

LIFE IN BIBLE TIMES

Lesson 3

Relationships within the Groups

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Relational Obligations

In our world today, we can often choose whether to follow the expectations of a group we belong to. In Jesus' time, however, individuals had no such choice—group responsibilities were non-negotiable obligations.

Consider the anger of the host in the parable of the wedding banquet when guests declined the invitation (**Matthew 22:1-14**). Declining such an invitation signaled disloyalty, prompting the host's extreme reaction, shifting group boundaries, and issuing new invitations. Remember, who you ate with reflected your alliances (e.g., the Pharisees' frustration with Jesus dining with sinners).

Reflect on Paul's serious explanation when he altered his travel plans (**2 Corinthians 1:15-19**).

Similarly, the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth (**Luke 4:16-17, 22-31**) led to Him not performing miracles there, unlike in Capernaum.

A NET-work of Friends

Friendship in Jesus' time carried profound commitment. Imagine a fishnet with a hole—friends who failed their obligations to one another rendered the network useless!

Titus 3:13 highlights how this network of friends accelerated the spread of the Gospel. A letter of recommendation opened doors for travelers, providing assistance, lodging, and care (**Acts 18:27**; see also **Romans 16:1-2, Philippians 2:19-30, 1 Corinthians 16:10-11**). Two New Testament books, **3 John** and **Philemon**, are essentially such letters!

Paul creatively used this custom to teach that believers themselves are “recommendation letters” of Christ (**2 Corinthians 3:1-3**). As members of God's family, when we stand before another believer—even a stranger—we represent Christ. Imagine saying, “If you want to know who I am, observe my life—my actions, my words—and you'll see I'm a letter from Christ, written by God's Spirit. Please receive me as you would Christ Himself.” How should this ancient custom shape our lives today?

Hospitality and inns

In **Matthew 10:5-15**, the disciples relied on the hospitality of strangers without recommendation letters—an extraordinary expectation! Hospitality to friends was assumed, but extending it to strangers was remarkable (**Matthew 25:35, Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:2, 1 Peter 4:8-9**). After a stay, you might part as friends—or not (e.g., Paul and Publius in **Acts 28:7-10**).

Inns in Jesus' time were often dubious, located along trade routes with minimal amenities—basic beds, food, and animal stabling. Poor sanitation, vermin like bed bugs, and overcrowding were common. The apocryphal *Acts of John* (sections 60-61) humorously recounts John's struggle with bed bugs and a miraculous resolution.

The New Testament rarely mentions inns (only in **Luke 10:34**, in the parable of the Good Samaritan) but refers to “guest rooms” (**Mark 14:14, Luke 22:11**). Hospitality rules prevented abuse; the late 1st century document, *Didache* (chapter 11) advised that traveling apostles should stay only one or two days—staying a third marked them as false prophets!

Read also **2 John 10-11** on hospitality's risks and **1 Corinthians 9** on apostles' rights to it.

Further Reading:

Acts 14:28; 16:15, 40; 17:7; 18:1-3, 26-27; 21:16-17. Reflect on Acts 15:3-4.

For elders: 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8.

Consider the situation with Diotrophes in 3 John.

Solidarity within your Group

Group solidarity in Bible times fostered intense personal, emotional, and spiritual intimacy. Social boundaries within the group faded, and members shared each other's joys and pains (**Romans 12:15**).

Love was a powerful bond uniting believers into one perfect unit (**Colossians 3:14, 1 Peter 4:8**). It wasn't merely an abstract feeling but expressed through concrete actions (**1 John 3:16, John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 13:4**).

Today, we might view a "doormat relationship" negatively, but in ancient group dynamics, serving others humbly was an honor. You served the group knowing you'd soon need the same support (**Romans 12:10**). Jesus stretched this concept further in the parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**) and by washing Judas' feet, knowing Judas would betray Him (**John 13:2-10**). We are called to bear one another's burdens (**Galatians 6:2**) and go the extra mile (**Matthew 5:38-48**).

Additional texts comes to mind: **John 13:34-35, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:3**.

"Brotherly love" should also be understood within this context: **Hebrews 13:1, Romans 12:10, 1 John 4:20-21 and 1 Peter 1:22**.

Jesus took solidarity to its peak, equating love for God with love for neighbor (**Matthew 22:37-39**). God's honor is reflected in how we love one another (**1 Peter 2:12, 4:16**). Serving a neighbor is serving God (**Matthew 25:34-40; 1 John 4:7-8, 5:1**). Love for God and neighbor are inseparable (**1 John 3:17, 4:20-21; 1 Corinthians 8:12**).

What should Giving Back to God really look like?

In light of all you've learned, what should our lives reflect as members of a group led by a God who gave us "surpassing grace" and an "indescribable gift" (**2 Corinthians 9:14-15**)?

Revisit also **1 Peter 4:10**.

Is serving God about "works" for manipulation or recognition, or does it reflect a deeper call to serve our Father within the community of believers?

My Neighbor within the Group of Believers

Jesus challenged views on "outsiders," teaching that every outsider is a potential insider (**Matthew 5:43-48**). In Christ, social, gender, and cultural-ethnic boundaries faded among believers (**Galatians 3:28**). For Christians, "outsider" became less a political or social label and more a religious group identifier.

With this in mind, revisit the parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**).

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