

FELLOWSHIP

beta version

On a cold night in the fourth century A.D., forty young Roman soldiers huddled together while immersed in a freezing lake. The pagan emperor Licinius was persecuting them for their Christian faith. As a result, they now faced death and the biggest temptation of their lives: They could go free at any moment if they chose to worship the pagan gods. As an added enticement, the lake was directly across from the Roman baths. As the soldiers' bodies shook and their teeth chattered, they could see the steam from the hot pools rising into the freezing air. In the midst of this torture, the soldiers had one unified prayer: "Lord, we are forty engaged in this contest. Grant that forty may receive crowns and that we may not fall short of that sacred number."

Throughout the night, this band of brothers was tempted to give in. Unable to resist any longer, one soldier headed for the baths only to die instantly upon arrival. One of the guards who was keeping watch of the soldiers was so moved by their witness that he removed his clothes and joined them in the icy lake. All forty of these remained faithful unto death, an answer to the men's prayer.

The story of these soldiers served as an inspiration to the power of Christian fellowship throughout the Roman Empire, and they were immortalized by the Catholic Church as the Martyrs of San Sebaste.

Hot Coals

You most likely won't find yourself in the same situation as these Roman soldiers. Still, you need Christian friendship just as much as they did. If you don't have close friends who are Christians, there's a good chance you won't grow in your relationship with Christ.

Think about starting a charcoal fire: The best way is to gather all of the coals and place them together in a pile. As the coals begin to burn, they feed off one another, and the ones that aren't lit yet catch fire from the heat of the others. However, if a coal is separated from the pile, the reverse begins to happen: When these isolated coals begin to cool, they don't have anything to help ignite them once again, and they eventually burn out.

The Martyrs of San Sebaste in that freezing lake were like a group of hot coals. There had to be countless times when the men wanted to go to shore, overwhelmed by the frigid conditions. They surely thought of their families, their wives, and their children. But because they were together, these men were able to encourage and support one another. When they were tempted to renounce Christ, someone was there to remind them of the heavenly crown that awaited them. As a group, these men were able to remain faithful, something that might have been impossible if they didn't have support from one another.

Since the very beginning of the Church, the early Christians considered fellowship to be one of four foundational habits of the Christian life (Acts 2:42). We need this same habit in our own lives. But how do we find these types of friends? The first step is to know what kind of friends we are looking for and what kind of friends we need to be.

Three Types of Friendships

Many people in our lives claim to have some type of friendship with us, but how can we find friends who will push us in the right direction? The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that there are three types of friendships. By understanding these distinctions, we can learn about the kind of friends we need to have and the kind of friends we need to become.

The first type of friendship is a friendship of utility, one based on the use or benefit found in the relationship. Use in this sense isn't necessarily sinful, but rather can be neutral or even good. Business transactions often fall under this category. For instance, think about your favorite coffee shop: You go there because you enjoy the coffee, and the coffee shop serves you because they make money. You might have a sort of friendship with those working at the coffee shop, but it is primarily built on the initial usefulness or benefit of the transaction between you, not the friendship itself.

The second type of friendship is a friendship of pleasure, one based primarily on the enjoyment of the relationship. For example, these friends might like the same music, the same sports team, or the same television show. They might be friends because they are popular or fun to be around. This type of friendship is built on the pleasure you receive from spending time with each other—but again, it's not built on the friendship itself.

Aristotle notes that these first two types of friendship are the most fragile because they are built on something that isn't permanent (some benefit or pleasure). While these friendships can serve a good purpose in our lives, it's important to know that they often dissolve when life grows difficult and the friendship is no longer pleasurable, beneficial, or convenient. You can probably identify examples of these types of relationships in your own life and how quickly some of them have come and gone.

Aristotle also identified a third kind of friendship, called virtuous friendship. This kind of friendship is based on something much deeper: These friends love one another in and of themselves, not out of a benefit or pleasure that they receive. On top of that, these friends want their friends to achieve virtue. As Christians, this is the highest form of fellowship and should be our aim in our own friendships.

For a virtuous friendship to form, both people need to be virtuous. In the context of Christianity, both people have to be pursuing a relationship with our Lord and want the other person to live out his or her faith to the fullest. Because of this, it is essential for those who have had conversions or reversions to the Faith to find brothers and sisters in Christ who can help ensure that their faith not only survives but thrives.

'As Iron Sharpens Iron'

We can, of course, have friendships with people of different backgrounds, regardless of whether they are Christian. But we want to make sure we have close Christian friends who are running after the same goals, friends who can help strengthen us in our faith. As Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." When two swords come together, they don't get weaker; instead, the metal from each makes them stronger. And a sword is a perfect analogy for the battle each one of us must face in keeping the Faith: If we allow our faith to grow dull and weak, we are going to snap under the pressure of this world. However, if we have fellowship, we will be sharp enough not only to resist temptation but to grow even stronger.

Over and over, we see this dynamic played out in the lives of the saints. It's been said that saints come in clusters: Whenever you read about a saint, you discover that they rarely became a saint on their own. Usually, other saints were right by their side, sharpening them in the process. Their intense fellowship spurred each other to pursue a deeper holiness and a greater desire to share Jesus with others, even in difficult circumstances. St. Francis Xavier had St. Ignatius of Loyola; St. Teresa of Avila had St. John of the Cross; St. Felicity had St. Perpetua. Who do you have? Find virtuous friends who can help you get to heaven and help you to make a stronger impact here on earth.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are your best friends? What effect do they have on your life?
2. What did you think of the hot coals analogy? What has your experience been with fellowship? How have others sharpened your faith? What has been your experience without fellowship? How was your faith at a greater risk?
3. What are some ways to increase fellowship in your life? How can you create more opportunities for fellowship?

Leader's Guide: Transferrable Concepts

1. Coals Analogy: Coals that stay together within a fire feed off one another for warmth, causing them to burn stronger over a longer period of time. However, if one of the coals becomes separated from the others, its fire starts to wane and it is at a greater risk of burning out. The same is true for our faith: Close fellowship with other Christians allows our faith to stay alive and flourish, but a lack of fellowship can put our faith in danger.
2. The Three Types of Friendship: Aristotle noted that there were three types of friendship—those based on utility, pleasure, or virtue. As Christians, the highest form of fellowship is a virtuous friendship, one where friends love one another in and of themselves and push their friends for their good, not for the sake of a benefit or pleasure they receive.
3. Iron Sharpens Iron: “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prv 27:17). Through fellowship, we are reminded of our relationship with the Father. The example offered by our brothers and sisters in Christ sharpens our faith.