

The Church: How We Treat Each Other

Text: Romans 12:9-21

Preached by Pastor Phil Hughes at First Presbyterian Church in Salt Lake City, July 28,2019

Prayer: Holy Spirit, you inspired Paul to write these words. Bless the words of my mouth and the listening of our hearts so that your Word is worked into the soil of our lives. Amen.

✘ Some years ago psychologists did a study on how members of 11 major symphony orchestras perceive each other.

They found that the percussionists were viewed as insensitive, unintelligent, and hard-of-hearing, yet fun-loving.

String players were seen as arrogant, stuffy, and unathletic.

The brass players were consistently described as being loud.

Woodwind players came off fairly well. They were described as quiet and meticulous, though a bit egotistical.

Given the different and very divergent personalities and perceptions of the other people in the orchestras, one might wonder how could an orchestra ever come together to make such wonderful music?

They determined that the answer was regardless of how those musicians viewed each other, they made their feelings and biases and prejudices subordinate to the leadership of the conductor.

As they come under him or her, they play beautiful music together as one orchestra.

✘ Whether it is an orchestra, an athletic team, or a company when different members can come together, work together and be as one it is a wonderful thing.

It is no different with the church.

Our conductor is the Lord Jesus Christ. We take our cues from him. We keep our eyes on him. And when we keep him the focus, we look like his people should look.

There is nothing like the body of Christ when it is working right. The number one picture in the New Testament of the Bible that is used about the church is that of "the body of Christ". Time and time again the church is referred to as a body because the way God has designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church.¹

There is no such thing in the Bible as living out faith in God individually. Everyone is a part of a tribe, a nation, a people, a church, a community. The Bible knows nothing of Lone Ranger Christianity. It assumes that we are in and active in a church where we receive and give, worship and serve with others. To call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ and not be a part of his body is a contradiction.

Romans 12 is one of the places in the New Testament where the Apostle Paul spells out the way the church is to work as a body. He writes,

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. Romans 12:4-5

Paul uses the metaphor of a body to show how we all to belong and depend on one another. And how we treat one another determines the health of a church, just like how we treat our bodies determines the health of our bodies.

¹ The Message, v.24

So Paul launches into a list of brief - bullet points - of how to treat one another within the Christian community, and how we treat those outside of the community.

If you ever think Christianity gets its head in the clouds a little too much, or some things you read in the Bible or hear in church seem a little esoteric or just irrelevant, well Paul brings the hay down to where we goats can eat it in Romans 12. No one – no one! – needs to be sophisticated, theologically educated, or have a long history in the church to understand these words.

This is where faith meets life, where the rubber hits the road. Let's walk through each phrase.

Love must be sincere. It starts with love. In that well-known passage from 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says love is the greatest of all spiritual realities. Jesus listed loving God and loving others as the fulfillment of everything God wants of us. He said people will know that we are his disciples by our love for one another.

So it is no wonder Paul tells the Roman Christian's love to be sincere. Real. Unhypocritical. Not faked. Everything else in the verses that follow really are examples of how to live this love with sincerity and truth.

Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Love easily gets reduced to sentimentality. But love distinguishes what is true from what is false. Again, 1 Corinthians 13, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth." Love does not bless or go along with what is wrong. We condemn evil in whatever form it takes, though not the people. In the Book of Common Prayer, the prayer for justice leads us to pray that love "makes no peace with oppression."²

Be devoted to one another in love. "Love" comes up once again. Love with mutual affection. Really the term is "family love." Love one another as if they were family.

Honor one another above yourselves. Figure out ways to lift up the other person. Be competitive in showing honor to others. Have you ever heard someone say, "I get too much encouragement, too many compliments, too much appreciation"? Is that true for you? We can probably never show enough honor to others.

Christian faith isn't self-seeking. It's other-seeking.

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Live with desire and enthusiasm. Feed the fire of your spiritual fervor, and serve the Lord with your time and energy.

Yes, the fire burns dim sometimes, but Paul encourages us to fuel up and keep the flame burning. Feed your faith.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. This is a great triad, and each of these things works together.

Joyful in hope. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is dependent on circumstances. Joy is deeper. Joy in the Bible is beyond the changes and circumstances of life. We can be going through something tremendously hard or painful, and still have joy.

Being joyful in hope means believing that no matter what, God is with us, is present and will get us through.

Patient in affliction follows that because we may have to endure what is hard. Hope holds out. We have to have patient endurance because life often takes time.

The theologian and archaeologist Teilhard de Chardin wrote a memorable poem that begins, "Above all, trust in the slow work of God." He goes on to note that we are naturally impatient

² Jim Edwards, Commentary on Romans, p.292

and want to get things over with. But God is doing something, forming us through his Spirit, through all we are facing. We have to give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading us. So we trust in the slow work of God. And that takes patience.

