

Proverbs of Solomon – Proverbs 27:17

This is an oft-quoted proverb, but it is another that I haven't seriously considered before. And I'm not sure that very many people actually have. Because, it has an easy application – *"We can sharpen each others hearts and minds by rubbing our ideas together."* But by spending a little time on this verse some unconsidered blessings might come out. Is there anything in the interpretation itself which people miss? Perhaps not. The word *"iron"* in the Bible can refer to *"iron ore"* or to the refined iron before it goes to the foundry. It can also speak of the instrument into which the iron is made. The Bible describes iron chariots and iron kitchen utensils for example. But the most common application and use of iron is to some sort of hand tool – like an axe-head.

The Hebrew word is found in *II King 6:5*. One pleasant day Elisha was with some of his seminary students on the banks of the Jordan. I have always pictured it as a picnic on a day off. As someone was chopping wood for a fire or perhaps for some shade, an axe head flew off the handle and fell into the river. *"But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the IRON did swim."*

The words *"axe head"* in *verse 5* and *"iron"* in *verse 6* are the same Hebrew word as here in our proverb.

As to the word *"sharpeneth"* – it is just what you'd expect. But in one verse it is rendered *"fierce"* – which makes perfect sense – sharp, fierce countenance. Then the English word *"friend"* properly reflects the Hebrew word in *Proverbs 27:17*. But it is rendered *"neighbor"* more than twice as often. And yet, I think that *"friend"* is the best way to look at it here.

With those thoughts in mind, what about an application?

The usual application, at least as I have usually heard it, is towards intellectual improvement. *"As iron sharpeneth iron, friends sharpen each other's MINDS by godly conversation."* *"As iron sharpeneth iron, friends sharpen each other's HEARTS by good conversation."* But wait a minute – this verse says nothing about hearts and minds. What does it say? *"As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the COUNTENANCE of his friend."* The Hebrew word is translated *"countenance"* 30 times, but it is rendered *"face"* almost 400 times. So this could say, *"As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the FACE of his friend."*

If we want to remain as close to the words of this verse as possible, what does this do to our application? Have you ever been introduced to two people at the same time, and one of them gave you a great big smile, while the other remained expressionless– or even worse? To whom are you more quickly drawn? Last August when I first met all those Cherokees and Choctaws, I introduced myself and received a variety of responses. For example, there was one young princess who behaved like true royalty. She stuck out her hand with a huge smile and said, *"Hi, I am Sydney Fourkiller."* I was instantly smitten. But there were others, both ladies and men, young and older, including some of the preachers who were not so openly friendly. Meeting them again last week, some of them still had the same facial expressions, but over a couple days, I found them all to be warm, loving and spiritual people, despite their countenances. Perhaps the lesson here is that there is room for all of us to work on our facial sharpening skills. Smiles reproduce themselves in smiles; frowns create frowns and scowls generate scowls. *"As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the COUNTENANCE of his friend."*

I think we could probably go further in this direction. Love, and most other emotions, tend to replicate themselves in the hearts, and on the faces, of others. For the sake of this lesson, don't think of this iron as cold, hard or harsh; think of it as positive. Positive attitudes beget positive attitudes, and sometimes they can be seen in people's countenances.

But let's return to the usual interpretation – intellectual improvement. It is certainly true that *"As iron sharpeneth iron, friends sharpen each other's minds by good conversation."* I've spent 12 hours on airplanes in the past ten days. On three of my flights I had aisle seats. That gave me opportunity to look at many of my fellow passengers. Of those who weren't sleeping or listening to music, most were watching videos on their phones. Very few were reading. Only those who were reading had the blessing of being honed. There is little sharpening by watching a Hollywood movie or listening to a modern song. It takes the effort of someone specific to sharpen our hearts and minds.

Generally speaking knives, saw blades and other tools, never stay sharp or get sharp on their own. In fact, things naturally go dull; things rust. A saw can be sitting around doing nothing, but in the process it slowly loses its edge. And hearts which aren't moving forward – toward the Lord – fall back toward the world or even worse.

