

How Much Do You Value God's Church

Romans 12:9-12

Pastor Larry Nelson, June 11, 2017

As I begin this morning, on behalf of Marian and myself, I want to express our deep and heartfelt gratitude for the love and acceptance that you have shared with us, over these last nine months. And although I am very sorry that Pastor Jeremy cannot be with us today, I was honored to accept his invitation to share the Word of God with you this morning. As one who has been in pastoral ministry for almost 40 years, I want to say publicly that I could not be more pleased with the gifted man God has sent to shepherd this flock. Pastor Jeremy brings an outstanding doctrinal and practical understanding of Scripture, and whether you are a seasoned saint, or you are new to the faith, I really appreciate the way in which he puts the cookies down on the lower shelves, where we can all get to them.

Not long ago, I remember Pastor saying that just about everything here at Grace Fellowship is “new.” He and Katie are new to Canada, new to parenting, new to this church, which is also new. The ink on our church documents is barely dry, and we are in the process of preparing to receive new members. Although some of you have known one another for years, there are new visitors coming almost every week. And for many of you, these last months have brought a new “freedom” in Christ, and a joyous Christian liberty, that you never knew was even possible. I think it is fair to say that God is doing the “... exceeding abundantly beyond all that we” could “ask or think ...” (Ephesians 3:20).

Some have referred to this time at Grace Fellowship as “The Honeymoon Period”, to which I say, “May it never end!” Any Christian, who has been married for more than about 20 minutes, will agree that marriage is wonderful – but it is also work! God brings a Christian husband and wife together, who love the Lord and who love each other, but unfortunately they are both still both sinners. And as their family grows, they produce more sinners. But fortunately for us all, our Lord has also provided the indwelling Holy Spirit and His written Word, so that we can, by His grace, live God-honoring lives together, where we learn to love Him and each other more and more as the years go by. This is the moment-by-moment miracle of the Holy Spirit-empowered Christian life.

As a Biblical counselor, I have ministered to some very troubled marriages, who lament that, “The honeymoon was over years ago!” This absolutely breaks my heart, because even though as Christians we still sin, and yes, we still have selfish conflicts from time-to-time, God forbid that the honeymoon would ever be over, in our marriages, or in our church! Ephesians 4:1-3:

1 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In other words, all healthy Christian relationships require Bible-led, Holy Spirit-empowered

labor!

Although having a solid doctrinal foundation and practical understanding of Scripture is essential to the spiritual vitality of any marriage or church, one of the most accurate ways to determine the health of any family or congregation is by examining how we treat one another.

Please allow me to ask you a very personal question this morning, “How much do you value the people in this congregation?”

Do you remember the frightening statistic that Pastor Jeremy shared with us awhile back, where he stated that about 80% of North American young people, who are being raised in church, leave it when they become adults? And although there may be many reasons for this, I think it is fair to say that they no longer value the family or church they were raised in. At best, life is complicated, but when children are raised in homes where their Christian parents argue and fight, and the people in the church don't get along either, many of them can't wait to get out on their own, so that they can put all of this painful conflict behind them.

So, let me ask again, “How much do you value the people in this congregation?”

While you are thinking about that, please open your Bibles this morning to Romans chapter 12, where Paul gives many practical exhortations, which are designed to show us what valuing those in Christ's church is actually supposed to look like. Romans 12:9-12:

9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,

So as we consider the value of God's forever family, if you are taking notes, the first of my four points this morning is that: value is proven by our devotion to God and others: Romans 12:9: “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.”

Although we could spend our entire time this morning on just this one verse, suffice it to say that our love for God and others needs to be genuine, where we learn to love what God loves, and hate what He hates! For one thing, God loves His church, and therefore He hates anything that will tarnish or damage it.

“Let love be without hypocrisy ...” - Mom & Dad, in case you haven't noticed it yet, children can smell hypocrisy a mile away. So if you eat “roast pastor” for lunch, then you should not be surprised when your children grow up not respecting him or you. Simply put, if the pastor, or anyone else in the church sins, Matthew 18:15-17, gives Christians a very clear step-by-step pathway to follow, where we are commanded to talk *to* a sinning brother, not *about* him. And if that talk must happen, Galatians 6:1 commands that it must be done in love, with a heart of restoration, not self-righteous condemnation.

Now let's quickly move on to the first phrase of verse 10: Romans 12:10a "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love ...". "Brotherly love" is made up of two Greek words *philos* and *adelphos*, which when you put them together you get *philadelphia*. And as you know, the other Greek word that is used in Scripture for love is *agapao*, which means, "to give of yourself unselfishly, without any expectation of return." We should note here that agape love and brotherly love are by no means contradictory, but rather they complement one another. 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10: "9 Now as to the love of the brethren (*philadelphia*), you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love (*agapao*) one another; 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren ... But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,"

As we follow in our Savior's footsteps, all Christians know intuitively that we should have a strong, and unselfish affection and loyalty to one another in the body of Christ. In fact, this is so important to the Christian life that the Apostle John used love as an absolute test for the genuineness of a person's faith. 1 John 3:10: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love (*agapao*) his brother."

