

“So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” Those are the words of Paul in Romans 12:5, and we’ve spent the last several weeks talking about what that means and how we live that out through the commands called the one anothers.

We began with the command to love one another as Jesus has loved us. We can only do any of this because God first loved us, and we have to start with **love, that unconditional, self-giving, others-benefitting expression of our goodwill and affection**, because all the other one anothers find their motivation in it. Richard then taught us to welcome one another just as they are and bear one another’s burdens, the willingness to carry each other to Jesus to let him do his work.

And if we keep going, we could do this about 40 more weeks because that’s how many one another commands are left to cover. The problem is that we could very quickly lose the heart of these and simply start compiling a Christian to-do list. I do not believe that’s what God intends. So then are there any of these one anothers that further define who we are to one another and help us see what is needed to live them out. The answer is yes, and it’s found immediately after Paul tells us we belong to one another.

The argument of Romans 12 is this: Because of God’s mercy, we can offer our lives as a living sacrifice to God and be transformed to become more and more like Jesus and live out his will. We’re not alone in that. God has united the recipients of his mercy into a single body, made us members of one another, and gifted us to serve each other. He then goes on to say how we live in light of that relationship by giving thirteen quick commands, and today we will cover three. They are more than to-dos. They tell us who we are to each other and how to live in light of that reality.

[Romans 12:9-16] ⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

Paul begins again with the primacy of love. It is the circulatory system of the church and essential to all we do. But he expands upon that love in v10 when he tells us to love one another with a brotherly affection. That means **belonging proclaims we are family**. Our union is so intimate that the Holy Spirit led the writers of the New Testament to use family language 220 times to describe our relationship with one another. We are related by blood. Not our own, but by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Because of that, our relationship is to follow after the example of a loving family. The ESV says “love one another with brotherly affection” but most other translations say, “be devoted to one another in brotherly love.” We are to dedicate our lives to providing love, warmth, loyalty, advocacy, and the desire to see each other flourish.

This does not happen automatically or easily. Remember, we are prone to love only ourselves, so Paul tells us the posture we need to live this out. To lovingly devote ourselves like this, **belonging prioritizes the other.**

The second half of v10 says “Outdo one another in showing honor.” “Outdo” makes me think of two people insisting the other gets off the elevator first. “You first.” “No, please, you first.” “No, please, you first.” **This is a call to humility.** Humility is not thinking less of ourselves. Humility is thinking more of others. We love as family when we place one another before ourselves and dedicate ourselves to each other’s best.

I was reminded of this type of humble and loving devotion a couple of weeks ago. I returned to Florida to visit my stepmom and work on some estate stuff for my dad. Any time I work on that, I bring along this notebook. It’s not impressive to look at, but it is full of evidence of my dad’s loving devotion. He had a will, but this book is full of instructions on how to carry it out. Over my dad’s last couple of years, walking to the kitchen was a chore. And in his illness, he could have said, “They can figure it out.” But he didn’t. That makes this more than a book of instructions. It is a declaration of love and devotion that honored my stepmom and put her needs before his own. My dad and I went through it one last time last March and, as we did, I wasn’t thinking “Wow, dad’s really thought all this through.” I sat there thinking “I’m so grateful he is taking care of Noel and us in this way.”

We are the family of God, and God wants us to do what families do. Love. We do that by placing each other above ourselves. We do that by walking through the doors of our church dedicated to honoring one another. When we devote ourselves with the intent to honor, love will be the result.

Not only do we need the right posture to love, but we also need to be ready to protect. **Belonging pursues unity.** In v16 Paul says, “Live in harmony with one another.” I don’t know about you but, growing up, and leading a family now, it hasn’t always been a picture of harmony. And what happens in our family at home can happen in our family at church.

Paul uses two words common in the New Testament that get translated “harmony”, “unity”, or literally, “same mind”. Paul makes this point here because he knows a lack of harmony is the greatest threat to the Church. It’s not a lack of \$, it’s not persecution, it’s not the wrong Supreme Court Justice. It’s disunity. When your family at home is dysfunctional, it can’t do what it is meant to do, and a dysfunctional church family can’t either. Without unity we won’t be able to one another one another and we will fail in our mission of showing Jesus to the world. Just think about any public church split. They can no longer love one another because there is now a chasm between the two sides, and the world is left mocking or wondering because those Jesus-lovers can’t get along. This is so important that Jesus prayed about it before he went to the cross.

In John 13-17, Jesus is giving final instructions to his disciples. We looked at the beginning of this in week one of the series. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and then told them to love one another. He finished that time, just before he was arrested and crucified, with this prayer.

[John 17:20-23] ²⁰“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,

²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

Love and unity go hand-in-hand because without love it is impossible to stay unified and without unity it is impossible to love. If love is the church's circulatory system, disunity is the plaque that blocks its arteries. Unity is not a static, passive state of being for the church. It is the fruit of people giving loving devotion and honor to one another and pursuing reconciliation when unity is threatened. When we work to stay united in love, we honor one another in the way God has called us to and give a testimony to the world about who Jesus is and what he can do.

There is a big game later today and, invariably, someone from the winning team, when being interviewed, will say something like, "We won today because we came together as a family. We were dedicated to each other, we had each other's back, and we were committed to achieving our goal of winning a Super Bowl. But that only happened because we were together."

When we have the same mind about who we are in Christ, who we are to each other, and what our mission is, love will flourish, our belonging will be lived out, and the world will take notice.

