

COOPERATION COUNTS!

Today's Text: Eccl. 4; Mark 6: 7-13

Extracts:

- 1. *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. ... A threefold cord is not quickly broken [Eccl. 4: 9, 10a, 12b]***
- 2. *And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits. ... And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them [Mk 6: 7, 13]***

There is the story of two hungry donkeys that were each given a rich stack of hay for lunch. However, a strong leash was tied to both their necks. As one donkey tried to get close to its allotted stack, it found itself constrained by the other horse that was pulling in the opposite direction towards its own stack. They pulled and pulled for hours until they both became bruised and tired. As they rested, they faced each other for the first time only to discover that there was another stack of hay on the other side. They both agreed to eat up one stack first and then move to the other side together and do the same thing. Without any further fuss, they both ate their late lunch and enjoyed it!

What lesson do we learn from that story? When one donkey wanted all for itself without caring about the needs of the other donkey, it soon discovered that it was not an island to itself. It was linked to the other donkey by the leash of life. One donkey soon discovered that what it desired, freedom to enjoy its due meal, was hinged on the right of another donkey to also enjoy its own meal. Without cooperation between them, each of them would have had its goal frustrated. That is why the word of God says that cooperation counts.

In an increasingly selfish world, we find ourselves locked in needless competition for time, space or attention. Between parent and child, husband and wife, teacher and student, pastor and flock, mentor and mentee, nation and nation, etc., competitors have locked horns in avoidable or bruising battles, the outcomes of which are not so sure. Yes, competition is good, but not all the time. However, cooperation is much better in most circumstances. Today's lesson will enable us to understand the subject better.

1. Cooperation in a selfish world

It is generally said that two heads are better than one. However, I doubt if two foolish heads are better than one wise one! Therefore, that cliché needs to be qualified. In our relationships with fellow human beings and God, cooperation is *necessary*. Cooperation means “working together.” For people to want to work together, there must be something in it for *each* of them. How many of us are ready to worship God or obey Him if not because of the enormous blessings that we expect to receive? When huge crowds went looking for Jesus, He told them, “You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but *because you ate of the loaves and were filled*” [Jn 6: 26]. Therefore, as we seek cooperation with human beings [Ex. 17: 12] or with God [Phil. 2: 12-13], we have our sights on our *self-interests*.

We can identify the following kinds of “cooperators,” among others:

a) *The Lone Ranger*

The lone ranger is *very selfish* and does not care what happens to everybody else as long as his/her interests are served. Therefore, s(he) will only cooperate with those who can help him/her to attain his/her goals. For example, there are many bosses who do not care how their subordinates feel as long as their production targets are met. There are many spouses who do not care about their partners’ feelings or pressing needs as long as they always have their way. When they cooperate, it is not because they appreciate you. Rather, it is because your performance is at the level that they expect. However, when it comes to reward, they will not repay your commitment. Moreover, they will do everything to keep you down, even when your promotion is overdue.

A good example was Abimelech, Gideon’s firstborn son by a woman that he had not married. Following their father’s death, Abimelech desired to succeed his father as the leader of the people of Israel but he feared if he would be accepted. So, he went to his mother’s brothers to ask for their help. They *cooperated* with him and gave him money with which he hired “worthless and reckless men; and they followed him.” He went to his father’s house and killed all but one of his seventy brothers “on one stone” and made himself sole ruler [Judg. 9: 1-7]. I doubt if his mother’s people would have paid for such a massacre!

b) *The Patriot or Martyr*

There are some people who have high altruistic values, for other people, country or God, and would not mind any loss to themselves. Therefore, they are prepared to cooperate with those who share their high values. These are the patriots or martyrs who are prepared to die for their causes.

They do not count their personal losses, as long as their causes triumph. A good example in Trinidad recently is an opposition member of parliament, Gillian Lucky. Another opposition parliamentarian had alleged that a government minister had attacked him in the tearoom. The matter was referred to the Committee of Privileges of the House, made up of government and opposition members. Following its findings that the allegations could not be proved, Gillian was the only opposition member to sign the report along with the government members. She claimed to have done so on the ground that her legal ethics did not permit her to bow to her party's pressure to abstain from signing. Her party has publicly chastised her for upholding her personal integrity to her party's disadvantage. In reaction, she has made herself an "independent" member of the opposition!

Another example comes from the Scriptures. Rather than worship the image of gold set up by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonia emperor, three young Jewish exiles, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, refused to cooperate because of their faith in the true God. At the pain of being thrown into the burning fiery furnace, the three remained unmoved until they were vindicated by the power of God, when they were rescued from instant death [**Dan. 3: 16-18**]. In this case, they *cooperated with God* rather than with man.

c) *The Coalition-Builder*

There are some people who are pushing their own self-interests. At the same time, they are prepared to help others to also attain their own pursuits. In other words, they would accept to work with those who would also help them to attain their own objectives. *Such people only have permanent interests, not permanent friends.* They can be with you today and with another group the next day *as long as* their interests are protected or served. You can never rely on their loyalty for too long!

A good example was the friendship between Herod and Pontius Pilate during the trial of Jesus. When the Lord was brought before Pilate, he could not find any fault in Him but he was afraid to set Him free. However, when Pilate heard that Jesus was of Galilee, Herod's jurisdiction, he quickly pushed Jesus to his sworn enemy who happened to be visiting Jerusalem at the time. Their common interest was Jesus and passing the buck became an exciting game for both of them, and "that very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other" [**Lk 23: 1-12**]. You want to know what happened to their cooperation and friendship after the crucifixion of Jesus? The coalition had died!

d) *The Team Player*

The team player is selfless and as caring about your success as his/hers. For team players, working with others comes very naturally. They rejoice with you when you rejoice; they mourn with you when you mourn. Through thick and thin, they are with you until your *shared goals or objectives* are attained. They are dependable and trustworthy. They acknowledge and appreciate each team member's contribution. They know when to lead and when to be led. When there is success, they celebrate with everyone else. When there is failure, they take full responsibility.

