider the example of Christ - Christ did not please Himself. But, Paul is not calling us to people pleasing or adjusting the Gospel so that others feel loved in merely a human way.

Paul is calling us to act wisely so that we will not allow nonessential matters to interrupt what Christ died to give us. You have real freedom, Paul says, but your

freedom is for the edification of your siblings. Use your freedom to serve each other in Love (Gal. 5:13).

In verse 3, when Paul says, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me," he quotes Psalm 69:9.

Jesus knew Psalm 69:9. He grew up reciting it. We are told in John 18:4, that Jesus knew all that was going to happen to Him.

He knew He would bear all of our reproach, all of our sin, all of our shame... The Father would turn His face away.

He pleased not Himself and gave us an example.

In John 13, there is another beautiful example of Our Savior. It's a story we all love. Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, even the feet of Judas, who would soon betray Him. A little further in that chapter, Jesus says, "For I have given you an example, that you should go and do just as I have done for you. Truly, truly, I say to you, A servant is not above His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent Him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (John 13:15-17)

Here Jesus calls us into humility and service, but remember He also told us that He would be with us (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus isn't just our example - He is our indwelling source of Life!

Through dependence upon Him and fellowship with Him, He enables us to walk as He walked.

Learning to abide in Him is our lifelong lesson.

The phrase “One Another” occurs 100 times in the NT. “Approximately 59 of those occurrences are specific commands teaching us how (and how not) to relate to one another.”

This isn't new to us, but it's good to remind ourselves that the Christian Life centers on strengthening others. His commands show us the true way to do good to each other. Follow along as I read these commands.

POSITIVE COMMANDS

Love one another (John 13:34 - This command occurs at least 16 times)

Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10)

Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10)

Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16)

Build up one another (Romans 14:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Be like minded towards one another (Romans 15:5)

Accept one another (Romans 15:7)

Admonish one another (Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16) Greet one another (Romans 16:16), Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)

Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)

Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:2, 32; Colossians 3:13)

Be patient with one another (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13)

Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15, 25)

Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32)

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19) Submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21, 1 Peter 5:5)

Consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2:3)

Look to the interests of one another (Philippians 2:4)

Bear with one another (Colossians 3:13)

Teach one another (Colossians 3:16)

Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13)

Stir up [provoke, stimulate] one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24) Show hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)

Employ the gifts that God has given us for the benefit of one another (1 Peter 4:10)

Clothe yourselves with humility towards one another (1 Peter 5:5)

Pray for one another (James 5:16)

Confess your faults to one another (James 5:16)

NEGATIVE COMMANDS (how not to treat one another)

Do not lie to one another (Colossians 3:9)

Stop passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13)

If you keep on biting and devouring each other...you'll be destroyed by each other

(Gal.5:15) Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:26) Do not slander one another (James 4:11)

Don't grumble against each other (James 5:9)

We do all this because we are in a real sense "members of one another" (Rom.12:5; Eph. 4:25)

While working through this list, I was convicted that these aren't just suggestions but actual commands that the Lord wants us to walk out faithfully.

But remember what we discussed at the last retreat: we make progress in our Christian Life through confession and repentance.

And remember that we build each other up with words of grace, but it doesn't have to be eloquent or long conversations. So often, it's the short comments we exchange with each other at break or the end of our service that God uses to strengthen our hearts.

Once when I was leaving a meeting, an elderly member of our congregation patted my arm and looked me in the eye, and told me she loved me. Her words were so unexpected that they deeply touched me. Walking to my car, I was moved to tears and felt ministered to. We never know how our words might build someone up. The Lord uses even simple acts.

I know I've been blessed and helped by so many of you as you have lived this out! How dear we become to each other as we yield to the Lord's teaching and build each other up.

Point 2 As Sisters In Christ, We Encourage (Rom 15:4-5)

Let's define encourage this way: Not only giving comfort to someone, but it involves exhortation, urging, strengthening and even appealing.

We learned from our passage in Rom.15:4, that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

The Spirit works through the Word to instruct and encourage us. The Scriptures correct our wrong thinking, conform us to Christ and resuscitate our hope.

None of us are over-encouraged! Life is not simple. Some days we face discouragement after discouragement. We are fighting a fight of Faith.

This is a place where we can help each other run well. Only God is independent and self-existent. The rest of us are interdependent.

Drew Hunter, in the book, *Made for Friendship* says that "Encouragement is relational oxygen." He also says that one of the best gifts Life offers us is unhurried conversation with close friends.

Even the apostle John in 2 John:12, said, " Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face so that our joy may be complete."

There is a friendship that we have read about in the Bible. It's the friendship between Jonathan and David. One of the most powerful verses about that friendship comes from 1 Samuel 23:16 where it says, "Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God." Other versions say, encouraged him in God.

