

Introduction

I'd like to begin with a cute little story I read. A man on vacation stopped at a restaurant in the deep south. Seeing grits on the menu and being a northerner who spent his entire life in Michigan, he politely asked the waitress, **"What exactly is a grit?"** To which she replied in a southern draw right out of the movies, **"Honey, they don't come by themselves."** She was right. Grits don't come by themselves.

And neither do people. That's a fact. No man is an island. As the Bible makes clear, we need **"one another"** and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to Galatians 5:13-15, 25-26.

Circles of Sufficiency

Let's begin by examining a term Paul uses in verses 13, 15, and 26, **"one another."** He isn't the only one who uses it. So do Peter, John, James, and the unknown author of Hebrews. Here are verses in which they do: Romans 12:10,16; 13:8; 14:13; 15:5,7,14, 2 Corinthians 13:12; Galatians 5:13,15,26; Ephesians 4:2,25,32; Colossians 3:13,16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9,18; 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; James 4:11; 5:9,16; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8-10; 5:5,14; 1 John 1:7; 3:11,23; 4:7,11,12, and 2 John 5.

Those verses describe a certain kind of community, of which I want to give you a glimpse. Romans 12:10 – **"Give preference to one another in honor."** Ephesians 4:32 – **"Be kind to one another."** Colossians 3:13 – **"Bear with one another."** 1 Thessalonians 5:11 – **"Build up one another."** Hebrews 3:13 – **"Encourage one another."** James 4:11 – **"Do not speak against one another."** James 5:9 – **"Do not complain against one another."** 1 Peter 1:22 – **"Fervently love one another from the heart."**

Those verses and the others I cited describe a community of mutual "for-ness." The people who make it up are in each other's "corner." Each receives, makes a place for, and provides for the other. Those are basic, universal acts of the love that every person on earth craves and

needs. And in the **“one another”** communities the Bible describes, they get it. Sociologists call such communities “circles of sufficiency.”

There are two fundamental circles of sufficiency. One is found in the lyrics of the old song *Blue Heaven*, **“Just Molly and me, and baby makes three.”** That is of course the mother, father, and child relationship. The other is what the term **“one another”** in the Bible refers to – the church, comprised of brothers and sisters in Jesus. Numerous forms of human association though can take on one degree or another of sufficiency – co-workers, neighbors, teammates and more. North Elementary School in Poland is an example of what I mean. There is a significant degree of sufficiency there, in the relationships between principal, teachers, students, staff, and volunteers. Everyone senses it.

Notice the word **“sufficiency.”** It implies that one another relationships are essential to human life and that is in fact the case. In his *Meditation XVII*, English poet and preacher John Donne declared unforgettably that **“No man is an island.”** Or to say it another way, people, like grits, don’t come by themselves. We have to be in a circle or circles of sufficiency in order to be joyful and whole. Now, circles of sufficiency require two basic conditions, both of which Paul reveals.

Fear of Harm Is Absent

The first condition is that the fear of harm must be absent.

We see that in verse 15. Notice the vivid terminology Paul uses here. He talks about Christians who **“bite,” “devour,”** and **“consume”** each other. Those Greek words were used to describe what animals do. What they picture, therefore, is Christians fighting like cats and dogs. But it isn’t just Christians in the church. It’s everyone everywhere, in homes, schools, workplaces, locker rooms, neighborhoods, and more.

Stop for a moment and consider the people we know and meet. The fact is we have one degree or another of fear with the majority, if not all of them. That fear is this. When the conditions are right, they will harm us. And it’s vice versa. They have the same fear with many if not most

of us. People harm each other in two primary ways.

The first is attack. We attack others when we purposely act against what is good for them, even with their consent. We say or do something to inflict pain or loss on them physically, psychologically, or materially. There are numerous forms of attack, three of which Paul mentions in verse 26. "Boasting" - One mother snidely told another in their church nursery, "**I can't believe how slow your child is developing compared to mine.**" "Challenging" - A mother at Wal-mart yelled at her little son to shut his mouth and quit being a baby. "Envy" - Co-worker A told co-worker B that the only reason co-worker C got the promotion was because he was the boss's pet. Those are just three of the numerous forms of attack and typify what goes on in human relationships.

There's a second primary way that people harm each other. They withdraw. They distance themselves from the well-being and joy of others and act as if they don't matter at all. So, a husband got mad at his wife and gave her the cold shoulder for two days. In that case, withdrawal was actually a form of attack, but it isn't always. Sometimes people withdraw not to harm but because they're weak, fearful, uncertain, or even repulsed. So a popular teenager acknowledged the nerd in her youth group at church but ignored him at school. She wasn't trying to harm him but to protect her reputation.

That then is the fear that exists in almost all relationships or groups. When the conditions are right, the people involved will act to harm each other. They'll attack or withdraw.

But as the "**one another**" verses clearly imply, that fear has to be absent in order for circles of sufficiency to exist. They can exist only when those in relationships or groups are inwardly and outwardly at ease with each other - when they know they won't be purposely harmed.

