

Getting Over Ourselves

Romans 12:14-16

© September 1st, 2024 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Romans

Our society today is fiercely individualistic. Sometimes this is good: we encourage people to embrace their uniqueness and to celebrate how God makes us different from one another. We've started encouraging people to recognize their brokenness and do the hard work of self-care to ensure we can be the best we can be. But there is another side to this fierce individualism—it is that we become so focused on ourselves that we disregard others. We become so enmeshed in our own viewpoint that we fail to acknowledge that there are other viewpoints. We become so engrossed in our own lives that we don't pay attention to the way others are affected by the things in their lives.

Our passage this morning is only three verses long but is full of instructions on how we can battle the selfishness that often pervades our lives.

I would remind you again that Paul isn't telling us how to be saved, he is showing us what it looks like to be a Christian. A Christian is someone who has embraced the grace God extends to us, but that grace also changes us. One way is that it should change how we relate to each other. And that's Paul's focus in these verses.

Loving Our Persecutors

He starts in a somewhat surprising place, by showing us how to love those who don't love us.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. (Romans 12:14, NLT)

When someone attacks us, our first response is to attack back, often with even greater intensity and fury. We figure we're doing well when we hold our tongues rather than retaliating. Don't get me wrong, that's still an improvement, but Paul puts forth an even higher standard. Not only should we not lash out at the person, we should actively seek their good! Paul says we should be praying for those who attack us, and asking that God would bless them. Let's be honest, prayer is rarely our response to being attacked—and even when it is, we are asking God to punish the person, not bless them!

Where does Paul get off giving this kind of command? How can he say this is what should be expected of believers?

Well, Paul is merely restating what Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount.

⁴³ "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy.

⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends,

how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. (Matthew 5:43-47, NLT)

Jesus calls us to live differently than the world around us. He says the world loves those who love them. That's not commendable at all. Instead, Jesus tells us that we are to love everyone—even our enemies. But Jesus doesn't just say we should love them, but we should desire their good and pray for them! He points out that God cares for the good and evil alike, therefore so should we.

So, how do we do this? It's not complicated—we begin praying for our enemies (or as an older translation says, those who spitefully use you). When you feel anger rising as you replay the hurt someone has thrown your way, stop and begin to pray for them. Don't just pray that God would help them to see how dumb they are, but that He would begin to work in their lives, to heal their hurt, to make them whole again. Maybe begin to pray that God would help you to understand where their hurt is coming from and how you can minister to them.

This is not an easy thing to do, but it is an incredibly effective exercise. It is exceedingly difficult to stay mad at a person and try to hurt them while you're also actively praying for God to heal their hearts. There is freedom that comes from choosing to love someone who is trying to hurt us.

At the core of this principle is a recognition that the person we are dealing with was created by God, has value, and matters to Him. Therefore, they should matter to us. Often, we see people merely as obstacles to be overcome, which makes it easy to treat them like they don't matter. When we rightly recognize them as people God loves, it changes our perspective entirely. Much of the time when a person lashes out it is due to brokenness in themselves. We should pray for God to heal their brokenness rather than that He would destroy them. This simple shift in thinking is incredibly powerful.

Empathy

The second principle Paul gives us is to be empathetic with others.

Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15, NLT)

The essence of this command is that we are supposed to participate in the lives of those around us. To do that, we have to see beyond ourselves and see what is happening in the lives of others. Our task is to understand a person's joy or pain and enter into that experience with them.

Sometimes we find empathy relatively easy. When we hear about an unexpected or tragic death, we feel that deeply. We can only begin to imagine the pain those directly affected by the loss must feel. We find it fairly easy to weep with those who weep in that situation.

Often, however, we find it difficult to empathize. The reason is not because we don't understand the hurt or joy the other person feels, but because we only view their hurt or joy through the lens of how it makes us feel!

When someone tells you about a fancy vacation they've taken, or a new car they got, or about their new job or new, larger paycheck, we often struggle to rejoice with them because there is a tinge of jealousy within us. Sometimes it goes beyond jealousy to being angry that they are receiving these blessings, when we feel as though we are far more deserving!

