

Frontlines
Week 3: Connection
Romans 12:9-16

Celebrated 9 years on staff last week.

- First 3 years at Bedford campus, lived in town. Developed good friendships and community.
- As I was stepping into this new role, we sold our house in March of 2020 and moved into our new home in June of 2020.
- HARD time to meet your neighbors and make new friends when everyone is practicing social distancing!
- Started feeling a little isolated. “I don’t like this!”

It doesn’t matter who you are or what your personality style is, if you’re introverted or extroverted, all of us desire to have meaningful connection with other people. I think it’s in our DNA. We talked last week about how we are made in the image of God. We are a reflection of his characteristics and attributes. Remember what He said in Genesis 1, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.”

God has existed in community with Himself for all eternity. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. And since we are created in His image, we were created to be in community with others. We weren’t made to be isolated and alone. We were designed to connect with others. It’s hardwired in us.

But experiencing this kind of connection can be hard sometimes.

- We’re busy. Between work, school, sports, practices, rehearsals, doctor’s appointments, and trying to figure out what’s for dinner, we’re exhausted.
- Maybe you’ve been hurt by someone or let down by a group and you’re afraid to put yourself in that vulnerable position again.
- Someone you trusted let you down, and so it just feels safer to keep people at arm’s length.
- You just don’t know who you’re people are, or where you fit in.

And so, there can be this tension inside of us where, we’re made for community and we desire to BE in community, but it just feels hard making those connections sometimes. Deep down, we all want people in our lives who know us, love us, celebrate with us, grieve with us. People who show up when life gets hard.

We want that kind of community. We were MADE for that kind of community. But we're often afraid to put ourselves out there to find that kind of community because we're not sure if we'd be welcomed. But, what we see in our text today is that **the Gospel creates a new kind of community where everyone can belong.**

We're in week 3 of our series Frontlines, seeing how the Gospel meets us in our everyday, ordinary lives. It speaks to our longings and desires. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is good news for us TODAY, not just sometime later when we get to Heaven. Following Jesus has real implications on our life right here and right now. It speaks into the things we all think about and struggle with from time to time.

Last week, we looked at image. Since we are made in the image of God, we don't have to work hard to project or maintain a perfect image. And today we're looking at how the Gospel helps us live in meaningful connection and community with others. And in Romans 12, Paul paints a beautiful picture of what this Gospel-shaped community looks like.

To understand why these words are so powerful, we have to know a little about the context they were written in. This letter was written to the **church** in Rome. There was only one. It wasn't like today where we've got a different church on every corner and, if you don't like one or the people in one, you can just go down the street to another one.

Paul is writing this letter to THE church in Rome and it was a church filled with people from all kinds of backgrounds and walks of life who wouldn't have naturally fit together. There were wealthy Roman citizens and the poor laborers who worked for them. Jews and Gentiles who came from very different religious places. It's likely that many of the people in this Church had spent their entire lives trying to stay separated from each other. They all had different customs, different assumptions, different preferences.

But then Jesus comes along, and as people from every walk of life start following Him, you can imagine, there's some tension that begins to fill the room. Old habits of division are hard to break, but the Gospel tears down those dividing walls and invites us into a new kind of community where everyone can belong. And so, Paul is writing to this church, not just to merely say, "Hey, be kind to each other and start getting along!" He's saying, "Listen, the Gospel has made you family. Start acting like it."

He's spent the first 11 chapters talking about how Jesus came to seek and save both the Jews and the Gentiles. How we all need Jesus and that Jesus came for us all. And in chapter 12, he starts getting into the very real implications of that, and right out the gate, he says that this Gospel we believe ought to change the way we behave.

Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Paul is calling these Roman Christians out of life they used to live before Jesus. He's calling them to be holy. To be set apart and different because Jesus is making them different. The pattern of Roman culture was to only be connected with people who were like you, could help you, or elevate your social standing. Paul is saying, "Don't conform to that pattern anymore. Let the Gospel shape how you connect in community. (READ vs. 9-10)

The section heading in my Bible says, "Love in Action" and that's what Paul is getting at here. The kind of love for one another that the Gospel pushes us towards. And the language he uses in these 2 verses is family language.

