

The Practice of Fellowship

Romans 12:3-21

Once upon a time, the animals decided they should do something meaningful to meet the problems of the new world. So they organized a school. They adopted a curriculum of running, climbing, flying, and swimming. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, all the animals took all the subjects.

The duck was excellent in swimming; in fact, better than his instructor, but made only passing grades in flying and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to drop swimming and stay after school to practice running causing his web feet to be badly worn, so that he became only average in swimming. But average was quite acceptable, so nobody worried about that – except the duck.

The rabbit started at the top of his class in running but developed a nervous twitch in his leg muscles because of so much make-up work in swimming.

The squirrel was excellent in climbing, but he encountered constant frustration in flying class because his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the treetop down. He developed “charley horses” from overexertion, and so only got a C in climbing and a D in running.

The eagle was a problem child and was severely disciplined for being a non-conformist. In climbing classes, he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there...

The lesson we learn from this story is a great example for the church in respect to our topic of fellowship, one that we draw to a close today. The lesson is to let ducks swim, rabbits run, squirrels climb and eagles fly – do what they do best.

The same goes with regard to spiritual gifts and our function within the body of Christ and how we are to treat one another. It’s all outlined for us in our passage today found in **Romans 12:3-21**.

Chapter 12 opens with two familiar verses describing both our consecration and transformation as we first give ourselves as an act of worship to

God with a desire to live holy and pleasing to Him. If we are consecrated to God, our desire will be a transformation in our mind/heart by doing God’s will rather than by being molded or conformed by the ideologies of the world.

Romans 12:1-2

If we are consecrated to God and transformed in our thinking by His Word, it stands to reason that it will impact our relationships in the body of Christ. They will be different, evident in our behavior toward others. It will be evident through the endowment of spiritual gifts given to each believer and used for the benefit of the body of Christ. It will be different in our engagement with one another through spiritual genuineness as we live out our faith. That’s what we see in the rest of the chapter as it lays out what the practice of fellowship looks like.

What Paul writes here is a good checklist for us to determine if we are really consecrated to and transformed by God. How we practice what Paul lays out in these verses is a great barometer of determining the degree and depth of fellowship in the body of Christ, His church. We see it in 4 ways.

The first way is in **verse 3** where Paul’s exhortation is to make an honest assessment.

I. MAKE AN HONEST ASSESSMENT – v. 3

Paul has been given grace by the Lord to tell the Romans the characteristics that will bring strong fellowship to their church. While he is writing to the church there, it is a warning to each individual to do a heart check.

An honest evaluation of our lives must include sin that may be lurking in the shadows.

I Corinthians 11:27-32

Paul addressed a concern in the church of Corinth because they were abusing the Lord’s Supper. If they approached communion with a right attitude, they would first make an honest assessment of their heart and confess any sin. If they honestly judged themselves, they wouldn’t fall under judgment, but if they didn’t, the Lord would discipline them for taking communion without first addressing their sin.

Psalm 139:23-24

In this passage, David asks the Lord to search his heart and reveal any sin so it could be addressed and confessed, leading the way to godly living.

In our text, Paul tells the church to consider if they have a right perspective about self regarding sin.

A. Have A Right Perspective About Self Regarding Sin

“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...”

The great thief of fellowship is pride. He'll bring it up again in our passage. Pride runs deep and we don't even know it. It's divisive and corrosive. Paul says we shouldn't have an overinflated view of ourselves. Such a view of ourselves is out of place for the Christian if there is to be unity in the body. Pride puffs us up so others will notice us. We become snobbish and elitist. Some might even believe that the church couldn't get along without me. It is human nature to overestimate our ability, our character, our gifts, our contribution and Paul says we aren't to think of ourselves too highly.

Professor William Kilpatrick wrote in his book Psychological Seduction, the Future of Modern Psychology that **“Extreme forms of mental illness are always extreme cases of self-absorption.”**

We have an overinflated opinion of ourselves. Read most employee self-evaluations and you will find that to be the case.

In a response to the false allegations that Christianity brought about the decline of the Roman Empire, Augustine defended the Christian faith in his book The City of God in which he wrote about two loves. We either love self and have contempt for God or we love God to the contempt of self. We either glorify self or God.

