

# Iron sharpens iron

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**By Gerald Gill**

KUNKLETOWN, Pa.—All of us can learn from other people. Likewise, all of us have something to give to other people.

A proverb in the Old Testament encourages people to help each other. It says, "Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17).

In thinking about this proverb, I thought about a few physical examples in my life that might be helpful in putting it into practice.

## **Grandfather's lesson**

As this article is being published in May of 2009, I am 80 years old. Some of my early understanding about sharpening knives came from my grandfather.

When I was a young boy, my brother and I spent a summer with my grandparents on Nantucket Island, Mass. My grandfather wore a suit coat and a vest every day. In his vest pocket was a small pocketknife. That knife was very sharp.

My grandfather would make kites, paddle-wheel boats and other simple toys out of wood for my brother and me. When he was finished carving and whittling a project, he would carefully clean the knife. Then he would take out a small honing stone and sharpen it.

He would tell us the importance of having a sharp knife. The reason he could make so many wonderful toys with his knife was that he took care of his knife. He regularly sharpened his knife.

## **Professional carver**

Later, I spent a lot of time with knives. I was a professional meat cutter for 31 years. (I retired in 1991.)

When I was 30 years old I served an apprenticeship in the retail meat business. I learned how to cut up cattle and turn them into steaks, roasts and other cuts.

When I was working as a meat cutter in the retail market, we had to work with large chunks of meat. That is not generally true today.

Most of the retail stores today receive meat prepackaged in smaller sizes. Years ago the retail market worked with the entire animal.

The frontquarter (a quarter of the animal) weighed 80-110 pounds. The meat that came from the frontquarter was the chuck steaks and chuck roasts.

The rib of beef weighed 25-30 pounds. The meat that came from this section was standing rib roasts.

The loin of beef weighed 40-50 pounds. The meat that came from this section was sirloin steaks, porterhouse steaks and T-bone steaks. (The highest-priced section of the animal is the tenderloin meat, which comes from three to four pounds of the animal.)

This type of work meant that we had an assortment of knives. It was important to learn to use them properly. But it was also vital to learn to take care of them.

Some of the workers neglected their knives, and their neglect showed up in their workmanship. There were times when their neglect of their equipment affected their production. The cuts of meat were not smoothly and evenly cut.

In our business there was an important rule: You never use another person's knives.

Some of the workers took such good care of their knives that they knew immediately if someone had used their knife, if only for a short while.

### **Spiritual lessons**

What can we learn about helping a friend from the simple physical act of sharpening a knife?

I have chosen three points for this comparison.

- In sharpening a knife, the cutting edge is the sharp edge of the knife.

A responsible person takes great care in helping the knife to be on the cutting edge. Do we have a strong desire to help people be on the cutting edge of the Kingdom of God?

Jesus Christ said that our words reflect our heart (Matthew 12:34). If we want our words to be edifying toward other people, our heart must be right.

- As each knife is different, so each person is different.

In sharpening the knife, what is its condition? What is the quality of steel in the knife? What type of stone should be used: fine, medium or coarse? We want to remove only as little metal as necessary.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 the apostle Paul wrote about the importance of understanding other people before trying to help them.

We have a different heredity, different past environment and different present environment. We are all different personalities with different strengths and weaknesses.

■ In sharpening a knife, we must hold it at the proper angle. In sharpening a friend, we must take the proper approach.

The cutting edge of a knife is usually maintained with a special tool called a *steel*. The steel, which is magnetized, is drawn back and forth over the edge of the knife to create a very fine, sharp edge.

People sometimes used a powerful magnifying glass to see when the edge is still a little too rough. Then it needs gentler steeling.

Paul wrote about the importance of choosing the right words. In Colossians 4:6 he wrote: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt; that you may know how you ought to answer every man."

### **Final thoughts**

In living our lives, it is not necessarily what type of job we did that we remember. Rather, we remember the good memories from the associations and relationships of the people we worked with.

As we grow older it is nice to go to reunions and retirement parties to rekindle memories.

God is in the people business, and He is interested in each and every one of us.