

The Forger's Fire

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Have you ever wondered why some of the things you want most in life are so difficult to attain? The Scripture speaks of iron sharpening iron, and the imagery of the metaphor is difficult to grasp in our modern world. Today, we think of electric grinders or a file that would sharpen a piece of iron such as a lawnmower blade. It takes only a few minutes, and that is what we often expect in terms of human growth. If I can just say the right word or give the right word picture, then genuine life transformation can occur — whether it be in ourselves or in someone we are trying to influence. In this “fast food” or instant society, why would we expect anything less?

Such thinking, however, runs contrary to the analogy and to life itself. In the days when this proverb was written, they did not enjoy the luxuries of electric grinders or metal files; they had blacksmiths. A blacksmith would heat a forge with coal, select the proper metal, and then, using a bellows, heat a portion of the metal until it was red hot, bringing it to a malleable state. The hot metal would then be hammered on an anvil, usually 6 to 8 inches

at a time, working the metal to the right thickness, length, and strength. From time to time the metal would have to be reheated to get it back to the right temperature; and it would be allowed to cool naturally while doing nothing to it, simply to help the consistency of the grain of the metal. Somewhere along the way, it would be reheated and allowed to cool while insulated, so the cooling would be slower. Many of these steps would be repeated several times. In short, iron sharpening iron is not an instantaneous occurrence; it is a long, slow, tedious process that requires a lot of hard, exhausting work from beginning to end, when the final product, a sword for example, is completed.

Sometimes we have difficulty making changes in our own lives, let alone the lives of those to whom we minister. It takes time and a lot of it to develop the right thinking and the right behaviors — all impacted by the right value system as God has revealed for us in His Word. That is why Paul described love, in 1 Corinthians 13, as being patient, and why Jesus said that all men will know that we are His disciples when we have that kind of patient love towards one another. The Scripture says that love covers a multitude of sins. We have to allow one another to be “in process.”

Even Jesus experienced frustration with His disciples in the iron sharpening iron process. In Matthew 16, the Pharisees and Sadducees had come to Jesus to test Him; and He warned the disciples to beware of the “leaven” of those religious leaders. Throughout Scripture leaven had been used as a picture of sin, but the disciples didn’t get what Jesus was talking about; they started talking about how none of them had brought any bread. Jesus chastised them — they were able to tell the weather from common indicators in the natural realm, but they did not have the same ability from the common indicators in the spiritual realm. He says,

“You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (Matthew 16:8-11 NASB)

What was Jesus’ point? On an earlier occasion, when a crowd of between 5,000 men and possibly as many as 10,000 more women and children were following Jesus to listen to his teaching, as the lunch hour approached, Jesus told his disciples to feed the crowd. The disciples looked at their meager resources and said they didn’t have enough food. After a search, they found a boy with a paltry five loaves and two fish. But the disciples had another resource they did not see: Jesus. He multiplied that boy’s lunch and fed the whole crowd, with twelve baskets left over. A similar story followed an encounter with a crowd of 4,000. Two major events provided ample opportunity for the disciples to

see that they had Jesus as the most significant resource of all. Still they needed further instruction. They had to be put back into the forge, reheated, and hammered again. It was only after Jesus' remarks that Matthew comments in the next verse:

Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matthew 16:12 NASB)

How many of us as parents have experienced a multitude of disappointments along the way as we have raised our children? But we did not quit and let the "bellows stop heating the metal in the forge." No, we kept heating the metal, hammering it again and again because we were working towards the final product: our child becoming a mature adult. That is the same kind of love and patience that we are to have with one another — iron sharpening iron.

My congregation has shown great patience with me as their pastor. I came to Grace Church Aurora eighteen years ago, as a young married man with a wife and a few children — a man who had never been a senior pastor. I was only thirty-five years old; and I had a lot to learn about people, about life, about preaching, about ministry, and about myself. I still have much more to learn. They didn't stop and throw me in the scrap heap. They kept putting me in the fire, heating me up, shaping me with the hammer, letting me cool, and doing it all over as God has been working in my life through them. I hope I have done the same for them.

God has placed us here in each other's lives for a purpose. The Scripture tells us that the Spirit composes the Body just as He wills, so our presence together is no accident. May He continually see in us the exacting process, person to person, that it takes for iron to sharpen iron as in the forger's fire.