If we are to do this, we have to stop thinking about how their experience makes you feel, think about how it makes them feel! Celebrate with them as they share their joy. When we focus on our jealousy, we end up trying to steal some of their joy in the hopes of making ourselves feel better. We say things like, must be nice, or I wish I could do something like that, or something even snarkier. We imagine that our complaining about their joy will make us feel better...But it doesn't. It just shows the people around us how little we think of them. The remedy is to stop making things all about ourselves and instead allow the focus to be on them.

We can do the same thing with those who weep. Have you ever had someone share their hardship with you, only to think to yourself (or maybe even say!) that's nothing compared to the hardships I'm facing in my life! Or maybe you feel jealous because of the attention and support they are getting, while you feel like no one notices your pain. How often does someone share a story of heartache with us, and we somehow manage to immediately make the conversation about us! We struggle to weep with those who weep because we have trouble looking past ourselves.

A better approach is to try to understand their experience. Instead of giving them the cold shoulder because that's how you felt people treated you in your hour of need, care for the person the way you wish others had cared for you. If you don't understand why they're complaining about something that seems minor to you, try to understand where they're coming from. Maybe they are having a hard time because they have never experienced anything like this before. If the burden is new to them, it may seem unbearable. Instead of diminishing their burden, help them bear it. Share something that has helped you, or simply empathize with them instead of trying to minimize their pain. Just because something doesn't seem like a big deal to us, that doesn't mean the hurt another person feels isn't valid. Paul tells us to enter into the joy and suffering of those around us rather than sitting in judgment over those things. Empathy requires us to look past ourselves and to truly see others.

Three Final Commands

In verse 16, Paul gives three more commands, each of which gives us a sense of what this kind of love looks like practically.

Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! (Romans 12:16, NLT)

The first command is to live in harmony with one another. If you're like me, this seems like an impossible task. Our world seems full of people who are only interested in division or drama. How do we live in harmony with people who simply want to create discord?

We'll see next week that sometimes it isn't possible for us to be at peace with everyone, but Paul tells us that while we can't control how others respond to us, we can control how we respond to them. So we should be people who are agents of peace, rather than agents of dissension. Here are some suggestions of how we can live in harmony.

- Choose to be kind and gentle with people instead of being harsh. This is even more important when they are being harsh toward us. Don't match their tone, set the tone!
- Clarify what people are saying rather than jumping to conclusions. We tend to assume the worst very quickly. Instead of making assumptions, ask questions to make sure you really understand what and why a person is doing or saying what they are. Often clarification can avoid conflict.
- Be willing to forgive. One reason we have repeated issues with people is because we refuse to let go of past hurts. We choose to interpret things they say through the lens of the pain we've felt in the past. That's not fair. We need to let go of those hurts (and pray for people!), or they will continue to taint the relationship in the future.
- Talk to people rather than about them. Gossip is incredibly destructive. It's awkward to talk to someone about a rumor you have heard about them. But my experience is that people tend to be grateful you talked to them about it rather than talking to others. We can avoid a lot of problems by going directly to the source instead of involving others.
- Be willing to admit when you're wrong. Sometimes people have a point when they're upset with us. We sometimes do foolish or insensitive things, often without even realizing it (because we're thinking only of ourselves!) Rather than defending ourselves (or trying to make the conversation about all their failures instead), admit and take responsibility for the ways you fail.
- Seek forgiveness when you fail. When we ask for forgiveness, we must recognize the hurt we have caused and seek to bring healing to the relationship. This is a valuable exercise for each of us. Understanding how we've hurt people can often help us to understand their response.

Paul says we should create harmony rather than discord. It's interesting that he uses a musical term to describe our relationships. One thing I have learned about creating harmonies in music is that it is imperative that you listen to the other people you are trying to harmonize with. Beautiful harmonies only come from the different parts listening carefully to one another and trying to work together. What is true in music is also true in relationships—we must learn to truly listen to others if we want to be able to live in harmony with them!

The second principle Paul gives is that we should not be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. I have to laugh as I read this, because it seems like there is a prideful assumption even in the way it's written. If we think we're too good to be with ordinary people, it means we think we are somehow extraordinary!

Paul is telling us that we need to have a much more sober view of ourselves. We tend to look down on people who don't have the same education we do, or who don't have the same financial standing we do, or whose past or reputation is seemingly more checkered than ours. But in the church, of all places, we should recognize that no person is better than another. We are all sinners in desperate need of a Savior. So, we should not view ourselves as "too good" for others.

