

A CUP OF SUGAR, NEIGHBOR

BIBLE READING: 2 Kings 4:1-6

Borrow from your neighbors and friends (v. 3).

There was a time when neighbors "neighbored" more than we do today. And frequently, the borrowing of a cup of sugar or some other commodity had a lot to do with it. There were practical reasons for this neighborly cooperation: no supermarkets with their loaded shelves tempted the shopper to stock up; the corner store may have been much farther than "the corner"; and with two and three-car families practically unknown, transportation was a problem for the homemaker.

So, when a woman ran short, she just walked over to her neighbor's house and borrowed. Invariably this led to friendly visiting so that sometimes the actual reason for coming was less important than the neighborliness it engendered.

Not having such reasonable excuses for borrowing, we have substituted the coffee klatch as a means of togetherness. For, even in our space age with its plethora of technical diversions, the need for sociability is as great as it ever was, perhaps greater. But sometimes, even today, we do borrow a cup of sugar.

The classic instance of one woman's borrowing from another is in the Bible. An unnamed widow of one of Elisha's students borrowed at the command of the prophet. Her neighbors could not know that they were to be part of a miracle, that they would be included wherever the "widow's oil" story would be told. Suppose they had refused her request, had turned away from their door this needy woman!

We can't know what form human need will take as it knocks at our door today: perhaps a grieving widow, perhaps a neighbor with a hunger in her heart, not in her cupboard. That emptiness Christ is waiting to fill. Like the

good neighbors of this "certain woman" in Bible times, you and I can sometimes have a part in a miracle.

And it won't cost us even a cup of sugar.

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

BIBLE READING: Matthew 22:34-40

Keep only these and you will find you are obeying all the others (v. 40b, TLB).*

A new Christian asked a Bible teacher what the Bible is all about. His reply was, "It's about two things: our relationship with God and our relationship with one another."

Some people describe this as "our vertical and our horizontal relationships." (I always get confused as to which is which.)

The Lord Jesus put great emphasis on the importance of these two areas: loving the Lord our God and loving our neighbor. Sometimes I wonder if Jesus knew we would have greater difficulty with the second command than with the first. Loving our neighbor is a more "nuts and bolts," "cup of borrowed sugar" kind of strain. Loving God appears to be more abstract and, therefore, less practical and demanding, less tied into our daily routine.

But is it? Should it be? Or is loving God in fact the very wellspring from which comes our love for our neighbor, for one another? Jesus would not have said that loving God is the first and greatest commandment if it *were not*. Certainly God does not need our love to make Him feel complete (although He wants us to love Him). So the benefit must be for us when we love God. Isn't it as we wholeheartedly love the Lord our God that His love is then shed abroad in our hearts, and we have enough for ourselves and to spare—enough to share with our neighbors?

**The Living Bible.*

So, let's put first things first today, shall we? And we'll find that the other things will fall into place.

FORMULA FOR FAITHFULNESS

BIBLE READING: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Then shall every man have praise of God (v. 5b).

Have you ever thought what our world would be like if God had seen fit to populate it with just "stars"—only brilliant, outstanding people?

God uses all kinds of people; and as Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "The good Lord must have loved the common people; He made so many of them."

Even as Christians we are prone to be impressed by those Christians who serve God in the limelight. But, at the same time, common sense tells us that, in every area of life, the people who keep the wheels oiled and running are ordinary mortals like you and me. This is true in the home; it's equally true in the church. Without the seemingly run-of-the-mill individuals, things would undoubtedly grind to a halt.

Not too many would recognize the name Bill Winslow; but in the lumber camps and isolated areas of Canada's northland, this was the man who, year after year, was practically the sole influence for God, the man who cared for the souls of men otherwise spiritually neglected. It was from this humble, home missionary I learned a great four-line lesson—a formula for faithfulness:

Just praise the Lord for all that's passed,
And pray that He will hold thee fast;
And peg away while life shall last—
Just praise—and pray—and peg away.