John Calvin wrote that man thinks he has a good reason to glorify himself and despise everyone else, and concluded that Scripture is the remedy for self-love. He then reminds us that who we are is completely from God.

In an article that George Barna wrote for Family Research Council in a recent issue of Faith, Family, Freedom, he cited that one of the reasons for the decline of Christianity among millennials is their focus on self. That generation has been described as the poster children for the narcissistic lifestyle. In other words, it's all about them.

When it comes to the sin of pride, Paul says we need to have a right perspective about this sin – not to think more highly about ourselves than we ought to. Which leads to the next point that we need to have a right perspective about self that is sobering.

B. Have A Right Perspective About Self That Is Sobering

“...but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.”

If there is a person aside from Christ who is a good example, it is Andrew.

We learn from the Gospels that he was a follower of John the Baptist – that is, until one day John made the announcement on seeing Jesus that He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. From that moment on, Andrew left John and began following Jesus and never looked back.

We also learn from Scripture that Andrew had a big brother, a rather outspoken, full of himself big brother, someone who was an impetuous, speak before you think, act first and ask questions later kind of guy. His name was Cephas. We know him better as Peter. Andrew knew the kind of person his brother was. He had grown up in his shadow and worked with him on the fishing boat. Here was Andrew's opportunity to make a name for himself. To put himself out there as the first disciple to follow Jesus, a chance to get out from under his brother's shadow. But that wasn't Andrew's temperament. It wasn't his nature. I think he was a humble guy, someone who didn't care about status or the opinions of others or who got the credit. One of the first things he did after joining up with Jesus was to go find his big brother and tell him about Christ and he brought Peter to Jesus. He was content with being behind the scenes because he

had a proper perspective of himself.

To have sober judgment means to have sound thinking or to think rightly about self. This kind of attitude opens the door to love and unity in the church. Sober thinking recognizes that who we are comes from Christ.

We need to have a right perspective about self that is sobering, one that keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves. Let's keep in mind from what Peter says (**I Peter 5:5-6**) that God gives grace to the humble, but he resists the proud. He may have been thinking about himself when he wrote that – remembering those times he thought a bit too much of himself when it came to never denying the Lord, or the other times when he put his foot in his mouth. I'm convinced he learned his lesson and had a right perspective of what he thought about himself. We need that as well. It comes from having a right perspective about self that is singular.

C. Have A Right Perspective About Self That Is Singular

“...Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

God, in His grace, gives faith to each believer in order to serve Him and others. We can't serve any other way. It must come from God. It underscores the fact that human pride is wrong because all natural abilities and spiritual gifts come from God. Because they come from Him, there can be no basis for us to have a superior, I'm better than you are, attitude. When we have a proper or singular view of ourselves, we will come to an honest assessment that it's all from God. Such humility leads to an awareness of the needs of others leading us to be involved in their lives which fosters unity.

Having a proper perspective of God will drive out a self-centered attitude. We will, as Paul told the Philippians, (**Philippians 2:3-4**) think of others and their needs. That brings us to **verses 4-8** where we notice a faithful application.

II. MAKE A FAITHFUL APPLICATION –

vv. 4-8

I trust you saw the value in the opening illustration of the animals, each with their own uniqueness. A duck can't fly like an eagle. A rabbit can't climb like a squirrel. An eagle can't swim like a duck. It's the same in the body of Christ. When we put our giftedness together, think of the things we can accomplish in the name and for the glory of God.

First of all, notice that we are given to each other.

A. We Are Given To Each Other – vv. 4-5

A football team made up of only quarterbacks would never win because they would all want to be in control.

A baseball team made up of only pitchers would never win because no one would be in the field to pick up the hits.

Paul said the same thing to the Corinthians, that we need each other. Let me refresh our memories.

I Corinthians 12:4-7, 14, 18-20, 27

Each of us has been given a spiritual gift to serve one another. Through the diversity of gifts, we benefit the body so that there is unity. These verses speak about our interdependence. But remember that even though there is within the body, people who have the same spiritual gift, it doesn't mean redundancy. Even though others may have the same spiritual gift as you, each person exercises their gift differently in the body of Christ.

