

# "Sharpen Up"

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Theme: Instead of looking for ways to look sharp look for ways to make others look sharp.

Text: Proverbs 27:17

Here's a thought: David Brooks observes, "Humility is not low self-esteem. It is low self-preoccupation."

Watch "How to sharpen knives - Jamie Oliver's Home Cooking Skills" at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=olZ8QNVb4P8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olZ8QNVb4P8).

A sharpening steel does not look impressive. You don't typically see one hanging on a kitchen wall or featured on a counter top. Instead, they are usually stored in a drawer out of sight. They are not the centre of attention when a cook is preparing a meal but they play an important supportive role by keeping a cook's knives sharp and more effective. A sharpening steel is made and it exists for one purpose - to sharpen knives.

King Solomon applies this word picture to relationships in Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." NIV

## **As Iron Sharpens Iron People Can Sharpen People**

### **As Iron Sharpens Iron**



From <http://godschemistryset.blogspot.ca/2011/09/as-iron-sharpens-iron.html>:

What does this proverb mean? When this was written? It was written during the Iron Age in the Middle East. Iron was not very pure at that time but contained other metals, such as nickel and copper, as well as carbon. Steel is iron with a certain proportion of carbon (between 0.2% and 2.1%). Pure iron is soft and carbon steel can be as much as 1000 times harder than iron. Iron in those days contained varying amounts of impurities and was of different strengths. Sharpening is defined as the process of creating or refining a sharp edge to an appropriate shape on a tool or implement designed for cutting. Sharpening is done by grinding away material on the tool with another abrasive substance harder than the tool itself. This is sometimes followed by a process to polish the sharp surface, increasing smoothness and correcting small mechanical deformations without regrinding.

When one item sharpens another, the substance on the sharpening surface must be harder than the material being sharpened, such as two different alloys of iron. It would be ridiculous to try to sharpen a knife with a sponge or a tissue. A sharpening steel is often overlooked for its strength while the credit and attention goes to the blade that is made sharper and more useful.

Abraham Lincoln concluded, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

Have you ever tried to use a dull knife or axe? Have you noticed the difference with using a new blade or newly sharpened blade?

As Iron Sharpens Iron

### **People Can Sharpen People**



Proverbs 27:17 requires that we operate in the way of sharpening the manner and forming the habits and character; that one help another to culture and polish of manner, rub off his ruggedness, round his corners, as one has to make use of iron when he sharpens iron and seeks to make it bright. (from Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament: New Updated Edition, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1996 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.)

There is something within all of us that wants people to like us. I have been in groups of people and caught myself wondering what they think of me. But I have also realized that I am not the only one wondering. This may or may not surprise you, but I can go to equips, training times and church leadership conferences where a room full of us are wondering what others think of us. We pastors can subtly or obviously size each other up by how intelligent we sound, how we are dressed or by how big our churches are.

David Brooks observes, "Humility is not low self-esteem. It is low self-preoccupation."

I wish I can say I do this every time, but when I go with a different attitude these gatherings take on a different meaning for me. There are times I have prayed before the meetings, "Lord, rather than trying to impress others or get them to like me, would you please show me someone that I can encourage and/or help in some way?"

How could our lives be different if we lived this way every day? Do people come away from you feeling duller or sharper? Do people come away from you nicked up, sized up or sharpened up?

The principle we are talking about certainly applies to education, because students often learn better in community. As colleges, universities, seminaries and technical schools develop their academic programs they search for ways to develop interaction between their learners. Different people learn in different ways but each learning style is enhanced when done in large or small groups. Online learning opportunities are growing quickly but organizations and instructors continue to look for ways to facilitate student interaction.

We should "point out" that you and I are not always to be the sharpening steel or the knife. In the sharpening of iron with iron, both pieces change - the sharpener and the one being sharpened. The benefits of sharpening in the context of relationships should not always flow one way. There should be neither dependence nor independence but *interdependence*.

Solomon describes it this way in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: 10 If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! 11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. NIV

Whether it is hunting, swimming or just plain living, the buddy system is the

way to go!

Let's look from a different angle at Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15-20:

15 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.  
NIV

While we usually focus on what the Lord is saying about forgiveness in this passage, He refers also to the power of unity and cooperation. While we often read this through our own personal lenses, Jesus uses the second person plural in verses 18 and 19 when He refers to "you":

18 I tell *you* the truth, whatever *you* bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever *you* loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, I tell *you* that if two of *you* on earth agree about anything *you* ask for, it will be done for *you* by my Father in heaven.

In other words, as we discern and declare God's will *together* we are more likely to be clear and accurate than when we go it alone.

We live in an increasingly individualistic culture, one in which we often turn to the Internet for counsel and advice rather than to people that we know personally. We rush to focus on quarterbacks in football, the goalies and goal scorers in hockey, the lead singers rather than bands, the prime ministers and presidents rather than governments and the CEOs rather than the companies. We tend to forget that progress and success is often because of a team rather than an individual.

I don't have a way to measure this or back it up, but I would guess many more books are written and many more talks are given on "being the best you can be" than on "helping others to be the best they can be". To sharpen or add value to another is to serve them without seeking recognition for ourselves. While the one doing the sharpening often gets less credit and attention, such an act requires great inner strength.

The way of the cross is a lonely path but yields eternal results, as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:3-8:

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!  
NIV

A strong, secure person is not out to impress others, to get others to laugh at his jokes or to admire his skill but she is out to sharpen and improve others. Without having to physically wash someone's feet you can humble yourself and serve someone by honing and polishing them. The best musicians make their conductor look talented and the best employees make their bosses look good. Living on the edge is found not in self-gratification but in serving others.

After begging my parents for years, I finally got to play organized hockey when I was 13. There was a fellow on our team whose father paid him a dollar for every goal he scored. You can imagine what kind of a player Louie became. No one wanted to play with him! Great players on any team make their team mates better.

Wayne Gretzky holds the National Hockey League record, by far, for the most points with 2,857. It is no surprise that he has scored more goals - 894 - than anyone else. What we don't often talk about, however, is that by an even larger margin he has more assists than anyone else with 1,963 ([www.quantohockey.com/nhl/records/nhl-players-all-time-assists-leaders.html](http://www.quantohockey.com/nhl/records/nhl-players-all-time-assists-leaders.html)).

One worker was overheard saying to the other in an office tower elevator, "I don't know what makes the boss tick, but I sure know what makes him explode."

This idea of iron sharpening iron is a double-edged sword. While interacting with others we can provoke to good or to evil, to greatness or to infamy. We should never underestimate the influence we can have on others and the influence that others can have on us. There are different ways to sharpen others, and these often vary with our giftedness, the situations that people face and the Lord's leading. With our prayer, encouragement, acts of service, appropriate touches, generosity and even loving correction we can sharpen the people around us.

What's your point in relationships? Is it about you or is it about others? Would you be more interested in reading a book about improving yourself or a book

about improving others?

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