

Humbly Working Together

Romans 12:3-5

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We are in the application section of the book of Romans. Last week we looked at the overarching principles: give yourselves as an act of worship to the Lord and don't let the world squeeze you into its mold but instead be transformed by thinking clearly and thinking godly thoughts.

As we move to the next section from verses 3-5 Paul starts to apply these general principles in different ways. The first is in the area of life in the church. Verse 3 is the first verse of this section . . . or is it? The Greek text did not have paragraphs to let us know plainly some transition verses like this one belonged to:

³ Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are.

Don't Think More Highly of Yourself Than you Should

There are different ways we can think more highly of ourselves than we should. First, you could think that those first verses do not apply to you. In other words, you may feel you are above compromising with the world. That is a very dangerous place to be.

People who feel they are not susceptible to worldly thinking are most likely to drift into worldly thinking while feeling they are being quite righteous in their beliefs. That makes them doubly dangerous. They drift into error because they let their guard down or lower the standard to fit with their experience. I am saved but the sin nature is still inside of me.

If the Apostle Paul sees this in himself (Romans 7) we better remain on guard. We must continually ask ourselves if we are holding to the beliefs, thoughts and practices we hold because it is the way of the Lord, or is it worldly thinking we have tried to dress up in church clothes?

Some very well-known teachers and leaders in the church have gotten caught up in horrendous things. How did they get there? They knew the Word of God! What happened? I believe they thought they were strong enough to "handle" various worldly behavior and tactics. They thought more highly of themselves than they should have.

Second, this could be a general call to humility. Jesus was constantly reminding us that unless we become like a little child, we cannot be His disciples. He told us in God's Kingdom the last will be first. He said the student was not above the teacher and if the teacher was persecuted the students will be as well. In the book of Philippians 2:3-8 we are told,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

There are different degrees of thinking too highly of yourself,

- There are those who think they know more than everyone else. This is the danger of those letters that are sometimes listed after your name or before your name. There is a feeling that you know more than anyone around you. But all the letters really mean is you learned a sufficient amount about your subject of choice to receive a degree. In some cases, it doesn't even mean you actually learned anything . . .you learned how to get the grade needed for the degree. You have surely been around people who acted like they were very knowledgeable about something that you actually did have good knowledge about. And you know they don't sound smart, they sound foolish!
- There are those who just think they are better than others. This is simple arrogance. They may believe they are better because of their upbringing, their appearance, they talents or abilities, or even because of their popularity. Such people frequently don't want to have anything to do with those who are of a "lesser class" than they are. I wrote a children's book to address this: Different is not better than or worse than . . . it is just different."
- The third form of thinking is most likely what Paul is referring to because of the verses that come next. This is when people in the church think their ministry or "gift of the Spirit" is more significant than everyone else's. This was a problem in the church. Paul addressed it in the book of 1 Corinthians where people seemed to be ranking each other based on the spiritual gifts or ministries that they had. Paul mentions the variety of gifts once again in the book of Ephesians.

As for arrogance Paul says we are to,

Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.

This does not mean we have to diminish the gifts, abilities, and talents, we actually have or at least believe we have. There are people who have great artistic abilities who seem to want to hide that reality. There are people with extraordinary singing voices who will never be heard by anyone because they refuse to let that ability be known. There are people with great teaching skills or management skills or even investment gifts that could be put to use in the Kingdom of God. And there can never be enough people who have gifts in the areas of prayer and service to others.

As we will see, if the church is going to function as it was meant to function, we all need to serve where we are gifted to serve. The body of Christ cannot utilize the gifts of people if they don't know what those gifts are! More on this later and then next week.

Be Your Piece of the Puzzle

⁴ Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote on this text some compelling words,

Some, because of the gifts given them, are called upon to exercise certain functions which others are not called upon to undertake, but the principle of grace and the distribution of gifts is common to all. So we must learn to think of the church as a living community of people: each one has faith, each one has life from God, each one has a gift which has been given to him or her, and each one is to function in the total life of the church.

These points, too, are significant for us because more and more the idea has been creeping in that the vast majority of church members are really not meant to do anything, but sit and listen, and the only people who function in the church are the certain special people. (Romans 12 p.158)

As I look back on my years as a Pastor my major regret (failure) is that I tried to do it all. I have to admit, at times I feel like the village pastor of a town who every day when the train went through town he would go down to the tracks and as the train passed, he would throw his hat into the air and say, "Hallelujah!"

People watched this man and his odd celebration of the freight train that came through every day. One person finally stopped him and asked why he did this daily celebration of the train. The Pastor replied, "It is the only thing in my parish that moves without me having to push it."

The Bible instructs Pastors to "equip the saints for ministry." The Pastor's main job is to preach the gospel systematically and develop disciples of the Lord. There were things that didn't get done by me because I was trying to do things that others could have done much better. I was robbing others of the joy to serve as I insisted on being solely responsible for too many things. When you do that there will always be people who are happy to let you kill yourself trying to be superman (or woman). In doing so, others are kept from realizing the joy of their ministry while I was somewhat frustrated with things God did not call me to in the first place.

As you look for a new Pastor, do not let him make the same mistake! Don't expect him to do everything. In fact, make him take time off just to get away enough to stay fresh and energetic in the job.

The Bible tells us that God designed the church to be a group of sinners, saved by grace, who are most effective in glorifying God when they are working together. The highest example of

this is what is called the “economic trinity.” It is a suggestion as to the “working relationship” of the members of the Trinity. The Father ordains salvation, The Son makes that salvation possible by giving His life as a ransom for those the Father has called, and the Holy Spirit applies salvation by drawing people to faith and then helping them grow in discipleship.