Praising and thanking God is a great tonic for our spirits, whatever our circumstances. It keeps us enthusiastic in our witness for Him.

Prayer is our vital link with God. Through it, we sense our partnership with Him in the greatest business in the world, however big or small our part may seem.

Peg away. Praise and prayer make it possible to persistently "peg away." It would be unthinkable that we could consistently praise God, commune with Him in prayer—and be a quitter.

Think what God can do with a whole host of Christians who live by this formula! Think what He can do with you and me!

THINK BIG

BIBLE READING: Ephesians 2:4-10

[*God*] *has lifted us up from the grave into glory*
(v. 6a, TLB).

As I slowed for a traffic light, a huge billboard caught my attention. "Think Big," it screamed. "Think Number One."

My mind translated the giant letters into Number One: *myself*, and I thought, *How self-centered can you be?*

But, dwelling on the idea the next couple of miles, I thought of something else. It was this: I can "think big" about myself, and it can be quite in order.

Care to try it with me?

What is the biggest thought that can enter your mind (and mine)? That we *belong to the Lord*. That God *so* loved us He gave heaven's best to reconcile us to Himself. That Jesus cared enough to come all the way from the ivory palaces to show us what God is like and then to die for us.

That He is preparing an eternal home for us and will one day come to take us to be with Him.

Can you think of anything more mind-boggling, more life-changing!

If you are like most of us, you become disheartened at times and begin to dwell on such thoughts as these: *I'm just a nobody; nobody cares what happens to me; nobody thinks I'm important.* Or you have some other self-belittling things.

That is the time when the message of the billboard takes on meaning. Even more, that is the time to look away above the highest billboard, look away to Jesus. We are His workmanship. He is responsible for us, and He has promised to love us, to care for us, and never to leave us. Have you ever thought that God does not create "nothing people"? Jesus did not die for "nobodies."

While we are exhorted not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (Romans 12:3a), this does not give us license to downgrade ourselves, for we are Christ's workmanship, His redeemed property, because we have accepted Jesus as our Saviour.

Isn't that reason enough to think big about ourselves?

COPING WITH AIR FLIGHT FEARS

BIBLE READING: Psalm 139:7-12; Deuteronomy 33:27

Even there, . . . thy right hand shall hold me
(v. 10).

Joan couldn't bring herself to take a plane trip. Even the thought of it made her shiver. For years she was able to avoid flying, but one day an emergency left her with no alternative.

Later, a friend said to her, "How did you ever manage to step aboard that plane? I know how petrified you must have been."

With a warm smile Joan explained, "Well, there I was, my heart in my mouth, just dreading the trip on that giant 747. I was telling a woman standing near me how I felt; and, just as our flight was called, she fished in her handbag and dug something out and pressed it into my hand. 'That's what always helps me,' she said, with a confident look."

"My! Whatever was it, Joan?" her friend was eager to know. "A tranquilizer?"

Joan thought for a moment then said, "In a way, yes, you could call it that. Here's what it was." She showed her friend a little two-inch-by-three-inch card. Together they read the words typed on it: "*The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms*" (Deuteronomy 33:27).

"I had read that verse many times," Joan admitted. "I'd memorized it even, but it took that stranger's act of caring enough to share it with me to give it the meaning God meant it to have for me. I can honestly say that I latched onto this promise, and God wonderfully calmed my fears. When I felt myself getting tense and scared, I just said over and over, 'underneath are the everlasting arms, so why *should* I be so fearful?'"

Underneath? Underneath what? Underneath wherever we are, God is there.

When we appropriate this comfort for ourselves—this knowledge that we can never go high enough or low enough that God cannot reach out to help us—when this becomes a practical, "present help in trouble," we can share it with other people who need it and help calm their fears.

HELP THY NEIGHBOR

BIBLE READING: Hebrews 9:19-22; 1 John 1:7

Without shedding of blood is no remission (v. 22b).