You may not realize it, but this happens quite often in churches. Often, we are only interested in adding people to the church that we think are worthwhile. In youth ministry there is a school of thought that says if you can win over the popular kids, the others will follow. Of course, this means the kids who aren't as popular get ignored, because they don't have as much to offer. As adults, we may think we should court those with power, money, or influence. Those who are poor, who may not fit our target demographic, or who are difficult to love are pushed aside. Once again, we are looking at people only in terms of how they can benefit us, rather than seeing them as people.

This means we should be welcoming, loving, and kind to people from all walks of life. People with pasts should be welcome. People who look different or think differently than you do should be loved. We should invest in people because they have intrinsic value, not because we think they can benefit us. It's one thing to say that every person is important, but the question is, do our lives actually bear that out or not?

The third command Paul gives is to not think we know it all! Most of us have known people who come across as know-it-alls. Sometimes we come across that way ourselves. This often comes from a place of insecurity—a desire for people to see you as valuable and important. But I also often try to remind myself that if you have to tell people how smart you are...you aren't!

Paul isn't saying we should feign ignorance about things we know, but that every person can teach us something, if we're willing to learn from them. Sometimes we imagine that the person who hasn't been a believer for as long as we have, or doesn't have the education or experience that we do, or who is younger than us should simply sit back and listen to us, because we have much we can teach them. And that may be true! But if we are truly wise, we will recognize we can learn from them as well. We often miss out on opportunities to learn and grow because we are more concerned with showing how smart and important we are. Paul tells us to get over ourselves, and instead see the value, wisdom, and knowledge of those around us.

Conclusion

Like last week's passage, our passage this morning reads like a bulleted list of things we are supposed to. But remember what Paul is doing. He is showing us the effect of

genuine faith on our lives. If the faith we claim to have doesn't impact the way we live, then we are not truly following the Lord. Paul wants us to think deeply about what it means to put our faith into practice. One of the chief ways it should affect us is that it should change the way we treat people. The primary obstacle for us treating people the way we should is our preoccupation with ourselves. So, how do we learn to get over ourselves so that we can start seeing and loving others as we should?

First, we should study Jesus' example. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, we ought to be attempting to model our lives after Him. So, it's a good idea for us to reflect on how He treated people. Jesus was patient with people. He welcomed people that everyone else seemed to avoid or ignore. He wasn't concerned with what people could give Him, but rather what they needed. Even as He was being crucified, Jesus prayed for those who were carrying out his execution—He asked the Lord to forgive them because they didn't know what they were doing. Jesus chose to extend forgiveness to people who didn't deserve it. He was concerned about how to benefit people, not about how to destroy them or get what He wanted from them. We should pay attention to how Jesus treated people and emulate His example.

Second, we should pray about these things. Prayer is an underutilized tool in the arsenal of most believers. But notice how Paul and Jesus tell us to deal with our enemies—we are to pray for them. Taking time to talk to the Lord about those who upset us can often be revealing. The Lord may help us understand where they are coming from, and help us to see their pain. He may help us to see our own selfishness and to address those flaws within us. And praying for our enemies has a funny way of helping us to see them as people rather than as obstacles to be overcome by any means necessary. Pray *for* (and not just about) the difficult people in your life, and you may find your perspective change, even if they stay the same.

Third, we need to take steps to get perspective. Solomon said that it is better to spend time at funerals than parties. His logic was that funerals remind us what is really important, while parties allow us to escape reality. Our problem is that we are self-centered. We tend to see the world only through how it affects us. So we need to be intentional about doing things that remind us that other people matter. We need to do things that help us to see beyond ourselves. Dedicate time to serving others. Make an effort to listen to people and enter into their experience, good, bad, or indifferent. When you encounter difficult people, try to understand what causes them to behave the way they do. Are they responding to pain in their past? Insecurity? Fear? Do they simply not know anything else? Trying to understand people takes time, and the more we work at it, the more we'll discover that our snap judgments usually aren't right. We must work to remind ourselves that the world is bigger than us.

Paul reminds us that people matter to God, so they should matter to us. Our natural tendency is to focus on ourselves. Like many of our natural instincts, however, God leads us in a different direction—a direction that sees the value of each person God created and treats them with the dignity and love we would desire for ourselves.

© September 1st, 2024 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Romans