

LESSON 10

They Honored Each Other

What does it mean to outdo one another in honor?

Let love be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another. Do not lack diligence in zeal; be fervent in the Spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer. Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.

— Romans 12:9–13

Introduction

Last week the hands of a poor church opened wider than anyone expected. The Macedonians, who had every reason to close the fist, instead reached into their poverty and gave beyond their means, because grace had taught them how. This week the same hands lift someone else. Honor is generosity in a different currency. The wallet is not always the test. Often the test is whether the brother next to you gets named, credited, deferred to, and raised up at the moments when raising him up will cost you something. Paul has been pacing the church through the New Testament's "one another" life for nine lessons, and this week names what holds it together.

The ESV reads, "Outdo one another in showing honor." The Christian Standard Bible renders the same verb "Take the lead in honoring one another." Both are faithful to the Greek. The competition is real, and so is the initiative. The hands of the church have welcomed, served, seized opportunities, humbled themselves, and given. The last beat of this movement is the one that holds the others together. Love takes the lead.

The Setting in Romans 12

Romans 12 turns on a single word. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship" (Romans 12:1). Eleven chapters of gospel exposition stand behind that "therefore." Justified by faith. Buried with Christ in baptism. No condemnation. The Spirit's witness with our spirit. The unbreakable love of God in Christ Jesus. All of it pours into the demand of the new chapter. Living sacrifice. Renewed minds. A body presented for use.

Paul then names the body of Christ itself and its varied gifts (Romans 12:3–8), the same picture 1 Peter 4 worked through. Verse 9 opens a cluster of short love commands that runs to the end of the chapter. Honor sits inside that cluster, surrounded on either side by other commands that share its tone. Love

without hypocrisy. Detest evil. Cling to good. *Take the lead in honoring one another.* The honor command is one beat in that sequence. Paul is not theorizing. He is pacing the body through what love does next.

The Roman World Paul Was Writing In

Honor and shame were the public currency of the first-century Mediterranean. Roman society ran on a patron-client system in which a patron of higher standing extended favors and protection to clients beneath him, and the clients returned loyalty and public praise. The whole arrangement was visible. Clients walked to a patron's house at dawn to greet him. They attended him on the way to the forum. They named him in speeches and stood by him in court. Honor (*timē*), the public weight of a person's name in the eyes of the city, was the prize.

That prize was finite. The honor budget did not grow. A man climbed the social ladder by stepping on another man, and shame was the social tax assessed against the loser of any given exchange. Senators and freedmen alike kept ledgers in their heads of who owed honor to whom and who had stolen it last. Into that culture Paul writes a verb of leadership applied to a downward motion. The Christians in Rome were to compete, and the competition was to *give* the honor away. The picture would have read as social nonsense in any banquet hall in the city. Paul writes it anyway, in the imperial capital, to a small body of Christians whose Lord had been publicly shamed on a Roman cross and crowned with glory by the only Judge whose verdict mattered.

The Verb That Tells the Story

The Greek behind "take the lead in honoring" is *proēgoumenoi*, a participle of the verb *proēgeomai*, which literally means "to go before" or "to lead the way." Translations split between two senses of it. The Christian Standard Bible, the New Living Translation, and the New Revised Standard Version read it as setting an example, moving first: "take the lead in honoring." The English Standard Version and the New International Version read it as esteeming more highly: "outdo one another in showing honor." The two senses cannot finally be separated. Whoever goes first in honor has already judged the other person worth honoring.

The verb's force is to move the Christian into motion before the brother or sister has done anything to require it. Honor in Paul's vocabulary is not a debt paid after the fact. It is a lead taken first.

The other Greek words in verse 10 tell us where this lead is taken. The love is *philadelphia*, family love, the affection of those who belong to the same household. The deeper word is *philostorgos*, devoted, tenderly attached, the natural bond of a parent for a child or a sibling for a sibling. Honor in Romans 12:10 does not grow in the soil of formal civility. It grows in the soil of family affection. The body is not honoring strangers. The body is honoring its own.