A much-talked-about program on a Los Angeles television channel is "Help Thy Neighbor." It's a live audience format and offers opportunity for persons with special needs to air them and, hopefully, to receive help.

Not always are the people speaking for themselves; and, the time I viewed it, a man was appealing for blood for a relative suffering from leukemia. Massive quantities were needed. The response was tremendous; and, as the station's switchboard lit up with the incoming calls, the host of the program gave precise instructions to the donors.

"Be sure to give the *name* of the person for whom you are donating your blood, and the *name and address of the hospital* where she is a patient." He carefully spelled out and repeated this information. "We have to be sure you do this," he cautioned, "because blood is always in short supply and this is the only way we can be sure the blood is credited to the right person."

How often we hear the word *remission* in connection with leukemia.

As I listened to this program, the wonderful truth came to my mind. Christ has provided complete remission from the fatal sickness of sin. I thought, too, that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, is never in short supply. And, certainly, it will never be in danger of being credited to the wrong person. Jesus shed His blood for "whosoever," but only those who admit to having the disease of sin and make application for this "blood donation" will ever have it credited to them. And "the Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Timothy 2:19).

God has His "blood bank," and we can best help our

neighbors by introducing them to our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. His blood matches every type on earth, and "Whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43).

WHAT'S YOUR REASON?

BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 3:12-15; Psalm 42:11

Hope thou in God (Psalm 42:11).

Crisis situations tend to bring out what has been hidden in people's minds. Living as I do in "earthquake country," I recall a morning when we had been literally "all shook up" as the earth rumbled beneath us and objects around us began to do strange things.

Living in our area was a man whom his neighbors jestingly called "John the Baptist." But, as we gathered in little groups to assess our feelings and the damage to our property, more than one person said, "I wouldn't have minded being in 'John the Baptist's' shoes when the quake hit." A woman expressed herself this way: "I'm not a church-goer like Old John, but *I'm going to give my granddaughter a dollar for the collection plate on Sunday.*"

In their own way these people were voicing their lack of security and their new awareness of their need for it. They had recognized that their neighbor, John, possessed it. Now, by any means, they were eager to latch on to some contact with the living God whom they didn't seem to need in calmer times. The trouble with this was that their hope was wrongly based.

In fact, it is not enough to have hope. We have to have a *reason* for that hope, as the Bible tells us. And, as believers, we have the most solid of all reasons: our hope is *in God*, in the promise in His Word, in Jesus Christ Himself. As Paul writes it for us, "I know whom I have believed, and

am persuaded that he is able to keep [me]" (2 Timothy 1:12).

When our world is rocking, whether by natural disaster or through personal crisis and tragedy, it is wonderful to be assured that we are on the solid rock, Christ Jesus.

It's good to take our "reason for hope" out and reevaluate it from time to time, to define it precisely for ourselves against the day of storm. (There will be no time then to begin asking, "In what am I *really* placing my trust?")

Once the matter of our reason for hope is settled, we can confidently share this hope with others so that they, too, may have a shelter in the time of storm.

THEY COME IN ALL SIZES

BIBLE READING: 1 Corinthians 13:1-4; Mark 10:13-14

Charity suffereth long, and is kind (v. 4a).

In the grocery check-out line, one woman said to another, "And speaking of neighbors, I have no complaint. I have good neighbors. But their *children!*" There was a world of dislike, of impatience, in her voice.

That set me thinking.

Do you suppose that, when Jesus gave His directive concerning loving our neighbor, He meant us to confine this love to adult neighbors only? I hardly think so. Nevertheless, maybe some of us can see ourselves in that woman in the grocery store. We're willing to show some understanding, to put up with certain attitudes of our neighbors, to make allowances for things they do which may not please us.

But this tolerance applies only to our adult neighbors. We don't tend to think of neighbors as coming in all sizes: small children, live-wire juniors, "difficult" teenagers, as

well as adult men and women. So we rob ourselves as well as our youthful neighbors. How shortsighted can we be?