This love is so important that Paul warned us, in 1 Corinthians 11:28-32, that we should not even partake of the Lord's Supper without first examining ourselves with regards to our love for God and our love for one another.

Christian "love" is not primarily an emotion, or just something that we do when we are in the mood, or when it is easy. Paul's command in our text is that we must be "devoted" to it, which means that we must work at it throughout every day. And again he told us just what this looks like in Ephesians 4:2-3: "2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is what it looks like to be "devoted to one another in brotherly love ...", humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul continues this theme of "brotherly love" in his next phrase of Romans 12:10b, where he says, "... give preference to one another in honor;" Which brings us to our next point: value is proven by our giving preference to others. Paul is harkening back a few verses to Romans 12:3, where he says "... I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think ...".

To "give preference to one another in honor," means that we are to put others' needs and feelings before our own. Philippians 2:4: "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Children learn to honor parents, as they live with the example of parents who prefer and honor the Lord, and each other.

Now as we move on to the verse 11, and the third point our outline, which tells us that: value is proven by the way we work for others. Romans 12:11 "not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;"

In this case, Paul is exhorting the church to not become lazy or complacent in our service for the Lord, or to others. Because we live in cursed bodies and in a cursed world, it is easy to get lazy, even in the Lord's work. Here is a very important truth: If you are a Christian, then you are a full-time Christian, and therefore, you are in full-time Christian work for the Lord ... If you are a Christian, then you are a full-time Christian, and therefore, you are in full-time Christian work for the Lord. So as devoted slaves of Christ, we need to remember that there is no such thing as "secular work" for God's people. 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

To "glorify God" literally means to make Him large. Just like a telescope enables us to see the moon more clearly, the way we as Christians work, will enable others to see God working in and through our lives more clearly. Ephesians 6:5-8:

5 Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; 6 not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

Whether you are serving the Lord by working at home with the your children, or you labor for pay in the outside world, no one should ever need to look over our shoulder to make sure that we are working. As often as I have opportunity, I love to encourage those who are entering the workforce with the advice that was given to me by a godly man in my church almost 50 years ago. He said, "Larry, make it your business to make sure that your employer makes an honest profit every day, because of your presence on the job!" So whether you are working for a Christian boss or an unbeliever, this rule still applies, "make it your business to make sure that your employer makes an honest profit every day, because of your presence on the job!"

Galatians 6:10: "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." In 1 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul told the church at Thessalonica that he never ceased giving thanks because of their "... work of faith and labor of love ..." Simply put, they had a faith that worked, and a love that labored!

He goes on, in our Romans 12:11 text, exhorting us to be "fervent in spirit" which has nothing to do with fanaticism, but instead, he is speaking of resolve and persistency, not just good intentions. Here's a question: What do you have to do in order to grow weeds in this country? Absolutely nothing! But if you want a weed-free yard, then you have to be "fervent in spirit," meaning that you have to be persistent at pulling them. And so it is, when it comes to our work for the Lord. Allow me to give you a Nelsonism: "God is not nearly as concerned with your ability, as He is with your availability and stickability. I call this "stick-to-it-ive-ness." Galatians 6:9: "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary." As Christians, once we know what to do, then we must do it, and keep on doing it, with all our heart.

The secular world defines “success” by measured accomplishment, but God measures success by fervent faithfulness to His will, regardless of the apparent outcomes. Most of us know missionaries who sometimes labor for years in hard places, with very little to show for it. Although the world would call them “failures”, we all need to remember that God judges the success of His servants by diligent, fervent, faithfulness - nothing more! Colossians 3:23-24: “23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

Romans 12 describes the Christian’s service in three ways. In verse 1, Paul speaks of the Christian’s individual and personal “service of worship.” In verse 7, he speaks of the spiritual gift of practical “service” to fellow Christians. And in verse 11, he speaks of “serving the Lord” as seen in the slave/Master relationship. However, in each usage, we must remember that if our service is to be of eternal quality, then, whatever we do must be founded in the love, and devotion of our personal relationship with Christ. Does the Bible speak about Christian’s duty to our Lord? Absolutely! But duty without devotion is just a hollow, going through the joyless motions of religion, without the reality of the Holy Spirit’s empowering us to obey and honor God. Speaking again of our children, who can smell hypocrisy a mile away, if there is not love and devotion in our Christian service, then we should not be surprised when the kids want no part of our faith when they grow up and leave home!

The church at Ephesus was the most well taught and influential church in all of Asia Minor. Paul planted this church, and taught there for two years, where he later appointed Timothy as their pastor. And yet, listen to Christ’s letter of sober warning to this once great church. Revelation 2:2-5:

2 I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent.

Many Christians misquote this passage, saying that the church at Ephesus “lost their first love.” But Jesus made it clear that they did not lose it, they left it, and this certainly did not happen overnight. But over time, their white-hot love, devotion, and fervency for Christ, had degenerated into a tiresome religious duty. So in mercy, He called them to repent and return to their first love, but they did not, and sadly, no church exists there today. As we think about Christ’s final words to the church at Ephesus, I believe that it is the responsibility of every Christian to personally and regularly examine our own motives behind what we do, so that our Holy Spirit-empowered diligent and fervent service will continue to give glory and honor to God, as we seek to bless others, both inside and outside the church.