It's this idea of strengthening another's hand in God or encouraging others in God that I'd like for us to think about. It's easy for us to think, "I'm just one person; what could God do through me?"

God wants to use all of us. He wants to use you! Each of us are given gifts to build up the body! No one is left out!

Sisters in Christ, "Through many tribulations, we enter the Kingdom God" (Acts 14:22).

We profoundly need each other.

Our culture trains us to have an individualistic perspective. We value self-reliance and autonomy. Even as Christians we can be tempted to make weighty decisions alone. Sometimes these decisions affect the rest of our lives.

Belonging to God's family causes a reorientation to this mindset.

Jesus calls us to belief and behavior that is consistent with belonging to the Family of God.

Remember what Christ told us in Mark 3:33? He said, "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around Him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

So how do we walk this out? We already walk it out, but how can we walk it out with even more intention? All of us need instruction, endurance, and encouragement. I believe it's by letting God's Word instruct us and refusing to live isolated lives.

Listen to this challenging quote by Joseph Hellerman, from the book, *When Church Was Family*.

"Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community. People who remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding, and they mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings. This is especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of personal discord and conflict resolution. Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian Life."

It's helpful to remember that relationships can be complex and have many sides. David Powlison said, " We grow and change by listening. We change by hearing, not by talking."

We thought about that idea in the fall as Carla led us through *Saints, Suffers, And Sinners*.

We listen so we can speak words that are timely and appropriate. Encouraging each other in the Lord doesn't give us license to share unsolicited advice.

Sometimes the best way to care for someone is to be a loving presence and to intercede on their behalf. Paul demonstrates this in Romans 15:5.

This is a prayer. I love the way Paul stops and prays. He says, "May the God of Endurance and Encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul knew prayer was vital. That's a subject for a talk in itself, but here Paul is praying something into the lives of his friends. We can do this too! We often don't know the best words to say, or we aren't the ones being asked, but each of us can pray. We can pray diligently for God to incline hearts to His will. We can pray He will strengthen and protect us from evil. We can thank Him together!

Prayer is bringing everything in our hearts to God. You can be honest with all you are struggling with. He knows it already, and He invites us to pour out our hearts to Him. And He teaches us how to entrust others and their situations into His capable hands.

We pray because we believe that God hears us and He has the power to intervene, and yet, true prayer ends with, "Thy will be done."

You, ladies, are so good at this. I love looking around our church and seeing groups of two or three praying, sometimes before church, during the break, or after church.

May the Lord help us to do so more and more because, as Sisters In Christ, we encourage!

Point 3 As Sisters In Christ, We Welcome! (Rom.15:7)

Romans 15:7 says, "Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

How has Jesus welcomed you? In Christ, you are not just tolerated. You are dearly loved. You are welcomed and accepted. We are united to Christ. His work on the cross was complete! The Father loves us as He Loves Jesus.

Because of that, because our security rest in His Love, we can open wide our hearts and cultivate a Biblical community. A community where the Gospel is central, and we have allowed it to sink into every area of our Life.

To welcome someone means to receive another person as Christ has received us.

Remember that great quote from Timothy Keller:

“We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”

Because we know we are flawed and accepted In Christ we can accept those whom Christ has already accepted.

This doesn't mean we don't challenge one another or call out sin. It means that we are gracious with one another and want the best for each other.

I've heard it said that unity is created by love and preserved by forbearance. Those are words to consider. And Paul says that when we do this we bring Glory to God!

In John 15:14, Jesus says, "You are my friend if you do what I command you." Here Jesus is calling us into obedience. He is our King and also our Beloved Friend. As we spend time with Him, we become like Him and become His fragrance to each other. Jesus not only models true friendship, He empowers it through His Spirit.

Let's finish this point with some practical ideas of how to walk out our welcome.

Practical ideas:

1. Instead of saying, "where are my friends?" Think.... How can I be a better friend? In this upside down Kingdom we are always being pointed away from self and toward others.

2. Guard against false expectations. Friendships take time and commitment. Don't despise the day of small beginnings. Trust God to deepen your friendships as you set your heart to build others up.

Personal Story When our family returned from the Durham church plant, it was a hard transition. We were grateful to have a home church to return to but sad that our church plant was not continuing. One day Donna W. invited me to join a ladies prayer meeting. Some of you ladies attended that group. God used this little gathering to be a spring of encouragement during a difficult time. These ladies were fluent in expressing adoration to the Lord. They began their meetings magnifying and extolling God. Their prayers were outward-focused and full of faith. I'm introverted... preferring to write my prayers, so their example was refreshing and life-giving. I learned so much in that little group of praying ladies. Once, Cassie S. told me to trust that God would deepen my relationships at the right time, and then another time, the Lord allowed me to hear almost the same words from Dorsey. She said The Lord knows you are missing people. He is going to deepen your relationships at the right time. It's been seven years now, and the Lord has done that! I share all that because if you are new, I want you to be encouraged. You might be missing people too, or missing the way your former church did things. The Lord will deepen your friendships at the right time...be patient with the process. And if you have been around awhile, try and remember what it's like to be new. Invite others in. Let's keep encouraging our young people to demonstrate this too.

