



"You just don't luck into things. . . . You build step by step, whether it's friendships or opportunities."
—Barbara Bush

28-Dec-18

Iron Sharpens Iron (Part One)

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to catch up with an old friend after work. We talked in general about how things were going and also touched on a few spiritual items. While we did not agree on everything, we had a good discussion overall. Later that night, we even texted each other something to the effect of, "It was great catching up. Good conversation." I recall agreeing and specifically saying, "Iron sharpens iron."

Those words refer to the well-known [Proverbs 27:17](#): "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend." Since we had engaged in a spiritual conversation, it seemed to fit that, as two baptized members of God's church, we were somehow sharpening each other's edge. This is how most people understand this proverb.

My wife and I have been reading the book of Proverbs with our children, so I decided to take a deeper look into this specific proverb to ensure that I was using it properly. I found that there is more to it than meets the eye.

To understand more fully what this verse is saying, we will split it in two, looking at each half in turn. The first clause, "As iron sharpens iron" is

relatively straightforward. What do we think of when we read or hear, "As irons sharpens iron"? For woodworkers, a metal chisel being sharpened on a grinding stone may come to mind. A chisel needs to be sharp to work properly when turning a piece of wood on a lathe.

For others, what suggests itself is sharpening a tool used in farming or landscaping. Some may recall honing their trusty old pocketknife on a leather strap, and yet others may imagine the sharpening of a sword by a skilled blacksmith. Cooks think of keeping their kitchen knives sharp. At the mention of "as iron sharpens iron," a person's mind can bring up a picture of any of these tools and others that require sharpening of some sort.

As it is used in [Proverbs 27:17](#), the word "iron" (Hebrew *barzel*; *Strong's* #1270) is simple enough: "iron (as cutting); by extension, an iron implement: —(ax) head, iron." All of the implements cited above are metallic. They are all made from iron, or more accurately, iron alloyed with some amount of carbon, which makes steel. In this way, it is hard enough to hold an edge and be sharpened.

How are metal tools, instruments, or blades sharpened? There are a few main ways to sharpen iron or steel. One can use a metal file, which has an abrasive or textured edge to remove metal and expose the edge of the blade. This step is typically followed by running the blade over a whetstone, the part of the process that actually brings the blade to a sharp edge. The sharpening is finished by polishing the blade with an extremely fine-grit sandpaper.

Many do not want to expend the time and energy that this process requires, so they turn to automation to do the work. A person can use an automatic sharpener, which typically utilizes diamond-based abrasive stones. A compromise between these two alternatives is to employ a simple tool, often made of some sort of abrasive ceramic, that can be run up and down the blade, and it sharpens as it goes.

Cooks and chefs know about steel knife sharpeners, also known as either steel rods or honing rods. These typically are a single rod of steel about 10 or 12 inches in length. We often see them used around Thanksgiving time when the cook, standing in front of the turkey, swipes the knife up and down the sharpening rod.

What is interesting is that this activity technically does not sharpen the blade. In reality, the steel rod pushes the knife's edge back to the center of the blade, straightening it. This is what happens when the blade is honed. However, when a blade is sharpened, bits of the blade are ground or shaved off to produce a new, sharp edge. So, technically, honing re-forms or re-aligns the blade, while sharpening removes metal to expose or create a sharper edge. This fact will come into play later.

"Sharpens" (*cha?dad*; *Strong's* #2300) is another basic Hebrew word: "a primitive root; to be (make) sharp or severe: —be fierce, sharpen." With our now-broader understanding of how a blade or edge is sharpened, this word becomes somewhat more interesting. *Cha?dad* is used only six times in the Bible, twice in [Proverbs 27:17](#), once in [Habakkuk 1:8](#) (where it is translated as "fierce"), and three times in [Ezekiel 21:8-11](#), an [Old Testament](#) description of how a sword is sharpened, polished, and made ready for war.

The final half of the verse is fairly straightforward except perhaps for the word "countenance," the word that spurred me to wonder if I was applying the proverb correctly. "Countenance" (*pa?n?ym*; *Strong's* #6440) is "the face (as the part that turns); used in a great variety of applications (literally and figuratively)."

For more insight, note what the *Oxford English Dictionary* website states about *countenance*:

(noun) 1. a person's face or facial expression: "His impenetrable eyes and inscrutable countenance give little away"; 2. support or approval: "She was giving her specific countenance to the occasion."

(verb) admit as acceptable or possible: "He was reluctant to countenance the use of force."

Synonyms: tolerate, permit, allow, admit of, approve, approve of, agree to, consent to, give one's blessing to, take kindly to, be in favour of, favour, hold with, go along with, put up with, endure, brook, stomach, swallow, bear.

The final word in the verse is "friend" (*re?a?*; *Strong's #7453*): "brother, companion, fellow, friend, husband, or neighbor," all of which are easily understood terms.

After studying and thinking about the words in this verse, I questioned if I have ever used "iron sharpens iron" correctly. To me, my conversation with my friend was two converted individuals with God's Spirit discussing spiritual things, the result of which was a sharpening of our individual characters. By refining how we viewed the topic at hand, our conversation worked to build and strengthen our [faith](#). This perspective on the meaning of the proverb is probably correct to some degree.

But that word "countenance" still made me wonder, "How were we, through conversation, sharpening each other's face? Is that even possible?" Next time, we will look into how the Bible describes the countenance and how it changes.

- Ryan McClure

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[You Are My Friends!](#)

by Martin G. Collins

While it is common on Facebook to defriend/unfriend, Christ's love for His people is a friending with the condition that godly fruit is produced. When Paul challenged the Roman congregation to produce godly fruit, he was not looking for new converts, but evidence of the spiritual fruit of God's character. The fruit Jesus asked His disciples to bear is designed to glorify the Father, to demonstrate love by obedience to His Commandments, and to increase the believer's joy, a by-product of sincere obedience. God admonishes us to not only bear fruit, but to bear more fruit through pruning. God is looking for a great deal of fruit as we yield to Him in order to exceed our self-imposed limitations, as well as for enduring fruit, in contrast to futile worldly projects which are subject to decay. As we bear godly fruit, the quality of our friendship with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and our brethren

will increase exponentially as we make activities like intercessory prayer, sacrifice, hospitality, and charity a perpetual part of our spiritual repertoire.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Godly Friendship: A Priceless Commodity](#)

by David F. Maas

We tend to take our friendships for granted, but they are important parts of our Christian lives. David Maas explains how we should cultivate and appreciate our friendships, for they are a necessary tool in growing in godliness.

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