Now let’s move on to Romans 12:12, and point number four, where we will see that: value is

proven by hope, perseverance, and prayer for others: Romans 12:12 “rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,”

Any Christian who seeks to honor God, and love His church by living the Holy Spirit-controlled life of Romans 12:1-2, is going to suffer some measure of discouragement and opposition. 1 Timothy 3:12: “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” And so Paul urges all of us to stand together, as we rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, and pray for one another.

Please note here that Paul is not commanding Christians to rejoice in our circumstances. However, he is commanding us to rejoice in God who is Lord over our circumstances, as He orchestrates them according to His divine will and purpose, and that to the good of every believer.

God is sovereign over everything that comes into the life of each Christian, and one of the bedrock cornerstones of the Christian faith is found in Romans 8:28-29: “28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son ...”.

Because God is absolutely sovereign in every aspect of our lives, we are called to live lives that are known for “rejoicing in hope.” When it comes to hoping in God, we must trust Him with the absolute assurance, that He is going to work all these difficult circumstances out for our good, godliness, and His glory. 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”

As I said earlier, the world judges success by measuring our accomplishments. But God measures success by our faithfulness to His revealed will.

Please take a moment to notice the word order of Romans 12:12. “Rejoicing in hope,” is what enables the Christian to be “persevering in tribulation.” “Tribulation” comes in many forms, sizes, and intensities. James 1:2-4:

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The point of this text is that we are being exhorted to respond properly to all of the trials and tribulations of life. Again, Scripture does not command us to rejoice in them. Instead, we are commanded to rejoice in God, who is sovereign over them. We are to rejoice in faith for what God is going to teach us, and how He is going to use us in the lives of others. Romans 5:2-5:

2 ... we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance,

proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

In order for Christians to “exult in our tribulations,” we must look to God with the eye of faith, trusting that He will never bring anything that is too hard for us to bear, as long as we go through it in His strength. Clearly, none of us prays as much as we should. But there is nothing like the trials and tribulations of life to drive us to our knees. So Paul exhorts every Christian in Romans 12:12 to be “... devoted to prayer.”

“Devoted” is the Greek word *proskartereo*, which means “to be strong, steadfast, and unwavering.” This is what Paul meant when he exhorted the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Simply put, every Christian should be devoted to a healthy prayer life, where we talk to God throughout the day about everything.

Please allow me to make a suggestion here: Regardless of how you were raised, I encourage parents today not to use canned, memorized prayers with your children. “Now I lay me down to sleep ...”. Teach them by your example how to pray from their hearts, as they learn to cast all their anxieties on Him, because He cares for His own (1 Peter 5:7). Teach them by your example that there is no problem or concern that is either too big or too small for them to talk to God about.

And we all need to remember that being devoted to prayer is not just bringing our wants and needs to the Lord. Devotion in prayer includes worship, praise, adoration, and faith-filled thanksgiving. We should be as devoted to prayer, even as our bodies are devoted to breathing. And as we do, we will learn to focus on the needs of others, not just our own. Sincere praying for others, is just one of the many ways that we show others in God’s family that they are valuable to us.

These have been very hard months for Marian and me, as she just completed her 22nd surgery, five of which have been for the purpose of fusing large portions of her spine. Her recovery has mostly been three steps forward and two steps back, and it will be at least a year before we will know how much healing she will actually experience. She suffers better than anyone I have ever known, and when you ask her, “How are you doing?” for many years her answer has always been, “It is well with my soul!” What a great encouragement it has been for us to know that God’s people are praying with us and for us, even as we are trusting Him to care for us and use us during these difficult times.

For those of you who have not heard, next Sunday will be our last time to worship with you for a while. Pastor Keon Lum of the Stone Church in Vancouver is taking a six-month sabbatical, and I have been asked to provide pastoral care and pulpit supply. Although Grace Fellowship is our home church, we are just going to be away for a while, so please be “devoted to prayer” on our behalf as we travel back and forth.

Over the years, people have told me that my sermons are kind of like trying to drink from fire

hydrant, so for those of you who would like to study this message again, please drop an email to me at, askpastornelson@gmail.com, and I'll send you a PDF file.

I want to close by saying that none of us can know for sure how our children will turn out, and whether or not any local church will continue on into the next generation. But these are some of the values which, by the grace and power of God, must be lived out in the church and in our homes, if our faith is to be seen as being attractive and genuine to our children.

Earlier, I asked you: "How much do you value the people in this congregation?" Value is proven by our devotion to God and others. Value is proven by our giving preference to others. Value is proven by the way we work for others. Value is proven by our hope, perseverance, and prayer for others. May God bless your faithfulness.