

“A Billion Friends and Counting”

Romans 12:9-18

Series: God is Closer Than You Think Week 5 People

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February 2, 2025

A Texas dad thought his family was trying to get rid of him. After driving all night on a family vacation, they stopped to fill up the tank in Tennessee. But after dad paid for the gas, he came out to find his van was gone. Before the stop another family member offered to drive so dad could sleep in the back. Thinking he was already asleep in the van, they closed the doors and took off.

Now here's where it gets interesting. The dad calls his own cell phone in the van. Nobody answers it. He calls the phone of his family members. Nobody answers. How did he finally reach them? He borrowed a computer at a local motel and reached his family through Facebook. Can you imagine scrolling through your newsfeed and discovering an SOS from your dad? How far did they go before they learned he was missing? 100 miles. Well the family did turn around and pick up dad. Now the question is: when the kids saw their dad stranded on Facebook, did they “like” it? ¹

Facebook now has 3.07 billion users and counting. On average, a user spends approximately 30.9 minutes on Facebook. It's more time than people spend reading (19 minutes); participating in sports or exercise (17 minutes); or social events (4 minutes).² In one respect, this is the most interconnected generation in history. We can reach out and touch people anywhere on the globe 24/7/365. We can build an endless list of friends. Facebook can be a tool to spark revolutions, expose corruption, form support groups, and reconnect long separated family and friends. Yet Facebook, like the internet, is a mirror of us – the good, the bad and the ugly. It can also be a place where we post political rants, cyberbully, and commit crimes. Sure I can send messages to thousands around the planet but to do so I wind up staring at a screen by myself. That's one reason why there is so much loneliness. Facebook is not a substitute for face-to-face relationships. We need real faces that laugh with us and cry with us, real arms and hands that hold us, hug us and help us, real minds and hearts and voices that comfort us and correct us, hear us and hold us accountable. Friendships on a flat screen simply fall flat.

Like Facebook there is another network that has a billion friends and counting. It's called the Church. This week in *God is Closer Than You Think* we discover how God speaks to us through People. You have heard me say repeatedly the Church is not a building, a day of the week, a pastor or an institution. Like Facebook, the Church is a

¹ WMC-TV, "Kids leave dad at gas station, realize mistake 100 miles away," (6-25-13).

² James B Stewart, *Facebook Has 50 Minutes of Your Time Each Day. It Wants More*. New York Times, May 5, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/business/facebook-bends-the-rules-of-audience-engagement-to-its-advantage.html?_r=0

network of people – people who are followers of Jesus. Like Facebook this network is worldwide and growing. Like Facebook, the Church is a movement and a revolution. Like Facebook, the Church is composed of countless connections and groups who speak every language on earth. Like Facebook the Church has been used by its members to accomplish great good and, sadly, great evil. Unlike Facebook, though, this network is united not by the power of the internet but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today, I hear people say, “I don’t need organized religion. I don’t need to go to a building and worship God. I don’t need the institutional church.” And they are right. Nobody needs that. But all of us need people who will love us, laugh with us, cry with us, help us, hold us, hug us, suffer with us and even lay down their lives for us. And we all need a God who will do the same. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome they didn’t have a building, an institution and nobody could accuse them of being organized.

So what did they have? Jesus and one another. In those days, the Church did not have small groups. The Church *was* small groups. The church in Rome met in Priscilla and Aquila’s house, in Aristobulus’ house, in Narcissus’ house and other houses. That’s all they had. That’s all they needed. They didn’t have Facebook. It was just face-to-face real raw relationships. They had to love each other faults and all. His love and their love sustained them through poverty, persecution and prison. When they gathered together, Jesus was with them. When they served, God showed up. Paul even says to the troublesome Corinthian Christians, if an unbeliever comes to your worship services, ...he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

1 Corinthians 14:25

What do you and I need to do so, outsiders see God is really among us?

In Romans 12, Paul lists practical suggestions for how to let God’s presence flow through us. The first is **Love Honestly**. Paul writes, “Love must be genuine.” (v. 9) What he literally writes is: Love is not hypocritical. *Hypocrite* is a Greek word for an actor who pretends to be someone else. That’s fine in a play. It’s wrong in relationships.

The profile we post on Facebook is a carefully crafted image of what we want the world to see. I can pretend to be someone I’m not. So long as there is a computer between me and you, you’ll never know the real me with all my faults and failings. The Greek word for love in this passage is *agape*. It is a unique word that appears rarely outside the Bible. *Agape* is not primarily a feeling or emotion. It is not romantic or sentimental. Love is a verb, an action. It is giving yourself to others, even to your enemies. It is not superficial, it is not phony, it is not counterfeit. This is tough love, the toughest love of all. And it is only possible if God pours His *agape* love into you through the Holy Spirit. In order to love honestly, ask yourself these questions:

Do I keep secrets or hide something from someone?

Do I need to seek or give forgiveness?

Do I need to confront someone who is harming themselves or others?

Do I call it love but it’s really control?

Do I love someone to their face but talk about them behind their back?

Do I hold judgments or prejudices against a person or group of persons?
Do I love someone enough to stop enabling them?
Do I love and serve someone even if they don't thank me or love me back?

Secrecy kills. Honesty heals. Don't harbor secrets. Confess them. Then love honestly.

Next, **Love One Another**. Jesus said,
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
John 13:35

Love must flow in both directions. There are 59 "one another" passages in the New Testament. There are three here in Romans 12: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:10,16). These "one another" verses remind us love is always a two way street.