Paul used the analogy of the human anatomy to illustrate this teamwork [**1 Cor. 12: 14-26**]. The body has different parts, each for a different purpose. Yet, they work in total harmony, such that “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it” [v. 26]. For example, if I say that I have headache, the pain is in the head but the mouth makes the announcement. If the pain is too bad, the whole body goes to see the doctor!

Look at the example of the children of Israel on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. They came in conflict with the Amalekites. For victory, Moses had to hold up his hands, as God had commanded him. Each time his hands were up, the Israelites were winning, but each time his hands came down, the Amalekites were winning. Then his hands got tired and heavy. So, they put stones under both arms, and Aaron held one arm while Hur held the other, “and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword” [**Ex. 17: 8-13**]. See how much teamwork went into that victory.

Another good example can be found in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by Babylonian exiles, Nehemiah and his team. Their enemies ridiculed them and threatened to disrupt their work. How did Nehemiah organize work? “Half of my *servants worked* at construction, while the other half *held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armour; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah*” [**Neh. 4: 15-17**]. Everyone was involved according to his duty, united by a common purpose, and “neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing” [v. 23].

There must in deed be something in working together. Jesus sent out His disciples *two by two* and they came back with wonderful stories of healing and conversions [**Mk 6: 7, 13**]. Jesus has said, “If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven for where two or

three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” [Matt. 18: 19-20]. You can then see why “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” [Eccl. 4: 12].

2. The Trinity as a “best-practice” of cooperation in action

I cannot find a better example in the Bible than the Trinity to illustrate how believers can practise cooperation. The doctrine of the Trinity states that there is one God who is manifested in Three distinct Persons, namely, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit [Deut. 6: 4; Matt. 28: 19]. This is best stated in the book of Genesis where God said, “Let Us make man in Our image...So God created man in His image” [Gen. 1: 26, 27]. How do God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit work together in such perfect harmony?

The word of God says, “the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork” [Ps. 19:1]. In another place, David said of the Lord, “Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands” [Ps. 102: 25]. Therefore, a good way to study cooperation within the Godhead is to examine God’s fingerprints in nature. That was what Professor Nathan Wood did.¹ Crime investigators use fingerprints of suspects to establish who are the culprits. Therefore, since we believe that God created the earth with all its fullness [Ps. 24: 1], then His fingerprints must show therein. Wood’s scientific evidence supported that position!

The totality of nature is referred to as the **universe**, not multiverse, which signifies *oneness*, as in one God. However, the universe consists of **time, space and matter** and no more, three components as in the Godhead! Time is either **past, present** or **future**. Interestingly, only the present is visible, just as Jesus Christ is the only visible member of the Trinity! Space is measured by **length, breadth and height**, as in the copy of the Bible in your hands right now! Matter is **energy in motion** producing **phenomena**. The sun is one big ball that we see every clear day. Apart from giving us **light**, it also produces **heat and radiation**!

What are the implications of the forgoing findings for cooperation? With respect to the universe, you cannot take time *without* space and matter. Otherwise, you won’t have a universe! In like manner, space is meaningless if you take one without the other two. For example, every page of the Bible that you open consists of length, breadth and height *all together*! Therefore, the Godhead works as a perfect team. Here are some of God’s features in action:

- They are three *distinct Persons*, the Father [Jn 14: 1-6; Jn 17: 1], the Son [Lk 2: 7; Acts 1: 11], and the Holy Spirit [Lk 1: 41]. They speak as distinct Persons [Ex. 20: 1; Matt. 5: 2; Acts 13: 2]. Yet, each of them is called God [Gen. 1: 1; Is. 9: 6; Acts 5: 3-4].

¹ Nathan R. Wood, *The Secret of the Universe*, 10th Edition [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 1936]

- *Wherever you find One, you find the Other Two.* For example, at Creation, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the earth” (Holy Spirit), and the Word (the Christ) who was with God (the Father) [**Jn 1: 1**] said, “Let there be light” [**Gen. 1: 1-2**]. At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove and the voice of His Father came from heaven, saying, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” [**Mk 1: 10-11**].
- *The Father always bears witness of the Son* [**Jn 5: 37**]; *the Son is always doing the Father’s will* [**Jn 5: 28-29; Phil. 2: 5-11**]; *the Son executes the Father’s will through the Holy Spirit* [**Lk 4: 18-19**]; and *the Holy Spirit bears witness of the Son* [**Jn 15: 26; 1 Cor. 12: 3**].
- We pray *to the Father* [**Jn 6: 6-14; Jn 14: 16**] *through the Son* [**Jn 14: 6**] *by the Holy Spirit* [**Rom. 8: 26**].

In summary, we can see that the team spirit among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is not the case of “one plus one plus one equals three” but “one **times** one **times** one **equals one!**” That is what breeds perfect harmony: *unity of purpose, plans, implementation, mutual respect and gain sharing.*

3. Conclusion

As we approach end-times, you may be under pressure to be the lone ranger, not to trust anybody. However, remember that even the golf champion needs a good caddy! Trade unions are discovering that partnership with management for productivity improvement creates more and better jobs than table banging. Nations are going into sub-regional groupings for better access to an increasingly competitive world. Churches and congregations may be numerous but Jesus Christ remains their unifying factor. Cooperation has become inevitable because viable individualism in a complex world has become impossible.

Cooperation counts.