As I think about my own journey from lukewarm Catholic accountant to Lead Pastor of this church, I know it couldn't have happened without the grace of God, but it also couldn't have happened without this people of God who loved me, prioritized me ahead of themselves, and devoted themselves to my flourishing. I am passionate about the church because I am the beneficiary of what it is meant to be and do, and I want all of us to experience that. These one anothers are more than to-dos. They are the substance of our relationship, and they are the aspiration of God's heart. God wants this to be a place where love abounds, a refuge where everyone is welcome just as they are, a gathering where we stand shoulder-to-shoulder to fulfill the mission God has us on, and a people who pick each other up when we're down and come together when we are divided. That's the kind of family we can be, that's the kind of family we are becoming, and that's the kind of family I want to invite you to commit to be a part of today.

As I announced last fall and mentioned several times since, today is the day we roll out Covenant Membership. It is the culmination of eighteen months of work, thought, and prayer between our elders, our staff, and some of our leaders. We call it membership because, while it's an imperfect word, it's probably the best. It is not intended to call to mind a gym or Costco membership. It expresses that we are members of the family God has assembled at Fellowship. But that word by itself is incomplete. Because our union is holy and sacred, our commitment to each other must be the same. That's why we are inviting you to make a covenant with one another today.

Covenant: a sacred bond between two parties whereby each party solemnly pledges to bless or serve the other party in some specified way.

Before we get into the covenant itself, I want to give you the heart of what it is and what it isn't. Some of you have been a member of a church where it was just a list of names while others of you have been a member where it is lorded over you and you are manipulated through. We have no interest in either of those options. Our prayer and intent is that Covenant Membership is a front door all of us can walk through to declare we want to belong and become.

A covenant, not a contract

A contract is self-preserving. It's intended to serve my interests, protect, limit liability, document what I get when I give, and it puts us on opposite sides of the table. A covenant is the very opposite. A covenant is others-promoting. It focuses on how I can serve the interests of the other, a responsibility I gladly take upon myself, and it puts us on the same side of the table because we are in this together.

Bonds, not shackles

It's been asked if this is a reaction to the challenges we had in 2019. The answer is no. I'm not looking to lock anyone in, and this won't be used to leverage you to give more or something like that. This is all about looking forward as a united community who acknowledges the sacred bond we have as God's people. This covenant is an act of beauty and grace that says I am here for you, I am devoted to your flourishing, and I am not going anywhere until God calls me elsewhere.

A family tree, not an attendance roster

This is not about creating a list of names we can put our hope in if it's growing. This is about creating an identifiable people who humble themselves and honor one another by making a public declaration that you want to belong to this family, that you want to become more like Jesus, and that it takes all of us to make that happen. Our covenant declares how we want to live and who we want to be. Over time, it will become a testimony to the generations of believers God raises up here. It is our spiritual 23andme report. A lot of you will read the covenant and think "I already do all of this". Awesome. This is your way to say so, not for you, not to prove it to me or our elders, but to humbly honor the person sitting next to you who will feel loved and be encouraged and inspired by your commitment. It also let's those not yet here see how we do family, how we are committed to one another, and what we are inviting them to belong to.

A challenge, not a checklist

This is not a bunch of to-dos that you must fulfill to qualify for membership and, if you don't, it will be taken away from you. This is a challenge to become more like Jesus. It is aspirational because we all have room to grow. It's also invitational because you can start wherever you are. Our discipleship is a journey of progress, not perfection. That makes our aim transformation, not participation. The goal is not to get you to just go do all the ministries of Fellowship. Our ministries are vital, but they are a means to an end, and that end is to be transformed, to become more and more like Jesus. We will go much further when we commit to do this together.

A next step, not a new initiative

This is not a new change. It is the culmination of all we have been working on over the last four years. It is the wrapper that goes around our new mission, vision, and values. We are calling each other to live out our God-given purpose in Christ every day. If you pause and consider how intimate that statement is, you'll see how valuable a formal commitment is as we begin to speak into each other's lives.

MY COVENANT WITH MY FELLOWSHIP FAMILY

Desiring to covenant with the body of Christ at Fellowship Dallas...

I DECLARE my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior and affirm the core beliefs of Fellowship Dallas and our mission of calling each other to live out our God-given purpose in Christ every day.

I ACCEPT the call to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ in becoming:
Consistent in pursuing a God-centered life as we get to know Him more and surrender our lives to Him.

Resistant to doing life on my own as we acknowledge our need for authentic relationships that remind us of our identity in Christ.

Persistent in designing a life of intentional investment as we learn to make more purposeful commitments and be boldly generous in the places God calls us.

Insistent on a legacy of exponential impact as we invest in the next generation, develop in our servant leadership, and draw others to Christ to build His Kingdom.

I WILL LIVE this out with my Fellowship family as I get to know others and let them get to know me. I will make every effort to maintain unity with others. I will come alongside others in times of spiritual, emotional, and physical need. I will accept biblical encouragement and calls to repentance and restoration. I will offer my time, spiritual gifts, and financial resources to build up this church body.

I CAN EXPECT early communication and invitations to give input; regular opportunities to assess my spiritual health and receive guidance toward next steps; leadership development opportunities; and environments where I can worship with the body, live in community, serve in my gifting, and be trained up to live out my God-given purpose.

There is tremendous spiritual value in making this commitment to one another, but it will only be as impactful as we make it. Signing this document won't do anything. BUT IMAGINE WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF WE ACTUALLY LIVE IT OUT! Your life will be changed, and through the practice of the one anothers, you will play a part in changing the lives of those around you. This is what we will become when we choose to belong.