

Good morning, everyone. How are you doing? Good to be with you this morning. Two weeks ago, we started a new series called, "Belonging." We're looking at the one another passages in Scripture and what it means to belong to the body of Christ – and the significance or benefit of belonging here at Fellowship. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, "34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Everyone in this world will know we are Jesus' disciples when they see our love for one another. The one another passages in the New Testament tell us how that love shows up in the day to day. Here are just a few examples of those passages:

Galatians 5:15: 15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. Starting next week when you arrive, you will notice all around the building our new "No Biting" signs to remind you to not bite each other so as not to consume one another. Those signs are going to help tremendously in children's ministry.

Ah, yes. This next one is one of my favorites. 1 Peter 5:14 14 Greet one another with the kiss of love or a holy kiss. Again, we have decided to take some action here. If you have ever been to a Mavericks game, you have probably seen the Kiss Cam – where they pan around the arena and land on a couple and wait for them to kiss. Next week during the time we ask you to stand up and greet one another – we will have our very first Kiss of Love Greeting Cam panning the room. Y'all be ready.

On a more serious note, here are a few of the other one anothers ():

- "...be at peace with one another." (Mark 9:50)
- "32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)
- "13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:13)
- "16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed... (James 5:16a)

Imagine walking into Fellowship for the first time to attend a worship gathering, a life group, a training experience, or serving on a service team and seeing that kind of love. Imagine if we were known for how we love one another every single day. Our goal in this series is to live these one anothers out and thereby impact every single person that belongs to Fellowship. We'll do that today by checking out two more one another passages and to do-so, we're going to look at one of my favorite stories in the Bible. Turn with me to Mark 2:1-12 (ESV).

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. 5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has

authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—¹¹“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.”¹² And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”

Leading up to this passage, Jesus has healed the sick, the diseased, and the demon-possessed. Because of that, people come from all over to get to Him hoping He'll heal them, too. They hear He is at home and quickly congregate there and as He is preaching, it says this, “And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men.”

At first glance, that might not seem like an important statement, but it is. In this culture, many Jewish people believed that any disease, illness, or deformity was the result of sin—it was punishment for your sin or the sin of your parents. This paralyzed man would have been considered unclean, untouchable, and unwelcome in the Jewish synagogue because of his sin. He was seen as weak, a liability, a burden – so much so that most people would want nothing to do with him.

Every day – someone has to bathe him, change his clothes, clean his mat, feed him, and carry him. This man – no matter the culture – was a burden. And yet, there are these four men who wouldn't let his weakness, his being unclean, his neediness, get in the way of him belonging. They wouldn't let his paralysis prevent them from welcoming him with open arms into their fold.

John Ortberg says this, “You should know that for the man in this story the development of these friendships did not happen accidentally. Because of his physical condition, the deck was stacked against friendships emerging here at all...in the face of formidable obstacles —social stigma, inconvenience, financial pressure, a high cost of time and energy—they chose to become friends.” And that brings us to our first one another this morning.

Romans 15:7 says, “⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” In the preceding passages, Paul has been talking to the church at Rome about their diet – not about the Atkins, Keto, gluten-free, or Whole 30 – but about whether or not it was proper to consume meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Those strong in their faith were imposing their beliefs on the weaker, younger, less mature Christians in Rome and so Paul's command to “welcome” or “accept” one another is really about the strong receiving anyone into the body. **It's about all being welcome.**

And so, here is what I want you to know today. **You are welcome here.** It doesn't matter who you are or what you came in with today, **you are welcome here.** You are accepted here. Quite literally, you belong here. It doesn't matter if you are considered strong in your faith, weak in your faith, doubting God's love, or if you're not sure you believe in God at all.. It doesn't matter if you walked in here hung-over after another weekend trying to numb your pain with your substance of choice. It doesn't matter if you came here knowing you are deceiving those closest to you. It doesn't matter that you walked in knowing this is the most sinful time of your life. It doesn't matter if your weakness or limitation is physical, spiritual, emotional, or all of the above. **YOU ARE WELCOME HERE.** We want you here. We welcome you here as Christ has welcomed us. You belong here. We welcome one another just as the four men in our story this morning welcomed each other – and more importantly – their paralyzed friend. His weakness doesn't get in the way of belonging to community. His paralysis doesn't hinder his movement into friendship. His limitations don't hold him back from the open-armed invitation these men give him. He is welcome with them. And you are welcome with us.

