

ADD BROTHERLY KINDNESS

Brothers forge unique bonds. You'd never know it watching them grow up. They have to survive a lot of scraps. To parents, it can feel like a running feud – a Cain and Able redux.

My grandparents had eight kids each about two years apart. Uncle Allen and Uncle Lloyd were in the middle. Uncle Allen tells about how they used to fight when they were supposed to be cleaning the chicken coop. They'd be hammering on each other and in the middle of it, Grandma Cumings would call them in for dinner. All of a sudden they'd stop, brush each other off, and ask, "Does it look like I've been crying?"

The whole family was close, but Allen and Lloyd forged a fierce loyalty. So much so that when Uncle Lloyd died suddenly of a heart attack in his mid-30's, Uncle Allen made sure Aunt Ruth was cared for.

Solomon observed: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Proverbs 17:17).

There's something special about the bond between brothers. The Greeks had a word for it: *philadelphia* – brother-love. It described the warm affection shared by male siblings. *Philadelphia* didn't have romantic connotations. It wasn't that kind of love. In its earliest uses, it was confined to the affection shared by actual blood brothers – sons of common ancestry. It was the love shared between men who grew up under the same roof, in the same family.

Later they applied the term metaphorically to other relationships. But *philadelphia* tended to keep its limited field of view. It was typically used within defined circles. In the church, *philadelphia* was the term used for the special affection believers have for one another within God's family.

The Bible teaches us that when we are born again, the Holy Spirit bears inner witness to our new position in God's family as God's kids. God's Spirit ignites in us the impulse to call God, *Abba – Daddy!* The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus and his followers "...are of the same family." So Jesus is not ashamed to call us "brothers" (Heb. 2:11).

No wonder that "Brother" became the term of choice in the Book of Acts to describe believers. For instance, after Paul's conversion [Saul was the name he used in Hebrew circles; Paul was his Greek name], God sent Ananias with a special message. Ananias went with grave reservations because Paul was scary, a known persecutor of the church. Ananias was to lay hands on Paul, and pray for him, becoming the instrument by which Paul's sight would be restored. He would deliver a message of encouragement and he would baptize him. But listen to how he greets this former enemy: "*Brother* Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17).

Paul was no longer the man who had savaged the church. By God's grace, he had been born again into God's family. He was a brother.

In the New Testament, *philadelphia* was used only to describe the affection and love that believers had for one another in the Body of Christ – the church. It was never used in any universal sense for love of humankind. Christians were family – siblings – brothers and sisters, and they loved each other as family.

So when Peter adds *philadelphia* to his list of seven virtues, we know he's talking about a character trait unique to relationships within the family of God. This is the term that governs our responses to other believers – 2 Peter 1:1:3-11.

The NIV translates *philadelphia* as brotherly-kindness. The translators want to avoid the

confusion caused by Peter's choice to put two "love" words back to back. To *philadelphia* – brother-love – he will urge us to add *agape* – the big picture word for love in the New Testament Scriptures. In the most recent revision of the NIV, the translators suggest "mutual affection." It's a reasonable translation and it reaches across the gender divide. But it misses the impact of the word picture: brother-love. We get that.

Brother-love is the first of the virtues listed that reaches outside ourselves. The first five virtues – goodness [moral excellence], knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and godliness – all refer to renovations to the inner landscape of our self. They work on us – they work in us – transforming our character. *Phadelphia* works in us too, but it transforms our relationships. The impact is experienced in connection with other believers.

For instance, Jesus taught that because we are all brothers, there is no place for arrogance in the church. There would be no spiritual hierarchy, even though there would be acknowledged leadership and church offices. Jesus taught that brother-love was characterized by humility and service: "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are *all brothers*. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt. 23:8-12).

The Apostles and Elders were never afraid to own their title, but neither did they grasp it or placard it as a mark of personal distinction. It was for them simply a role graciously bestowed upon them by Christ within which they were privileged to serve his body.

Nor were brothers and sisters to look down on the less fortunate. James writes: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4).

When I'm with my extended family up in Sparta, they respect God's call on my life in ministry, but they never call me Reverend Cumings. My cousin John will call me Yip – a childhood nickname. In healthy families, neither fame nor misfortune matter. Brothers and sisters know who they are and they just love on each other. They don't create social hierarchies.

Brother-love is also marked by practical acts of service. When a group of children were asked to describe love, Lauren, age 4, said this: "I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones."

Lauren had some lessons to learn about her big sister's real motives, but she was absolutely right about one thing: she felt loved because her sister gave.

- "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:9-10).
- "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it" (James 2:14-15)?

The Bethel family gets this. If there's a need, you step up.

Brothers watch each other's back. As much as James and Allen scrapped during adolescence, when the threat came from the outside, they came to each other's defense. One time Allen came home from school really hot. He was livid. A girl friend of James had said something terribly hurtful. Allen barked: "No one treats my brother that way!"

A major theme of brother-love in the New Testament is spiritual protection. Look out for each other! For instance:

- “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But *encourage* one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:12-13).
- “I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers” (1 Cor. 5:5-8).
- “...watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4).
- “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2).
- “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye” (Mt. 7:3-5).

Each of these is worthy of a whole sermon. But let them hang together. They describe a cluster of proactive, protective, restorative responses. Brother-love says: You fall – I'll be there. You mess up – I'll love you enough to get in your face and walk you back. I'll work on me first so I'll have grace to extend to you. And even if you do me wrong, I'll absorb it because we're family.

I've got your six!

Covering someone's six came from combat pilots during WWII. They used the numbers on an analog clock as a quick way to indicate direction. Twelve-o'clock was on the nose – right in front of you. Your six was directly behind you.

Fighter pilots flew in a formation called a finger-four. It consisted of a flight leader and his wingman and an element leader and his wingman. When they got into combat, the job of the wingman was to protect his leader from attack from behind – the leader's six. This allowed the leader maximum freedom to attack aggressively because he knew his wingman had his six.

In the church – God's family – brother-love means we cover each other's six. Everybody's got a wingman. In the spiritual battles we face – the temptations, adversities, even the failures – we've got brothers and sisters who care enough to encourage, protect, confront, forgive, and restore. It's another way of understanding one of our core values: We're better together.

God's power has given us everything we need for godly living. His very great and precious promises enable us to participate in the divine nature. We are exhorted to richly supply our faith with goodness – moral excellence; and to goodness to add knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness. All these good virtues rearrange the stuff in our souls to be like Jesus. Now, Peter says, look outside yourselves at your spiritual siblings: add *philadelphia* – brother-love, because we really do need each other. We need to honor each other, care for each other, and protect each other.

The writer of Hebrews begins his final chapter with this exhortation: “Keep on loving

each other as brothers” (Hebrews 13:1). God’s church is a place where God’s people are family, where everyone has a home, and we all love on each other.