This is an overly simplistic picture of the perfect unity of the Triune God (each person of the Godhead is involved in every area of salvation and growing to maturity) but it does show us some main areas of emphasis and what God desires for the church. He desires unity because we all belong to each other. It is like a family relationship . . . in most families, every member of the family is unique and sometimes members of the family kind of annoy each other, but . . . if a member of the family is threatened . . . the family draws together, and any opponent of one member of the family is going to have to take on the entire family!

Another image the Bible uses is that of a body. For me to talk to you right now there is an assortment of things in my body that have to be working together. There is of course my mouth, my vocal cords, my brain, the pathways between these organs. I have to depend on my lungs to give me air and my heart to keep the blood pumping so things keep running. I rely on my legs to hold me up, my eyes to see the Scripture and my few notes, I need my hands to turn pages, and I am relying on the nerves, tendons, muscles, and pathways I know nothing about to help me give you this simple illustration.

Which of these things is the most important thing in giving a speech? They are all important! If any one of them is missing, the task of speaking becomes much more difficult. This is a picture of the church.

Second, we all have a role to play in the church. Rick will have more details on this next week but let’s get the concept into our head. In the book of 1 Corinthians we are told,

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:11)

God has placed you in this congregation for a purpose. We are a better representation of the Kingdom when we are all working together. We are more satisfied when we are doing our part in the Kingdom. We are more unified when we are working together.

Every person is important in the church. I wish I would have counted the number of times people have said, “I don’t know what my gift is.” I like to think that our gift is: something you already like to do but now you are being asked to this to honor and glorify God.

I am startled by the number of people who feel their gifts are unimportant. Is praying unimportant? Are the people who help set things up important? Yes. What about music, maintenance, leaders, recruiters, helpers, people who cook meals for get-togethers? Yes, yes, yes!

The gifts God gives to us, I believe, are as numerous as the creative genius of the Lord Himself. He knows what is needed to accomplish His work through us and in us. And He has given us the privilege of participating in the building of His Kingdom.

One could say, "If the church is supposed to be unified, why are there so many different churches?" The criticism is somewhat valid. Churches do often seem to split over petty things or over things that are interpersonal things that really have nothing to do with the gospel. Such divisions are a stain on the unity of the church.

However, not everyone who is part of a congregation is a member of Christ's body. People go to church for many reasons: to be seen, to practice religion, to meet with friends, to keep up the status quo. Some go because their family have always gone to that particular place of worship. This is why theologians make a distinction between the visible and invisible church. The invisible church is made up of true believers. The visible church is made up of believers and unbelievers. This is the way it will always be if a church is reaching out.

But there is a serious problem taking place in many churches. The church is beginning to conform to the image of the world. Rather than hold to God's standards there are many churches and church bodies who are embracing the morality and theology of the world. It is impossible to have any kind of unity when we are not worshipping the same God!

In 2 Corinthians 6 we are told,

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

To try to create unity with churches that are denying the clear teaching of the Bible is to necessitate a compromise of our faith. This must not be done! By necessity there will be some division in the body of Christ if we hope to remain faithful. But what do we consider essential teaching? Let's not look at our opinion but at the words of the Scriptures.

³ I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. ⁴ He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. ⁵ He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him. (Corinthians 15:3-8)

A church that does not affirm the sacrificial death of Christ, the need to be forgiven to be made right with God, the authority of the Word of God, the factual death and bodily resurrection of Jesus, witnessed by many . . . is not a Christian Church and we should not be unequally yoked with them. We can find unity in these things with other churches but if we do not agree on the

essentials, there will be no unity because these truths make up the core of the gospel. We can and must do a better job at unity with those who trust in the Christ Paul describes above. We know such unity is possible because we see it at concerts, conferences and other places where labels give way to worship.

Important Takeaways

Regardless of your position, education, or your popularity, **we must never forget that we are but sinners saved by the grace of God. EVERYTHING we have comes from Him.** That realization should make us humble, grateful, open, and very approachable by everyone else. When we live in this state of humble gratitude, we will find others being drawn to us. And we will begin to see past ourselves and learn from others and share the ups and downs others experience without any sense of judgment.

Second, we should come away knowing **God does not want us to be a spectator in the church.** He wants us to find our place in the church and serve the Lord. How do you find your place?

- Look at how you would like to serve
- Look at the needs of the church (even needs that aren't being met)
- Experiment

Rick will flesh this out much more next week.

Third, **we need to realize that whatever we can do, we matter to the church and to the work of God's kingdom.** Since God gives the various gifts as He determines, it is our job to enthusiastically serve in the areas He has placed us in. I believe when there are glaring needs in a church, it is because people are not stepping up to use their gifts for the Kingdom. We cannot be what God has called us to be unless we are hitting on all our cylinders.

Fourth, we need to understand that a true church is led by the Lord and not the man on the platform. Sadly, it seems that churches that grow really big are often seen as big because of the man in the front of the church. The Pastor should be a leader . . . but not the star! There is only ONE name that should be "in lights" in any church, and it is the Lord's name. Anything less is a church that is headed in the wrong direction.

This is one of the dangers of "vision casting" that is a big thing in churches now. It seems to me that Jesus has already cast a vision for the church! Our job is to find ways to implement THAT vision. The church will be most effective when the entire church embraces their responsibility to the Body of Christ. We work for the Lord!

People who work in the White House, work at the pleasure of the President. They serve him and His agenda! The people in the church are to work for the pleasure of the Lord. This is true of every one of us from the platform to the closet. It is not a burden. It is the richest privilege any of us will ever know.