

IRON SHARPENS IRON

Imagine, if you would, the workshop of a blacksmith in ancient Israel. One of the king's soldiers has returned from battle. His sword has been blunted by many strikes of the blade in this battle. He takes it to the blacksmith to have it sharpened. In order to sharpen the blade the blacksmith rotates an iron wheel at high speed and moves the blade of the sword up and down the rotating wheel. Sparks fly as he sharpens the edge and after doing this for a few minutes the sword is then ready for the next battle.

One of the most famous of King Solomon's many proverbs is found over in **Proverbs 27:17**. This proverb was written at the time of the birth of the archaeological age known as the Iron Age. Perhaps it was just such a scene that inspired to King Solomon to write his famous proverb in **Proverbs 27:17** which says: "As iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend."

What lessons can we draw from this proverb? In the sermonette time today I'd like to answer the question "How can we sharpen our friends?" How can we sharpen our friends just like iron sharpens iron?

I would like to look at three ways that we can do this. The first way is probably the immediate one that springs to most people's minds when they think of this proverb and that is offering constructive criticism. While no one wants to be known as someone who's mostly critical and negative most of the time constructive criticism every now and then can be quite beneficial in helping our friends grow and to become better people. Giving criticism in an effective way is a very delicate art.

One of the best examples of how to offer constructive criticism is found in the letters from Jesus Christ to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. I like to call this method the sandwich effect. In these seven letters Jesus starts off by praising them and telling them some of their good points.

Part of the reason for this was to remind them that Jesus was on their side and what He was about to share was for their benefit. People are much more responsive to criticism when we balance our criticism with praise. No one likes to feel inferior. If we don't balance our criticism with praise those we offer criticism to are more likely to focus on their hurt feelings at being criticised instead of feeling that we are on their side and trying to help them.

After offering praise in the letters to the church Jesus then offered the constructive criticism that they needed to be in His kingdom before He finished off with giving them a fantastic incentive to apply the criticism - "To he who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne". The incentive to apply the criticism helps takes a person's mind off their hurt feelings to the positive benefits of the applying the criticism in growing in that area we want to help our friends grow in.

This approach is like a sandwich in that you start off with something positive then offer the criticism then cap it off with something positive again and it really is one of the most effective ways to give constructive criticism.

Another related point to this is one that Mr Frank Jervis gave when I was in England in a sermon on friendship that I would like to demonstrate here today. [Hmmm that's not a knife...Ah, now that's a knife! Now where was I?]

Mr Jervis explained that the angle at which the iron blades meet is very important. If you come in too shallow it won't make any impact and won't sharpen. We do this when we are so subtle that we don't

get the point across. We don't want to go to the other extreme either. If come in at too great an angle we can damage the blade. We don't want to be too negative and too in someone's face and tear down another person's self-esteem which is just simply counterproductive to the very goal of the other person changing for the better. Paul in **Ephesians 4:15** didn't just say we are to speak the truth but we're to "speak the truth in love".

The second way in which we can sharpen our friends is by giving encouragement. Over in **Proverbs 16:24** King Solomon had this to say about encouragement. Here in Proverbs 16:24 we read: "Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones."

Discouragement is like a sickness that drains our energy and makes it harder to be productive and better ourselves. Encouragement, on the other hand, is health to the bones. It gives us energy. It helps sharpen us. Encouragement gives confidence and courage and it can help us to do things we never thought possible.

The famous American writer, Mark Twain, once said "I can live two months on a good compliment."

We need encouragement when we're discouraged, when we're under stress, when we've done a job well - in short, all the time.

What are some practical ways that we can give encouragement and praise others? We can praise others for good qualities we like about them. When was the last time that we complimented each of our closest friends, husbands, wives, parents or children that we have? When was the last time that we complimented someone on a job well done? We can encourage people that share with us their plans and dreams and give support to accomplish things that are difficult. We can show comfort and sympathy in times of sorrow, send cards to the sick or a thank you card to those who have helped us out.

One example of a great encourager in the Bible was Paul's companion Barnabas. His name Barnabas was apparently a nickname given to him by the apostles who were so impressed by how positive and encouraging he was that they called him this name that meant "Son of Encouragement" (**Acts 4:36**). His example is a great one for all of us to emulate.

David Alcock in his book "The Healing Art of Encouragement" writes:

"When others encourage us, we feel good about ourselves. We feel good about the encourager. We are willing to try new things and our confidence increases. Encouraged people are effective people. They have positive self-esteem and expect success in the tasks they undertake. They tend to have positive relationships with others and can concentrate on helping others rather than on their own personal inadequacies. Furthermore, encouraged people are the best encouragers of others (p23).

The third way that we can sharpen our friends is by giving them focus and direction. Some people live their lives like rudderless ships or feel that way when it comes to certain problems that they are facing not knowing how to resolve certain situations. Sometimes our friends can be blissfully unaware of their potential in certain areas.

Good advice from a friend can make a big difference for people in such situations. We can give answers to problems that they are facing, we can point out opportunities that they may not be aware of and so give them focus and direction that they may not have had otherwise. Solomon had much to say about good friendly advice. **Proverbs 27:9** is one example where he spoke of such counsel as being sweet like ointment and perfume.

People who have goals, who have direction are much more productive and successful than those who do not and friends can make a real difference with good advice that gives focus, direction and clarity.

I do software support for a particular computer program for a living. When I first started myself and the other guys I worked with were given very little training in fixing the specific problems we had to fix for people with the program. Our supervisor didn't give us any systematic training at the time though he was very helpful with ad-hoc things we needed his help with. This was the case for a long time though he has gotten better these days. When the subject of training used to come up with our newest team members we'd joke saying "Training? What's that? We never got training when we started." As a result of our experience us senior members on the support team have put in place better training for our newest members who have really benefited and progressed a lot quicker than we did in our first few months in the job.

Good advice and mentoring can really make a difference in sharpening up our friends and our work colleagues as well as our children. Please turn with me to **Deuteronomy 6:6-7**.

Here in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 we read:

"And these words which I command you this day shall be in your heart. And you shall carefully teach them to your sons, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up."

Without proper regular guidance our children will just simply go along with the flow of the world and end up doing things contrary to God's way of life and hurting themselves and other people around them. For our children to reach their full potential in life they need plenty of support and teaching from parents and grandparents.

Today we have looked at three ways in which we can sharpen our friends. Firstly, we can give constructive criticism when there is a need and not just speak the truth but speak the truth in love. Secondly, we can give encouragement which can energise and give confidence to our friends and help them even do things they didn't think were possible. The last way we looked at was to give focus and direction with good advice and guidance. With those points in mind let us all sharpen up one another more so we are able to better handle whatever challenges that life throws at us all.