Which leads to being *faithful in prayer*. The only way to keep joyful in hope and patient in affliction is to be faithful in prayer. Prayer makes endurance possible. Prayer keeps our eyes on the Lord. Prayer keeps us holding on to the Lord. Prayer engages us in the battle between the world and the Spirit. God doesn't promise to exempt Christian from hard things, but he does promise to be with us in them. Prayer is to our souls what eating and brushing our teeth are to our bodies.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. If you see another in your church who has a need, share what you have with them. It might be financial, but it might be time. It might be a word of encouragement. It might be a listening ear. We don't keep what God has given us to ourselves.

Practice hospitality. Churches have the opportunity to do this every Sunday. We welcome the guest with a handshake, word of greeting, conversation. We help people find their way here. The ministry of "welcoming" can never be underestimated.

In his rule for monasteries, Benedict, 1400 years ago, wrote that every person who comes through the doors of their communities are to be welcomed and treated as if they were Jesus Christ. Rich or poor, attractive or not so much, important or lowly. Welcome all as Christ.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Boy, that's tough. It echoes what our Lord Jesus Christ said when he said,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"³

Man, I want to be better than a tax collector.

And it isn't just be quiet and don't hit back. We are told to "bless" those who make life hard for us. This takes deep inner strength. It takes a heart controlled by the Holy Spirit. Paul comes back to this in a few verses.

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Is someone celebrating? Has someone had something great happen to them? Rejoice with them. Is someone sad? Grieving? Mourning? Join them in that. Be aware of what others are going through. And stand with them.

Live in harmony with one another. Psalm 133 says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" Division, rivalry, and enmity absolutely destroy a church. Harmony complements. We all have different personalities, backgrounds, social status, gifts and abilities. Harmony is when those are blended together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ for everyone.

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Snobbery is never Christian. Be able to talk with, be at ease with and have genuine relationship with those who may not be as high or valued in the eyes of others. This phrase can also be translated, "give yourselves to humble tasks." Sometimes it's our job to reach for the plunger.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

³ Matthew 5:43-46

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

The last verses are one, larger idea. It goes back to when we are mistreated and explains what it means to bless someone instead of curse them. Paul spends a lot of time on this so 1) it must have been an issue in that community, 2) it must be important.

When we come up against the jerks of the world we don't repay them with our own version of "jerk-ness." We don't seek revenge. We leave it to God.

I still marvel and admire Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When he was beaten, jailed, his family threatened, his home firebombed he still said that a true leader "is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus. If every Negro in the United States turns to violence, I will choose to be that one lone voice preaching that this is the wrong way."⁴

I have always kept in mind those words about living at peace with everyone as far as it depends on you. Sometimes we can't live at peace with people. Sometimes they just aren't interested in reconciliation. Sometimes the danger is too great. It is "as far as it depends on us." We do all we can, but then may have to walk away.

Paul wraps up this list of how we live the Christ-filled life with **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** Part of the victory of the Christian life is that we don't become like the person or who is doing evil to us. We don't let evil get the best of us. We get the best of what is wrong by doing good.

There is a parable of a holy man who was engaged in his morning prayer time under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank. During his meditation he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. He crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him. Someone watching came along and said to the holy man, "Don't you know that's a scorpion, and it's in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?" To which the holy man replied, "That may well be, but it is my nature to save, and must I change my nature because the scorpion does not change its nature?"

During one of the bitterest moments of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said a kind word about the South. A shocked bystander asked how he could do this. Lincoln said, "Madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

✕ We read all these things and might be thinking, "How can I live like this?" Paul is writing about a life that is filled with grace. This is how we work out our lives together as people of the Lord. All of this will happen as our hearts are filled with Jesus Christ. When we give the Holy Spirit room, we will find our attitudes and actions becoming more like him and less like what this world tells us we are to do and be.

So many people have become skeptical of churches. They don't see anything different in people who claim to be Christians. But the stuff Paul writes about here in Romans 12 sells. They demonstrate a compelling life. They are the things that happen when a church is working right. And, as one pastor said,

"There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential unlimited. It comforts the grieving and

⁴ Let The Trumpet Sound, p.407

heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness.

Still to this day, the potential of the local church is almost more than I can grasp. No other organization on earth is like the church. Nothing even comes close.”⁵

✘ First Presbyterian Church of SLC, you are in an exciting time. Interim times are always full of challenges and questions. This time of transition is a time for growth and redefinition as a church. It is not to be wasted.

I know this – as your love is sincere, for God and for one another, you will be a church that works right. And Jesus will be known here.

Prayer: Gracious God, we ask for these things to be in our lives and in our churches so that we will live as people of the Lord Jesus Christ. May love be sincere, and nurture how we treat and live with one another so that we will look like your people and bring health to your body. Send your Holy Spirit to make this reality. Amen.

⁵ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, p.23