And from what Paul just said about having an honest assessment of yourself, that goes for spiritual giftedness as well. One gift is not to be emphasized over another gift. Each gift is important because each gift has been given by God. We belong to one another.

Let me add one more crucial point because the opening illustration hints at it. How important it is that we shouldn't try to get people to serve outside their gift. It only brings frustration, division, and inadequate outcomes. The church is best served when we serve within our giftedness. Keep in mind that a servant's heart in using your gift first comes

from what we see in **verses 1-2** regarding a surrendered heart. If your heart isn't surrendered, you won't serve with a right attitude.

We are one body with many members that serve that one body. Scientists tell us that our DNA is estimated to contain instructions that if written out would fill 1,000 books of 600 pages each. That DNA works to create you, to benefit you. That's how the body of Christ operates. God has so uniquely designed the body of Christ with different gifts to operate for the benefit of the body. We are given to each other and secondly, we are gifted for each other.

B. We Are Gifted For Each Other – vv. 6-8

In these verses Paul lists seven serving gifts. Remember that our serving comes from a surrendered life. Jesus surrendered Himself to do the will of the Father and so we can read in **Mark 10:45** that He didn't come to be served, but to serve giving Himself as a ransom for many.

Let me just add that “**grace**” and “**gifts**” are the same root word meaning that they originate from the goodness of God, not by anything we can do or through any merit on our part to earn them. Think of them as one author noted that they are special gifts of grace, freely given by God to His people to meet the needs of the body. A way to determine the effectiveness of your spiritual gift is to see if the church is being built up.

1. The gift of prophesying

This is communicating God's message to strengthen, encourage and comfort (**I Corinthians 14:3**) so that others are in a right relationship with the truth conveyed in God's Word, truth that has already been revealed. The underlying intent is to exhort to obedience. This gift always proclaims the Word of God.

And notice how it is to be exercised – “**in proportion to his faith.**” Most likely it carries the same idea as **verse 3** where we read “**in accordance to the measure of his faith**” meaning that God gives us the power needed to use our gift.

John MacArthur points out an important truth that whom God sends, He equips to serve with divine gifts. He gives you what you need. If we don't have joy in serving; if we don't have enthusiasm when serving; if we don't have a proper view of those we are serving, most likely we are trying to exercise our spiritual gift in our own power rather than in the power God provides. Let me put it this way, while there is a specific gift of serving, every gift is in essence a serving gift as it's intended for the body.

2. The gift of serving

This is probably the most needed gift, because there are so many needs in the body of Christ. It is the word from which we get deacon. It's used in **Acts 6** where the Apostles request that 7 men be chosen who are full of the Spirit and wisdom to help people. The gift of serving has broad application. Driving someone to an appointment.

Fixing a meal.

Babysitting.

The possibilities are endless, and those with this gift are to look for opportunities to serve others in a beneficial way that demonstrates the love of Christ.

3. The gift of teaching

This can refer either to the act of teaching or to what is taught. Through the Holy Spirit, this person can interpret and understand God's Word and then communicate it in a way that exhorts others to action and active spiritual growth.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Let me emphasize though, that teaching is not limited to pastor/teachers only. Others in the body of Christ also have this gift.

4. The gift of encouragement or exhortation

This is another spiritual gift that is so needed in the body of Christ. It has the same root of the word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit as Comforter in **John 14:26**. This person advises, pleads, encourages, warns, strengthens, and comforts.

He is the person in **Galatians 6:1** who goes to the person caught in some sin and gently restores them. He is the person in **II Corinthians 1:3-4** who comes alongside and comforts the broken hearted.

He is the person in **Ephesians 4:15** who speaks the truth in love.

He is the person who is there to remind us that we don't have to fight our battles alone.

How often this gift is needed!

5. The gift of contributing or giving

We often think of this in terms of monetary giving and how we need that in the body of Christ, but it can also be any tangible contribution.

The gift of time

The gift of talent

The gift of tithe

Notice that it is to be exercised with generosity or liberality. In other words, don't be stingy. Paul tells us in **II Corinthians 9:6-7** that giving is like a farmer who sows and reaps. It should generously flow from the heart, not reluctantly or because we are forced. Instead, giving is to be done cheerfully. This kind of giving is sacrificial and in fact, that is how every gift is to be exercised – liberally, cheerfully, and sacrificially. Liberality means to do so with singlemindedness and open heartedness. It literally means to have an open hand.