That makes our calling, in verses 15 and 26, clear. Eliminate attack and withdrawal as a way of relating to others, "period." Make and carry out the decision that we will never do either with anyone for any reason. When the conditions are right and most people would attack or withdraw,

we don't. No one is ever purposely harmed in our presence.

My wife, for instance, followed a cardinal rule with our sons. Never discipline or embarrass them in front of someone else no matter who it is. They never had to fear that happening with her. Eliminating that specific harm is our model for eliminating all harms, period. We intend that we will never attack or withdraw from anyone for any reason – and carry out our intention. The fear of harm is absent when we do.

Certainty of Help Is Present

Circles of sufficiency require a second condition. The certainty of help must be present.

We see that in verse 13. Paul asserts that Jesus freed his readers from the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic Law – the laws of circumcision, festivals, and foods. But, he says, they shouldn't use that freedom as a springboard for the flesh, to act on selfish desires. They should use it to **"be slaves to one another"** instead.

What is it practically speaking that slaves do? They serve their masters. That's exactly what goes on in circles of sufficiency. Those who comprise it serve or minister to one another in love, verse 14. In his classic book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer identifies and explains seven kinds of ministry that characterize circles of sufficiency. They are the ministries of holding one's tongue, meekness, listening, helpfulness, bearing, proclaiming, and authority. Those ministries are about people actively promoting each other's good in a variety of ways. There is an interplay of constant mutual blessing between them. That interplay in turn creates the certainty of help.

We have a part to play in that certainty of help and Dallas Willard defines what it is: **"But every contact with a human being should be one of goodwill and respect, with a readiness to acknowledge, make way for, or assist the other in suitable ways."** That's our part. Make our every contact with others ones of goodwill and respect, with a readiness to acknowledge, make way for, or assist them in suitable ways.

A Christian I know noticed an office co-worker of hers falling behind in her work. So, she stayed late with her after work for two days to help her get caught up – for no pay. She helping with that specific need is our model for helping with all needs. We intend to make actively helping and blessing our way of relating to others – and carry out our intention. The certainty of help is present when we do.

Those then are the two conditions that must be present for our homes, churches, offices, and so on to be circles of sufficiency. First, the fear of harm must be absent. So we eliminate attack and withdrawal as a way of relating to others. Second, the certainty of help must be present. So we make serving and blessing our way of relating to others.

Two on One

Verse 25 tells us how to do that. Line one points out that the Holy Spirit is the source of our life. And since He is, line two concludes, we should let Him direct the course of our life. That means we do everything, including relate to others, as He directs. Well, how He directs us to relate to others is “two on one.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains that in his book I mentioned earlier *Life Together*.

Most of us relate to others “one on one,” which means this. I have direct fellowship with them. I think of what **I** am going to do **with** or **to** or **for** them. I direct my love toward them for my own sake.

The problem with that kind of love is that it is dominating. I treat others as persons who are bound to me. I see them almost entirely in terms of me. Consequently, I try to regulate, coerce, or manipulate them for my own purposes. They do the same with me and the result is verse 15, fighting like cats and dogs. That’s one on one.

But the Holy Spirit wants us to relate to others “two on one,” which means this. I have indirect fellowship with them – fellowship that’s mediated through Jesus. As Bonhoeffer says it, Jesus stands between the lover and the ones he loves. I never think of what **I** am going to do **with** or **to** or **for** others. I always think of what **Jesus and I** are going to do

with or *to* or *for* them. The presence and action of Jesus permeate everything I say and do with them. I direct my love toward them for His sake not mine.

That is the love of verse 14 and, as you can see, it isn't dominating. I don't treat others as persons who are bound to me. I don't see them in terms of me. I treat them as free persons instead. Consequently, I don't try to regulate, coerce, or manipulate them for my own purposes. They do the same with me and the result is a concord and peace that are the opposite of verse 15.

So that's how the Holy Spirit directs us to relate to others, two on one. We do that by thinking and praying. First, we keep it constantly in mind that it's Jesus and us, not just us, engaging people. Second, we regularly ask the Holy Spirit for the presence and action of Jesus to permeate the way we engage people. If we're disciples of Jesus, doing those two things will revolutionize our relationships and us.

I was at Wal-mart during Christmas rush and bumped into a woman with my shopping cart. I was going to say "**I'm sorry**" but she turned around and angrily said, "**Why don't you watch where you're going**" before I could. The condition was right and engaging her one on one, I would have harmed her. I would have attacked her right back. But I didn't. I engaged her two on one instead. It wasn't *me* engaging her, but *Jesus and me*, which made her attack irrelevant. So I politely said what I originally intended to say, "**I'm sorry**" and moved on.

Conclusion

Blaise Pascal once said that there's a God-shaped hole in our heart that only He can fill. That's true. But it's also true that there's a human-shaped hole in our heart that He chooses not to fill. That hole is filled only when we have the "**one another**" experience that the verses I cited describe - when we're in circles of sufficiency. So, let's relate to one another two on one. The Holy Spirit will create those circles if we do. That's because He knows, as we do, that no man is an island.