The Contest with the Rules Reversed

Paul is not shy about athletic and competitive language. He commands the Corinthians to "run in such a way to win the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24). He names his own life as a race he intends to finish (2

Timothy 4:7). In Romans 12:10, the competitive image returns, but the rules are reversed. The contest is real. The object is to lift the other man up.

Last week's math was affliction plus poverty plus joy plus grace, equaling a wealth of singlehearted giving. This week the arithmetic turns competitive. The harder a Christian runs to honor the brother, the more the brother is raised, and the body itself is raised with him. Rome's honor budget was finite. The church's honor budget is endless, because it does not come out of the giver's own capital. It comes from the grace of the Lord, and grace does not run out. Honor given is honor multiplied. The body that competes this way lifts every member.

What Honor Looks Like on the Ground

In Paul's usage, honor is public, concrete, and costly. It is not flattery, which is honor without truth, and not politeness, which is form without substance. Honor is the deliberate raising of another person where others can see it. It names a gift in front of the room. It credits the unseen worker. It defers at the door, at the table, and at the microphone. It refuses to diminish in private what it praises in public. It speaks the brother's name before speaking its own.

Paul gives the picture in a parallel passage.

The parts of the body that we think to be less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor... God has put the body together... so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other.

— 1 Corinthians 12:23–25

The body's instinct, when grace is doing its work, is to compensate. The weaker member is wrapped in greater honor. The unseen worker is named first. The new convert is set in a seat closer to the front than the old hand. The brother whose contribution is being measured too small is defended out loud. Honor in the body is corrective. It moves toward whoever is being overlooked. It is how the body protects against schism and how love refuses to be hypocritical.

When Honor Goes Missing

The absence of honor in a congregation is rarely loud, and that is what makes it dangerous. It shows up as the same gift overlooked when it comes from the same person, every time. You see it in the faithful work of the quiet hand, never named from the front. You hear it in public correction that lands without private love behind it. It is there when one brother talks over another in the foyer, takes credit that belonged to someone else, withholds the word that would have built the body up. None of it announces itself. It bruises slowly, and the body begins to limp without naming the injury.

Paul will not let the church drift here. He commands honor as a duty of love, because love without honor turns into the hypocrisy he warned against in verse 9. Where honor is absent, something deeper is wrong. Where honor is present, grace is at work. The corrective is not to make a campaign of it. The corrective is to start going first, today, with the brother nearest at hand.

The One Who Took the Lead

Wherever Christians go first in honor, they go second to Christ. He took the lead. Philippians 2 named the mind that refused to grasp. Second Corinthians 8 named the One who became poor to enrich us. This lesson takes that same descent one step further. The Lord who would not grasp at honor was the Lord most worthy of it, and toward us, who were worthy of none, he took the lead. He honored bankrupt sinners with his own life. He addressed us before we addressed him.

Romans 5:8 names the timing. "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Philippians 2:9–11 names what followed. God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The glory and honor he now wears were not seized. They were given by the Father after the descent. The order is the order Paul keeps writing. Down first, then up. Honor given first, then honor received. The Christian who goes first in honor toward a brother in the body is doing in the small picture what Christ did in the large one.

Looking to Jesus

The body learns honor by watching the One who gave it first.

Consider how he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well when no rabbi would have spoken to her, asked her for water, and entrusted her with the longest conversation about himself recorded in the Gospels (John 4:7–26). The town had written her off. The Lord wrote her back in.

Watch him call Levi the tax collector from his booth, address him by name, and sit down at his table with his friends. The Pharisees called the table a scandal. The Lord called it a banquet, and named the men around it as the very ones he had come to save (Mark 2:14–17).

Remember how he stopped in the road for blind Bartimaeus when the crowd was telling the man to be quiet. He asked the beggar what he wanted, treated the question seriously, and gave the answer at the cost of his own delay (Mark 10:46–52). The crowd wanted to walk on. The Lord refused to walk past.