This requires you to open yourself up to others. That's risky. While wallpapering a bathroom, I discovered this wonderful substance called sizing. If you paint it on the walls first, the paper is easier to hang. When it's time to strip the wallpaper, it peels off leaving little paper behind. Sizing seals shut the wallboard. Sizing is great for wallpaper. But the bond between Christians must be stronger and closer. So close, in fact, that Paul tells us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Your joy and pain become mine and mine yours. You can't tear us apart without damaging both of us.

Let's not let the culture divide us. In this contentious climate, it is easy for believers, progressive and conservative, to express their views on Facebook. Sometimes these passionate feelings are shared here. I encourage you to keep speaking the Truth as you see it. I do hope you base that Truth on Scripture. But above all, when you speak your truth, let's follow Paul's direction.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. Ephesians 4:15

To speak the Truth with love means you do not compel, coerce, or control others to see the Truth as you see it. Woodside is a rare oasis of unity. In a swirling sea of division, this is an island of cooperation. Even with the real and passionate difference disciples hold on various issues, we are able to love one another and work together to accomplish amazing things for the Lord. Last month Woodside was a warm, safe home for our homeless neighbors on 27 of 31 bitter, frigid nights. Sometimes more than 60 cots were filled. Over the month, our kitchen team served 1,120 meals. This a beautiful community. But it is also extremely fragile. It is a tenuous balancing act. It would take very little for a spark to ignite the divisions in here we see out there. What's the key that keeps us together? Love. When you speak the Truth, speak it with love.

One of the best ways I know to love one another, especially those who are different than you, is to get close to them in a Growth Group. We have 40 Growth Groups some of which are doing the Alpha Course. There is a group for everyone's schedule. Nobody can use the excuse there is not a group for you. The only reason to

avoid a group is you're afraid to be in a group. You may think, "Those people are weird, they'll ask me questions I don't know, invade my privacy, and start singing "Kum By Yah." None of those things are true. You will find friends who will laugh with you, encourage you, fight for you, cry with you and stand by you no matter what. This is where you can practice the "one another" passages. When you rejoice, they'll celebrate with you. And when you grieve they'll surround you. Sign up for a Growth Group today.

Finally, Paul tells us to **Love Without Limits**. Up until now, Paul focuses on relationships inside the church, between Christian brothers and sisters. Now he turns to relationships with those outside the church.

Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12:13-14; 16-18

The word "hospitality" does not mean serving tea and cakes. In Greek it literally means "loving strangers, outsiders, foreigners." I don't know what the government should do about undocumented aliens and immigrants, but I do know how Jesus feels about foreigners, immigrants and outsiders: He loves them. How do I know? Because I am a foreigner, an immigrant and an outsider to the Kingdom of God. He loves me even though I don't deserve it and He wants me to love everyone as He does. He does not want me to be proud or conceited around them, to look down on them, to avoid them, or even to repay them with evil when they do evil to me. What he asks me to do is bless the stranger, the outsider, the foreigner, the other. He tells me to try my best to live at peace with all people. There are no boundaries or borders in the Kingdom of God.

Now people can get on Facebook and argue this back and forth. Why not do something instead. Start small. Join the Welcome Team. You can welcome guests by opening the door, smiling, handing them a bulletin, finding them a seat, giving them your seat. Practice hospitality by joining the children's ministry or youth ministry, serving on the dinner ministry, taking a turn with Code Blue, helping with a Recovery Service, Cast Your Cares, a mission trip, REACH ministry, the Alpha Course. And if you are in a Growth Group ask yourself two questions:

1. How long has it been since a new person joined our group?
2. What can we do to give birth to another group?

Why? Living things grow, scatter seeds, give birth. Living groups welcome new people and start new groups. Living churches welcome new people and start new churches. We believe God is calling us to go to the next level, to be a church that starts microchurches. God is calling us to be a sending church. And it all begins with love.

Frank Laubach prays CIHU prayers – "Can I help you?"

One speaks to God and man at the same moment asking, "Can I help you get together?" We do not ask "Do I like you" or "Do I need you" or "Do I despise you" but only "Can I help you" and "Can I help you find God."

John Ortberg told his mother Kathy she should talk to her hairdresser Joanne about God. She said no. Joanne was on her fifth husband Ted who was on his third marriage. They knew how to party and spend money. There was nothing about their life to indicate any openness to God. But John pressed his mom, so the next time she went she prayed, “God if you want me to talk to Joanne about you, you’re going to have to give me some kind of sign, because I don’t want to do it.”

Joanne’s first words were, “Kathy I understand that you and your husband have a small group Bible study at your house. Ted and I were wondering if we could come visit it sometime.” Kathy took that as a sign.

Joanne shared her story. She grew up in a family that was alcoholic and abusive. Her father was Jewish and her mother Catholic. He dad took her to synagogue and when she got home her mom made her go upstairs with a rosary to ask God’s forgiveness for going to a Jewish service. Joanne left home as soon as she could. By sixteen she was drinking heavily. By 21 she’d been married twice and could out-drink any man.

When she woke up and realized this was killing her she went to AA but she struggled with the spiritual part. Her childhood confusion about a Higher Power prevented her from even saying the word “God.” So she called her Higher Power “Ralph.” She turned her life over to Ralph. She was the only Ralph-ist in America.

Then one day a new person came to her AA meeting. He was obviously drunk, wearing a seedy overcoat and reeking of booze and vomit. He couldn’t walk straight or speak coherently but he did get out one statement, “I am an alcoholic. My name is Ralph.” Joanne was crushed. She started to cry. “That’s not my God.” That meeting led her to seek the real God and ask Kathy about the Bible study. From there the lives of Joanne and Ted opened to the presence of God. A hair salon is where God became real for Joanne, Ted and Kathy. God speaks through people.

Your assignment: with everyone you meet this week pray a CIHU prayer – Can I help you? Turn off Facebook and get your face in His Book among His friends.