6. The gift of leadership

This person is good at managing and administration.

The word literally means one who stands before.

This person is a guide, leading others to a common goal with excellence. In this case the goal has to do with leading the body of Christ.

This gift is to be done with diligence, attentiveness, carefulness. Such persistence requires effort. The person isn't to be lazy or do his work halfheartedly. Being diligent can also refer to haste vs. idleness or procrastination. Since this is a spiritual gift, his leadership is under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

7. The gift of mercy

This gift is demonstrated by caring for the sick, the poor and the elderly. They have a tender heart and are moved to do something about the need. They don't just tell someone to go be warmed and filled, they look for ways to show kindness to the needy. Notice that this gift is to be exercised cheerfully.

It's been said that people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

It's Jesus having compassion on those who came to Him with injuries and illness and disabilities.

It's the Good Samaritan who helped the guy who had been beaten to the point of death.

It's the Irpin Bible Seminary in Ukraine sheltering and providing food for refugees.

It's Forget Me Not Ministries doing the same in Romania.

Here is another gift so needed in the body of Christ.

When we are following God's Spirit, there will be a faithful application of these spiritual gifts because each gift is necessary for fellowship. They are given to each of us and gifted for each other. At Christmas or birthdays, we are given gifts that benefit us, but these spiritual gifts are given to us to benefit each other in the body of Christ.

The third thing I see in our passage is that when the body of Christ is functioning as God intended, the natural outcome is that we make a loving association. We see it in how we treat each other.

III. MAKE A LOVING ASSOCIATION –

vv. 9-16

We notice a loving association first in our practice.

A. We Notice It In Our Practice – vv. 9-13

Paul gives us a list of exhortations and commands, ways we are to relate to or how we treat one another in our attitudes and actions, our character and conduct. Let me add as well, that this is to be how we treat others whether they are saved or unsaved.

1. We are to have sincere love

This is God's love developed in us by the Holy Spirit. John asks a pointed question. **How can we say we love God if we hate our brother?**

The word sincere literally means without hypocrisy. **I Peter 1:22 “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.”**

Warren Wiersbe writes that some believers have enemies because they lack love.

This love is to be genuine. When Robyn puts on the grocery list to pick up vanilla for baking, she always makes sure it is pure vanilla not imitation vanilla.

I prefer real cheese to imitation cheese.

I prefer real potatoes to imitation potatoes.

I prefer real flavors to artificial flavors.

Our love is to be real, not artificial or an imitation.

According to **I Corinthians 13:13**, love is the greatest virtue. It is unselfish, self-giving, willful, sacrificial, forgiving, seeking the best for others. It is even at the core of how we exercise our spiritual gift as we seek to meet the need and consider the welfare of others.

2. We are to hate what is evil

Our culture has become soft on crime because the church has been soft on sin. We have tolerated it or excused it away or turned a blind eye to it. We are to abhor it. The word abhor means to shrink from it in disgust, to make us nauseated by it. We should be repelled by it. Let's first hate sin in our own lives and then in our culture. Let's weep over it. When we read the news and hear about some sin that someone committed, let's have broken hearts over it. Hate what is evil.

3. We are to cling to what is good

The word cling means to stick to like glue. Grab hold of what is good and don't let it go. It's the same idea God used in speaking of marriage in **Genesis 2:24** when the man is to leave father and mother and cleave or cling to his wife.

I Thessalonians 5:21-22 "Hold on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil."

We can't cling to what is good if we are not hating what is evil. When we hate what is evil, we must fill the void by clinging to what is good.

4. We are to be devoted to one another in brotherly love

That means we are to be loyal, devoted to, and faithful to each other. They say that blood is thicker than water and we have been united through the

blood of Christ that binds us together. Be committed to each other.

5. Honor one another above ourselves

It's the idea of putting others first.

6. We are to never lack in zeal

It means that we don't shrink back, be hesitant or lazy in how we exercise our gifts and in how we love and treat others.

