

“LOVE YOUR FRIENDS”
by Rom A. Pegram (3/12/17)

See if you identify with these observations made by a man who spent his lifetime in the mountains of Western North Carolina. He's just an ordinary guy, but what he has to say is very significant. Here's an extended quote from Volume 3 of the *Foxfire* books; maybe you're familiar with that series. Here's what Lawton Brooks has to say:

I've seen lots of changes in my life. I'uz just wonderin' if I could live as long again as I have, what kind of a world we'd be in. But I just know the world is different from what it used t'be. Back then, when people had more time, they thought lots more of each other than they do now. Yeah, they did, they thought more of people than they do now. They's lots more people than they used to be. Now that's got lots to do with it. . . . They goin' s'fast, that they ain't got time to take up with you. They ain't got time to take up with me. They goin' so fast. An' that's what makes th'difference. Used to be all ever'body had was time. They had plenty of time. . . .

Back then, they wasn't no such thing as a car—you couldn't hurry. . . . Seems like now if you can't go t'Atlanta an' back in th'same day, . . . you way behind. You ain't got time t'fool with it. People livin' s'fast you got t'keep up with it in order t'stay up with things. . . . You can't slow down like we used t'do. I can't either.

I'll tell y'what—people enjoyed life better then than they do now. Because ever'body thought s'much more of each other. . . . If you got down sick, people'd come askin' about your eating supply. If you didn't have it, here'd come somebody with a shoulder of meat . . . somebody with a ham—throw it right down there on your table. See that you had somethin' to eat on. An' then expect no money for it. Now tell me now who's gonna come . . . when you're down an' throw you a good country ham down on your table—without any money. Now you show me one. Not never expectin' t'get a dime out of it. . . . We done it because we loved th'people, an' the people loved us. That was just a habit that we had.

They's a lot of changes. They's as much difference in people now as they is in day an' night. People don't care for people no more like they used to. Use t'be if anybody got sick in th'community, why people'd go see about 'em, not just pass'em by. If you lived in our community, even if you was seven or eight mile away, when we hear you'uz sick, we'd go see about you. . . . Nowadays you can get sick an' people ain't gonna go see about you t'ask how y'are, let alone do anything for you. You'd freeze t'death 'cause they ain't gonna get you no wood.

People loved people better in them days. I know so. People cared for each other more. Nowadays they're livin' too fast. They ain't got time t'take time with you. That's true. That's as true as it can be. . . . Believe me, we was happier then than we are now.

Folks, how does that set with you? Do you think Mr. Brooks is right? It seems his opinions about the changes he's seen in our culture are incredibly accurate and profound! Generally, people *don't* care for others like they used to. BUT...

- What *really* should matter in life, folks, are *relationships*...
- What matters the most in the world *should be* other people!

In our scripture lesson for today, *Jesus gives some specific guidelines for how we should relate to others*. In light of this scripture, I think Jesus would agree with Lawton Brooks. I think Jesus would probably say 'we've lost the ability to look out for other people.' Well, that ability needs to be recaptured—especially by Christ-followers. Listen:

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. ⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. – Matthew 5:43-48 (NLT)

“Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. ² When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. ³ But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. ⁴ Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. – Matthew 6:1-4 (NLT)

So, what is Jesus telling us here? *He's telling us what will happen to us when we become aware of **his presence** wherever we're at!* Here's what we can learn...

JESUS HAS A HIGHER STANDARD FOR THOSE WHO ARE HIS FOLLOWERS

(5:43-48). Jesus is calling us to a *higher set of expectations* than those who do not follow him! Jesus has raised the bar just a little bit higher for those he calls his own! The standard for *how* we reach out to and minister to others is more demanding than ‘just loving those who we *know* will love us right back!’

I don’t know if any of you remember these or not, but a few years ago there were some Dodge commercials out ... where they had a great time with subliminal messages. The whole time they're showing you pictures of new Dodge vehicles, they keep flashing the word ‘*DIFFERENT*’ on and off on the screen. Why did they do this? Because they believe *people are tired of the same ol' things; they WANT something that's ... you guessed it: different!*

Well, *Jesus delivers, doesn't he?* He's calling us, as his followers, to be just that—*different* than the rest of the world! What Jesus is *actually* calling us to here ... is to be PERFECT! Now, before you jump to any wrong conclusions, please understand what

Jesus means by the word 'perfect.' Jesus and Mr. Webster probably wouldn't be on the same page here; what Jesus is talking about is that he *expects* his followers to be *perfect in intention*, perfect in *LOVE*, perfect in our *love* toward others ... even our enemies, with God's help...