Think of the woman who had bled for twelve years, an unclean woman who reached for him from behind in a pressing crowd, and whom he would not let slip away unnamed. "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Mark 5:34). He gave a woman the whole town treated as untouchable a place in the family.

See how he praised the faith of a Gentile centurion in front of his own people, refusing to keep the credit inside the household of Israel: "I have not found so great a faith in Israel" (Matthew 8:10). The honor was given publicly, where it would mean something.

Notice how he defended Mary at Bethany when the men in the room measured her gift in denarii: "She has done a noble thing for me" (Mark 14:6). He stood between a woman and the men who would have shamed her, and he named what she had done as beautiful.

He knelt at the feet of his disciples on the night he would be betrayed, took the towel and the basin, and washed feet that included the feet of the man who would sell him for thirty pieces of silver (John 13:3–

15). The master took the slave's task on purpose, so the body would remember what honor looked like with a towel in its hand.

Look at the way he turned to the thief beside him at Golgotha and gave a dying criminal a sentence that has carried through twenty centuries: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). He honored a man the world had finished with.

Consider how he sent the women from the empty tomb as the first witnesses of the resurrection, in a culture that would not credit a woman's testimony, and trusted the gospel itself to their voices first (Matthew 28:1–10). The Lord made the women the first preachers of the news that holds the church up.

The pattern is the Lord taking the lead in honor wherever he went. The body learns by watching him.

A Final Encouraging Word

This lesson closes the second movement of the study, and it is the right place for it to close. This part of our study has been the work of the hands. Welcome (Romans 15) honored the outsider with a seat at the table. Gifts (1 Peter 4) honored the Giver of every good gift by using what he gave. Opportunity (Galatians 6) honored the moment in front of the church by acting before it closed. Humility (Philippians 2) honored the Lord first by counting others as more significant. Generosity (2 Corinthians 8) honored the brother in need by opening the hand. Honor is the binding underneath the whole movement. Lift the binding out and the practices fall apart into religious performance. Keep the binding in and every practice serves the next.

The same binding is also the soil the next movement grows from. A church that has practiced honor can be willingly changed by Scripture in the weeks ahead, because no one is jockeying to be right (Acts 10). A church that has practiced honor can be eagerly taught from the text, because pride no longer blocks the ear (Acts 17). A church that has practiced honor can respect the leaders God has placed in the body, because the muscle of going first has already been trained (Hebrews 13). The movement that began with welcome closes with honor, and the movement that opens next opens on the ground honor has prepared.

Your congregation has probably been learning to go first in honor for years. Meals served quietly with a name on the card. Brothers and sisters credited from the front for work that no one would have seen otherwise. New members welcomed to chairs closer to the heart of the body than the back row. Public defense of a brother whose contribution was being measured too small. In each case someone went first, and the Lord's own lead was echoing through the body. The lesson asks for more of the same. Take the lead this week. Go first. The Lord who honored you when you deserved none of it will not run out of grace to fund the honor he is asking the church to give. To the glory of God.

For Discussion

1. Romans 12:10 sits inside a string of short love commands. What changes in how we read the honor command when we keep its neighbors in view, especially "let love be without hypocrisy" just before it?
2. The Greek verb behind "take the lead in honoring" carries both senses at once, going first and esteeming more highly. Which of the two pictures is harder for you in practice, and what does that suggest about where honor most needs to grow in you?
3. The Roman world treated honor as finite, a thing won by stepping on someone else. Paul writes the church into a competition that gives honor away. Where do you still feel the old math at work inside the body, and what does the gospel math look like in that same situation?
4. Honor in Paul's usage is public, concrete, and costly. Think of a specific time someone honored you in that way. What did it produce in you, and what might honor of that quality have produced in a brother or sister you can name from this past week?
5. The absence of honor in a congregation is usually quiet. What are the signs you have learned to watch for, in yourself first, and what is the first step a body takes when it notices the signs?
6. The Lord took the lead in honor toward us when we deserved none of it. How does keeping that picture in view shape the way you walk into the building next Sunday, and the way you treat the brother or sister you find sitting near you?