3. Think of what you already do and invite others to join you, establish rhythms... Sunday after church, invite others over. Be the one to initiate. Friendships thrive when we eat together!

4. Bring God into the conversation, talk about spiritually significant topics. Ask good questions; how can I pray for you? What is difficult right now? Be a trustworthy person guarding the confidentiality of those who open up to you.

5. Be ok with feeling awkward as you grow in affirming others...press through and keep trying. Here is a practical tip to live by from Drew Hunter's book, *Made For Friendship*, "Whenever the thought crosses your mind to affirm something about someone, do it and do it without hesitation." I think we hesitate because we don't want to flatter. Flattery is insincere and is given for reciprocal affirmation. Encouragement is given to bless. To see a good example of this, look at the last chapter in Romans. Paul commends 29 people, 19 men, and 10 women. He is full of affection and tenderness toward these dear people. His words cultivate an atmosphere of appreciation and affection. We want to cultivate this too. We already do this, but let's ask the Lord to help us intentionally lean into it more and more.

6. Be honest about your struggles; ask for prayer. Be transparent but don't fall off the cliff with over sharing to everyone. Jesus spent His Life with lots of crowds, but His closest group was a group of twelve. And in specific situations, only three. We are to be open-hearted with everyone, but we can only navigate deep friendship with a few.

7. Let those close to you know they have the right to correct you and promise to receive it well. (another tip from, *Made For Friendship*) Of course we know that correction is never given in a superior way, but in a heart-to-heart way, in a spirit of gentleness like Paul says in Gal. 6:1. Our posture is always humility and love. We pray for that.

8. Cultivate Empathy, Lauren Whitman in her book, *A Biblical Counseling Process* describes Empathy this way: "Empathy does not mean we are in blind agreement with someone's perspective. Rather, Empathy aims to accurately understand someone's perspective. Empathy is an outworking of love and it says, 'I see you and that you are struggling. I am committed to not standing far off from you. I will work hard to understand you, your experience, and your perspective because I want to know you.'

9. Practice forgiveness- like the subject of prayer, this also could be a talk in itself. I like what C.S. Lewis has to say on this, "Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has someone to forgive." Jesus also has some words to say about this topic, and He commands us to forgive (Matt. 6: 15, Col. 3: 13-14). Because we are recipients of God's grace, we must give grace to others, but it isn't easy to walk this out, nor does it always result in reconciliation. Paul reminds us in Romans 12, "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

As I mentioned before, as we spend time with Jesus, we become like Him... Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. "For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

This is a lifelong process that can feel painfully slow, and often it is through difficult circumstances that God works His nature into our hearts.

There is a story in John 11 and 12, that illustrates some of Paul's points from the Romans passage and also highlights how Jesus walked out His friendships.

Jesus considered Martha, Mary, and Lazarus some of His beloved friends, yet He delayed when they seemed to need Him the most.

This was painful and confusing to them. But, later, they came to see the wisdom of Christ, and they grew in the certainty that Jesus never minimizes our pain; he enters it and reveals Himself right there in that place.

This was demonstrated most of all when Jesus died on the cross for us.

Everything Jesus did was to show us exactly what the Father is like. He imaged the Father to us! He showed us what it means to live a life for God's glory and not man's. He emptied Himself and loved us to the fullest extent.

I'd like to close by reading the first three verses of John 12, (you can turn there in your Bibles)

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus, therefore, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for Him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with Him at the table. Mary, therefore, took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Sisters in Christ, we love because He first Loved us. When you respond to His love and let it fill you and flow through you to others, it is like a fragrance pouring out...because it's the fragrance of Our Father and Our Elder brother and the Spirit that has joined us together in the family of God!

Just like Martha and Mary and Corrie and Betsy learned from Christ how to live for His glory, we are learning that too. Christ has purchased us by His blood. We belong to Him. He promises to finish what He began. Every day is an opportunity to live for His glory. Every day He will help us to build up, encourage and welcome! Every day we can be his fragrance to each other.

What a privilege to belong to Him and one another!

Let me end us with Prayer:

Father, you tell us in Psalm 16 that the Saints in the land are the excellent ones! That's how I feel about these people here.

But all of us know and all of us realize that any good in us is only a result of You and Your work in us. You are Our Good Portion Christ. Please will you pour out Your Spirit among us and Fill us again. We want more Lord, more of You. Please fill us with your love and help us to demonstrate it to each other and to the Lost. In the Name of Christ our Lord we pray.

Amen