I can see illustrations of this verse in last week's missions conference. It was all about *"iron sharpening iron."* That was a part of Bro. Johnson's objective when the idea was conceived last August. There were things in each of the

churches represented which were used of God to sharpen the others. Four preachers went down from Idaho, Washington and Oregon to challenge the complacent churches of Oklahoma in regard to the needs up here – both native and white. And there were things in those Oklahomans which rubbed off on us – at least they did on me. There were messages on evangelism and missions; there were messages on revival and service. A good preacher might take our text and develop a sermon on revival. *“As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.”* Revival isn’t something which can be taught – although we can teach the principles. Revival is something which can only be caught; like a life-saving blood transfusion from someone else. Ministries sharpen ministries; great faith begets great faith in others; an example of service can create a desire for more opportunities for service in someone else. As one church sees what another church is doing for the Lord, ideas for even other types of service spring to mind as directed by the Holy Spirit.

Culture is another way in which this verse applies to the last week. There were very few white people at this conference – the Fultons, the Parrows for one night, the Silvers and me. As I drove the Parrows to the meeting on Friday night I told them to be prepared for culture shock. The Indian services were similar to ours – they had music, prayer, an offering, testimonies and a sermon. But their music was different, their prayers, their testimonies and their sermons were all different. I was told that Bro. Berg told you last Wednesday, that churches in other places and other cultures do things differently than we do. I can say “amen” to that; they do. But those differences don’t necessarily make those churches unscriptural or unworthy of our fellowship. There were things I learned to appreciate in those differences. They sharpened me.

“As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” One of the things I saw was how close-knit many were to each other, especially within each church. And even though many don’t have some of the earthly things you and I have, they were willing to give and to sacrifice to help their brethren. Bro. McKinney, the preacher from over in Oregon is considering giving his family home in Oklahoma to the cousin of Brother Johnson, because that man, Harry, has been unselfishly caring for his elderly father. But the government might not approve of the gift, because the elderly man is now in a nursing home. Then Bro. Johnson said that he would somehow come up with \$10,000 to make the deal work. A lot of white folk could learn from the way that the Indian brethren take care of each other.

“As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” Sharing thoughts and opinions help to sharpen the people who are discussing those things. But what do people discuss these days? The qualities of opposing quarterbacks and wide-receivers? Whether or not Donald Trump ought to be impeached? The price of tea in China? After the lady sitting on the plane next to me Monday night heard that I had spent the week preaching in a Bible conference she changed the subject to the weather. She actually pulled out her *“Farmer’s Almanac”* and told me we were to have a warm, wet winter – apparently Ben Franklin said so. And for ten minutes we debated the *“Farmer’s Almanac”* versus Coeur d’Alene meteorologist Cliff Harris. After her husband took my side; she said she’d think of me all winter, whenever it snowed – or rained. In all of that we have an illustration – As marshmallows rub against marshmallows nothing gets sharp. Feathers rubbing against feather don’t make the bird’s countenance sharp.

“As IRON sharpeneth iron.” Don’t we usually use one kind of material to sharpen another kind of material? When our great grandfathers wanted to sharpen an axe or scythe, didn’t they use a stone wheel, spinning away as their feet drove the peddles? And when our fathers needed to sharpen their knives, didn’t they use a whet stone? At what point did our forefathers come up with files to sharpen things? I guess that a file isn’t made of iron, but it’s closer to *“iron sharpening iron.”* But here in this verse we have equals sharpening each other.

Please notice in this case that we are talking about friends sharpening friends. Sometimes discussions between friends can get heated, but I question the profitability of those debates. Here we have friends; these are peers; they are equals. And as such the conversations are more civil than what might be found in other situations. This is more of a revival verse than an evangelical verse. This is not about discussing the blood atonement with a lost man, but rather its about a fine point of doctrine with another believer.

Bro. Raymond Johnson had laryngitis all week and could barely speak a word – he didn’t preach or sing. But as we drove 2 hours back to Stilwell on Sunday afternoon he squeaked out the question: *“Can you explain the difference between Infralapsarian; Sublapsarian and Supralapsarian?”* My soliloquy wasn’t long, but it concluded with *“I am not a hyper-calvinist – a Supralapsarian.”* He just grinned and mouthed, *“Neither am I.”*

And that may bring up one more point: this sharpening works both ways. As equals talk about the things of the Lord,

they both may be blessed and grow more concise in their doctrine, their practice and their worship. We need to pray that this past week be a continued development of this verse – *“As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.”*