And because we are all welcome here, each of us bear the responsibility of making sure that anyone that walks through those doors feels welcome, too. Which is why you will not see the kiss cam next week because that's just creepy. If you are new here, we invite you to help us continue to make this a welcome place – to welcome others just as they are, so that they might belong here, and become who God has made them to become.

If you have been here for a while, can I just encourage you? You have made Fellowship that kind of place, already. Fellowship is a church that welcomes all. Over 10 years ago, Erin and I began a search for our home church together. She was already attending here before we were married, but we thought we'd check out other churches in the area. And you know – there are some great churches in Dallas! However, one of the reasons we chose Fellowship was because of the welcoming culture. Before we chose here, people that belonged to Fellowship chose us. Our first community group was made up of people that we hung out with while we were dating and we walked in life with those people for almost 6 years. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for making this the kind of place where weak and strong are welcomed in together.

Now, let's get back to our story to see the other one another for the morning. These men hear that Jesus is in town. Someone in the group says, "We have to get our friend in front of Jesus. Maybe Jesus can do something for him. Maybe Jesus can heal him." Imagine with me, these guys go to their friend. "Hey, we have an idea. We want to take you to Jesus. We think He can do something for you. We're going to load you up on this mat and we're going to carry you to Him."

And they begin their journey. Everyone grabs a corner and they go. They make stops along the way because someone is losing their grip or maybe their hands are cramping. Maybe he's coming off the holidays and gained a few pounds like yours truly and so their arms are getting tired. Doesn't matter. They'll do whatever it takes to get Him to Jesus. As they approach, they can see the crowd. The house is packed. People standing outside the house eager to catch a glimpse of Jesus – people hoping to be healed or to hear Jesus preaching for a moment – just longing to hear a Word that will give them hope, that will give them peace, that will give them joy, that will CHANGE THEIR LIVES.

They try to make their way through the crowd. But hey – we know how people can be, right? In 2004, some friends and I went to a concert. I am going to tell you who I went to see and assume this is a safe space. The opening band was Story of the Year, then there was POD, then a band called Hoobastank (what a terrible name for a band), and then the headliner – you ready for this? Linkin Park. My friends and I showed up hours before the concert to get a good seat in the general admission section. When we got to the arena, there was a line from the front door all the way to the street. When we got up to the top, we started to see that they were letting people line-up at the doors to get in and that's when we started chatting up one of the security guards – who after while says – "Hey guys, you see those doors with no one in front of them – those are going to be open too. Y'all go start a new line so you can get in first." So we did and then we devised a plan. One of us would go through security, block the entrance to the arena until the rest of us cleared and then sprint down to the front to reserve 4 seats so we could be as close to the bands as possible.

Now listen, if we were willing to block people from entering an arena so we could touch the hand of the lead singer of a band called Hoobastank – imagine what people are doing when they know a single touch from the hand of Jesus would provide them with a long-awaited miracle. There is no way this group of guys is getting someone on a mat through a crowd and in front of Jesus.

So, they come up with a plan. Houses during this time were usually a small, one-room structure with a flat roof. Access to the roof was by means of an outside stairway. The roof itself was made of wooden beams with thatch and compacted earth in order to shed the rain. They carry their friend around the bag, up the stairs to the top and begin digging through the roof. You can imagine, Jesus is teaching and pieces of dirt and wood start falling from the sealing and you know people are getting hit on the head or on the shoulder. And you also know, Jesus knows who is about to be right in front of Him. They've dug enough that now there's this big gaping hole in the ceiling and they lower him down to Jesus.

Now look at verse 5. "And when Jesus saw their faith..." Did you catch that? It's not the faith of the man that Jesus calls out. It's the faith of the four men peering through this gaping hole waiting to see what Jesus would do – four men who believed the best thing they could do with the friend they welcomed into their lives – the friend that's supposedly been punished for his or his parent's sins – the best thing they could do with their friend who is suffering from paralysis was to get him to Jesus. They were faith-filled and desperate to get their friend in front of the healer. They carried the load, his weakness, right to Jesus.

That brings us to our 2nd one another this morning. First is Romans 15:1-2. Here's what it says, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. ²Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." Now let's pop over to Galatians 6:1-2.

We carry one another to Jesus.

The Romans passage is referring to a weakness or immaturity in faith. In Galatians, the issue is sin. In both cases, we're called to gently and lovingly bear the weakness with one another. We welcome each other just as we are and when weakness shows up in our lives, the strong carry the weak to Jesus. You have probably heard the old saying, "I love you and accept you just as you are. But I love you too much to let you stay that way." That's how we feel here at Fellowship. Our goal, as brothers and sisters in Christ here, should be that way we love each other so much we want nothing more than to get each other in front of Jesus and let Him do what He does best – bring healing to our lives.