7. We are to serve the Lord

We need to remember that everything we do, we are doing for the Lord in service to Him.

Colossians 3:23-24 "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

8. We are to be joyful in hope

This refers to persevering in trials even though we may not see what is ahead. We continue in faith.

Romans 5:2b-5

9. We are to be patient in affliction

Affliction refers to any trouble or distress and **James 1:2-4** reminds us that when we are joyfully patient in our trials, we will become spiritually mature.

10. We are to be faithful in prayer

11. We are to share with God's people in need

The word share here is koinonia or fellowship. The qualifier here is here is sharing with those in need.

12. We are to practice hospitality

This literally means to pursue friendliness with strangers.

B. We Notice It In Our Patience – vv. 14-15

1. We are to have patience with our enemies – v. 14

Paul is saying the same thing Jesus said in **Matthew 5:44** – "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In that passage Jesus continues by saying that is isn't anything to love those who love us in return, but it is quite a different matter to love those who don't love us. It's human

nature to want to retaliate in some way, but both Jesus and Paul teach a different approach, a better way, an unheard-of response – love your enemies. The Old Testament had the principle of an eye for an eye. But the New Testament takes a different approach and says don't get even, love them.

Think about how Jesus responded to His enemies. He offered a crown of life to the man who put the crown of thorns on His head.

He offered a robe of righteousness to the man who mocked Him by putting on the purple robe.

He offered eternal life to the men who nailed Him to the cross in order to take His life.

Do we love our enemies? Do we love them by blessing them? To bless them means to treat them as friends.

Paul speaks about our patience with our enemies in **v. 14** and then our patience with everyone in **v. 15**.

2. We are to have patience with everyone – v. 15

We are told to empathize with others. When they rejoice, be glad with them. When they are sad, mourn with them. Live with them in the moment.

A pastor friend once shared with me about two visits he made at the hospital in one day. One visit was with a couple who had experienced the joy of their first child. He rejoiced them. He then went up one floor to visit another couple who had just experienced a miscarriage and were told by the doctor that they would not be able to have any children. He wept with them.

Be patient with others as you enter into their lives and empathize with them.

C. We Notice It In Our Partnership – v. 16

This is a call to unity, a call to fellowship, a call to oneness. Harmony will be absent where there is no humility. Paul says the same thing James does in that we are not to show favoritism. Pride puts people in different categories and says I like you, I'll hang out with you, but not you. It's something Paul had to address with the Corinthian church when it came to which teacher they preferred or how they were treating certain people during

communion. Instead, we are called to live in harmony through humility. Humility is blind to status and color and ethnicity and so on. It sees people the same and lovingly associates with them.

Let me close with one final point from **verses 17-21** where we make an equal attention.

IV. MAKE AN EQUAL ACTION – vv. 17-21

A. Our Actions Are To Be Peaceful – vv. 17-19

B. Our Actions Are To Be Pleasing – vv. 20-21

Similar to what he just said, Paul tells us not to seek revenge but let God, the perfect judge, mete out the punishment on those who deserve it. Instead, we are to do everything in our power to pursue peace, to be reconciled. But that isn't always possible.

Sometimes the other person may not want to reciprocate and end the feud. They want to remain angry and unforgiving. Our response is still to be the same – seek peace at whatever cost. Now that doesn't mean we compromise our convictions for the sake of peace, but instead seek to love them by and through the grace of God. Forgive them in the same way even though they may not want to. Paul says we aren't to be the reason there isn't peace. Do what you can to make it happen.

Paul then quotes from the Old Testament giving an illustration. In those days, when a person was penitent for doing something wrong, they would walk around with a basin of hot coals on their head. It was a way of expressing their guilt, shame, and repentance. Paul says when we treat them with love, kindness, and forgiveness we shame them for their unwillingness to do the same. He adds that the way we overcome evil isn't with the same attitude or actions of retaliation but instead we overcome evil with good. The good we do softens their heart.

The list of attitudes and actions Paul gives are a good assessment tool to evaluate both the depth and degree of our fellowship with one another in the body of Christ. Fellowship is a discipline the Christian must pursue – for the good of one another and the glory of God. Paul has show us the practice of fellowship.