Children and young people respond to warmth and genuine interest. It is worth keeping in mind that, by our love and patience and kindness, we can greatly influence pliable young minds.

When we turn off a neighbor's child because his actions bother us, who knows if we might ultimately be at least partially responsible for his refusal to turn to the Lord—especially if this young person knows we profess to love the Lord? Can we afford to be this kind of Christian?

Little neighbors grow up to be big neighbors, and how wonderful if, by our love and demonstrated interest, we can be God's instruments to bring them into His kingdom! They will, in turn, realize that neighbors come in all sizes.

BALANCING OUR PRIORITIES

BIBLE READING: Luke 4:37-40; Titus 2:7

Sometimes as Christians we are so busy "serving the Lord" that we fail to respond as we are able to human need around us. It's not difficult to fall into such a pattern, to be somewhat unbalanced in our priorities.

"Love my neighbor!" exclaimed a Christian living in a large city, "I don't even *know* my neighbor," and she's not alone in this.

One experience along this line will always haunt me.

I had unlocked my apartment door and stepped out into the hall, ready to leave for my office. And there was a neighbor—just waiting for me. In near despair she poured out her tragic story. "I can't *stand* it," she said during her storm of tears. "Pray for me. Pray for me!" And she literally threw herself into my arms.

I listened. I did pray, and we wept together. In the ensu-

ing days, I continued to pray and to show my concern for this neighbor. But as I left her that morning, somewhat calmed after my prayer, the thought in my own mind was, *What kind of a neighbor must she think I am, that she couldn't feel free to wake me up at any hour of the night to share her burden?* I know totally non-Christian women who are available to help other people at any time!

It is written concerning our Lord that He went about doing good (Acts 10:38). Doing good was a way of life with Him. He was available. He could be—and was—interrupted and disturbed by needy persons. Jesus was, first, last, and always “about His Father’s business”: eternal business, balanced by human need for Him to be a “present help” in their time of trouble. In this, He set us an example that in all things we should show ourselves a pattern of good works.

By balancing our own priorities, we can refute the criticism that “Some Christians are more concerned with ‘souls’ than with *people*.”

NATIVE WISDOM

BIBLE READING: Psalm 19

Making wise the simple (v. 7b).

As far as anyone in town was aware, “Aunt Mary” had never attended college or university. But she so often had amazingly right answers that both young and older people came to her with their problems.

Perhaps you know such Christian people. They appear to have insight beyond other people in similar circumstances and with the same educational background. This should not surprise us. It was no secret to David, the psalmist: “I have more understanding than my teachers,” he wrote, “for thy testimonies are my meditation” (Psalm 119:99).

And "the testimonies of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple," we read in Psalm 19.

"Native wisdom" we sometimes hear this called: a strange, unexplainable knowledge which cannot be accounted for by the individual's known educational advantages. But it is nevertheless unquestionable.

Isn't it exciting to realize that God has this gift all ready for any one of us who will meditate on His Word! We, too, can have more understanding than our teachers. (What a verse for homework-harried students to latch on to!)

James, likewise, had this concept. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God," he advises (James 1:5*a*).

Sometimes we look to the wrong source for what we need, falsely expecting the world to reveal what only the Spirit of God can show us. For instance, for sheer, unadulterated wisdom what college course can begin to measure up to what reading *and meditating* on the book of Proverbs has to offer?

It takes time. It calls for diligence and persistence. But no matter how simple we think we are, we can be wise—with God-given wisdom.

WHO NEEDS A HOROSCOPE?

BIBLE READING: Psalm 1

The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous (v. 6a).

Increasingly, even Christians are becoming intrigued by the horoscope columns in the daily newspapers.

"I was horrified," a young mother admitted, "when I realized that I could hardly wait to get my hands on the paper and turn to the horoscopes each morning. I let it set the tone for my whole day, good or bad. It was like some form of addiction, and I couldn't break away from it until