A pastor once received a short note from a *very young* parishioner. It read: Dear Preacher: I heard you say to love our enemies. I am only six and do not have any yet. I hope to have some when I am seven. Love, Your friend, Amy...

If you're seven or above, you've got to ask yourself this question: *Is what we're doing in life totally motivated by the love of God that lives in us?* Or, is there something else motivating our actions in life? There's the test: ARE YOU PERFECT IN GOD'S LOVE? 'A great expectation, right? ... Then, in the first few verses of Chapter 6, Jesus begins to spell out for us some of his *specific* expectations...

JESUS EXPECTS TO SEE HIS 'HIGHER STANDARD' LIVED OUT IN OUR LIVES (6:1-4 ... about how to offer charity). Basically, Jesus is saying ... when we learn to live within this 'big picture outlook'—that he's always there and his love should motivate us, this is an example of what *should* begin to happen! Here Jesus gets very specific (6:1-4) about our actions and how we should relate to others (including Christians). I want to look at this closely, but first let me share this...

A while back, there was a made-for-T.V. movie I watched where an older character kept *overemphasizing* to everyone he spoke to about the 'anonymous' gifts he and his wife had given over the years to various causes. Any chance he got, he reminded anyone and everyone of the 'anonymous' gifts he had been so gracious to give, along with details on how much had been given, etc. *I don't think this is what Jesus had in mind...*

By contrast, there was another story I read that talks about a man who was down to his last dollar—literally! He had no idea how he was going to put breakfast on the table for his family the next morning. He went to his mailbox, and there was a letter for him. It had his name on it, but no return address. He opened the envelope, and inside he discovered one hundred dollars in cash! Along with the money was a note that read: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." It was simply signed "Philippians 4:19." That was it ... a *genuine* anonymous gift. Well, this dad was so overwhelmed that he dropped to his knees right there beside the mailbox and offered thanksgiving and praise to God. He commented later: "There was no one else to say thank you to. I had no other option but to give credit to God alone. It's an experience I'll never forget!"

I also heard a story about a young mother. Except for her children, she'd lost almost everything—including her husband—through tragic circumstances. So, she moved to a different part of the country for a fresh start. She located an unfurnished apartment, and the day she moved in, two beds mysteriously appeared on her doorstep. She said, "I have no idea who was responsible. In fact, I don't even remember telling anyone what my needs were. I just assumed my kids would have to

sleep on the floor for awhile. It was as if God himself had gone ahead of me and prepared this wonderful, unexpected housewarming gift."

Folks, I'm sure many of us know similar stories. In fact, maybe you've been the recipient of such a gift at some time in your life. If so, then know that the only response for a believer in such cases is to say, "God, you're really something! Thank you for looking out for me. Your special care overwhelms me!" **For Christians, when *specific personal needs* are met in *unpredictable ways*, these events are not only physically significant, but spiritually significant too—usually for *both* parties.**

This is exactly what Jesus is talking about here; here's *how* Jesus 'higher standard' can be lived out in our everyday lives! ***Specific personal needs should be met in unpredictable ways, leaving the only Person to thank ... to be God himself!***

Folks, when we begin to 'practice the presence of Christ' in our lives, God's love begins to be lavished—poured out—on others. And, when you stop to think about it, you and I have within our grasp the opportunity to encourage fellow believers to experience God's presence in their *own* lives ... by relating to them the way Jesus commanded us to. Isn't that exciting, to know we have this opportunity within our reach?

How do we sense Christ's presence even stronger in our own lives, getting a first-hand taste of *divine intervention*? By ministering to others—those in need—in secret, doing anonymous acts of kindness, and giving them no other alternative but to turn to God themselves and say 'thank you.' **Here's the point: *ministering to others in secret encourages them to acknowledge God's involvement in their own lives!***

From personal experience, I'm convinced that a part of *the reward* Jesus is talking about is this: *the satisfaction of knowing the person you've ministered to in secret has no other way to respond except to give God the credit!* And we can take part in this awesome ministry opportunity by putting a NEXT STEP into practice: ***Show Christ's love through secret acts.*** Here's my recommendation to you today, to begin to apply this message to your life: *choose one kind act per week that you can do anonymously throughout the next several weeks leading up to Easter!* Now, that's putting the truth of God's word into action, isn't it?

The very last thing the voice of God said to Peter, James and John on that Mount of Transfiguration was this: "Listen to him (speaking of Jesus)." What are *you* going to do with today's message? These, folks, are the words of Christ who is present with us today. What you've heard today is God's truth. My recommendation is the same as God's command to the disciples: "Listen to him." And as you're busy changing the lives of others, see what happens to your own! You might be surprised...