Look at verse 5 again. ⁵And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Religious leaders question Jesus in their hearts and Jesus says back to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? ¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."

The faith of the friend's gets proven, right. They knew healing would only take place if they got their friend in front of Jesus and they were desperate to do so. We all need friends like that. We need friends who, when we are struggling with any weakness, will stop at nothing to get us Jesus. We need friends who will carry us lying on a mat to the very feet of Jesus. We need friends who are more desperate for Jesus than we are. It's why welcoming one another is so important. Because the next person that you welcome here could be the friend with the strength to carry you on your mat to Jesus and the next person that walks in may be the weak that so desperately needs to be carried to Jesus.

How do we make this practical? How do live this out?

Feeling weak? Admit your weakness. Most of our weaknesses aren't as visible as the paralytic. You need to share it. Admit it to yourself. Admit it to the Lord. Admit it to someone close to you. "Human friendship, in which we bear one another's burdens, is part of the purpose of God for his people. So, we should not keep our burdens to ourselves, but rather seek a Christian friend who will help to bear them with us." – John Stott.

Ask for and allow others to help. It's not enough to say, "Here's my problem or weakness." Humbly ask those friends to help you and be as specific as possible. Tell those closest to you how they can grab a corner of the mat and carry you into the presence of the Lord. If you don't have friends to turn to, Fellowship offers help. If you look at our Training Experiences being offered right now – we have help in the form of Steps – a gospel-centered recovery program, a grief group, parenting, spiritual disciplines, and a few others.

Able to help carry the weak? Pray. If you know the issue, send a text or a note letting them know you're praying or a passage of Scripture around their situation. If you don't know the issue, ask "How can I pray for your soul – for spiritual and emotional healing?"

Meet a practical need. Don't wait for them to ask. Don't say, "Let me know if I can do anything." In moments of weakness – many of us won't know what we need. In 2006 and in 2014, I battled depression. The best thing people did for me was to just come and sit with me. Offer to listen to me. When Erin and I had some different struggles this year at home – friends sent meals, bought groceries, and offered to take care of our kids.

If someone confesses a weakness of sin – **speak forgiveness and life over them.** Restore them gently. Remind them of who Christ says they are.

If you don't know what your friends are struggling with – ask them.

This man in our story came into his friendships as a burden. He entered that house on that mat with and as a burden. But he left that house with and as a testimony. He came in through a roof and walked out carrying his mat, ready to share his story. He came – carried by His friends into the presence of Jesus and left able to walk on His own feet with the very men who brought him there.

In 2004, a man named Samson told his friends Mark and Carla McLanahan he was going to Nigeria to get married (**show pictures**). He returned shortly with his bride Priscilla who was quickly welcomed into the church. In 2004, tragedy struck when their daughter died in utero – forcing Priscilla to deliver a still-born child. In back-to-back years, they had two boys. A little over a year later, tragedy struck again in the form of a lung cancer diagnosis for Samson. Initially the cancer was thought to be treatable, but unfortunately it turned aggressive. In January 2008, Samson was hospitalized and stayed there for the next 3 months. During that time, their church rallied around them with their presence and even financially. People spent countless hours visiting them in the hospital, taking care of their young boys, and giving Priscilla time away. Samson once said, "That is more than love. It's a sacrifice." Samson, passed away in April of that year, leaving behind a beautiful wife and two little boys.

Priscilla moved to Oklahoma to get back on her feet and study nursing. She spent ten years there before moving back to Dallas and choosing to show back up at the same church that cared for her 10 years ago – Fellowship Bible Church Dallas (**show picture**).

I want you to hear a few words from Priscilla. In 2009 she said this, "While in the hospital - the love and outpour of the church was so overwhelming - I don't need to advertise Fellowship Bible Church Dallas. Even my African community is overwhelmed by the extension of love. They keep asking, "Who is this group of people?"

And just this week, she said this to me: "I want to say thank you to Fellowship. When someone is hurting, in my culture, we believe so much in prayer. But in my journey, I learned, you need more than prayer. You need presence, love, hope, and to be surrounded by people. I don't know what would have happened to me and my boys without Fellowship. I know Samson is grateful, too. Thank you for never leaving me alone. Thank you to Pastor Gary for telling me, "The sun will shine again." It has. My story is not complete without Fellowship. There are too many names to thank so I just want to thank the body of Christ at Fellowship.

At the end of our story this morning we're told that the result of this moments – God gets His glory. He did then and He does today.