Vs. 9 – **Agape: Sacrificial love.** Deep, rich, *lay my life down for you* kind of love. More than just a feeling or describing something you really liked. "I LOVE ice cream!"

Vs. 10 – **Philadelphia: Brotherly love,** like the city. And like brothers and sisters, Paul knows that there are times we will argue and bicker with one another, but we work it out because we belong to the same family in Christ.

The Gospel is creating new connections. No more favorites or outsiders. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, sincerely loving and devoted to one another. (READ vs. 11-13)

That phrase, "Practice hospitality," I want to linger here for just a little bit because it's really interesting. Two Greek words.

"Practice" in NIV is **"Dioko": Pursue, carry out, chase after.** It's an active word. You can't sit back and pursue something. You can't wait around and chase after something. There's an intentional action taking place when this word is used.

"Hospitality" is a compound word, **"Philoxenia" – Philo: Love of a friend.** (Related to Philadelphia.) **Xenos: Stranger, foreigner.**

Paul is NOT saying, "Chase after strangers and make them your friend!" No! Good way to get stalking charges. Instead, by using these words, I think he's saying, **"Pursue a life that helps strangers become friends."**

When I think about hospitality, I think of it as being more passive. That if someone shows up at my home, I want to be kind, welcome them, make sure they're well fed and comfortable. And there's definitely an aspect of that. But, there are Greek words Paul could have used here to paint a picture of just being friendly to those you already know.

The idea he's communicating is about more than just receiving guests. Practicing hospitality is about pursuing those who feel like they don't belong, who feel lost or forgotten, or like strangers, and making them feel welcomed. It's taking the first step towards someone, even going out of your way, to make them feel like they belong.

And then Paul gets really practical in vs. 14...(READ vs. 14-16)

This isn't Paul's version of How to Win Friends and Influence People. In Roman culture, status was everything. Honor was currency. People were constantly trying to climb the social ladder and associating with someone of lower-status could actually diminish your own standing in the community. Paul says, "Do it anyway." And don't just do it, seek it out.

The Gospel destroys the ideas of status, posturing and positioning, maintaining dividing lines. These are all opposed to the way of Jesus. The Gospel creates a new kind of community where everyone can belong. Rich, poor, Jews, Gentiles, successful, struggling, those who have their life together and those who don't.

The Gospel teaches us that everyone stands on equal ground at the foot of the cross. And because of the transformative work of Jesus in us, we don't conform to the patters of our world that STILL want to divide and separate and draw lines. Instead, we've been called to love sincerely. Sacrificially. To be devoted to one another like family. To honor each other. To know others fully and to be fully known by others.

Romans 12 isn't inviting us into superficial friendliness. Paul is describing a community where you don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to impress anyone. You don't have to hide your struggles. You don't have to earn your place at the table.

Do you have people like that in your life? (Story of new Covenant Group)

Step into community. Join a group, a serve team, attend Discover Sherwood Oaks. We want to help you! And I know you're busy. We're all busy! But if you wait to find community with other people when you're not busy anymore, it's never going to happen. And if you wait to build deep, meaningful connections with others until that time you really need friends like that in your life, it's going to be too late.

We make time for what's important. And there might be important things pressing up against us, shouting for our time and attention, but what's really going to matter 5 days from now? 5 months from now? 5 years from now? It's the relationships you pour into.

Create community. Many of us have experienced the blessing of a Connect Group. Someone made room for you. They reached out and invited you into their home, into their lives. You've been part of a group that shares joys and pains with each other. You know the blessing of being part of a community like this.

Could it be that the Lord is inviting you to help create that kind of community for others? I look at so many of our Connect Groups and think, "That's a group filled with people who could facilitate and lead a group." Who could help others find that kind of community.

The truth is, we always have people who are looking to be part of a Connect Group. What we need more of are people willing to leave the comfort of their group and start a new one. To open up your home and your lives for others.

“I didn’t got to Bible college!” We have tons of resources and studies for you to use! You’re facilitating conversations and learning together.

“What if someone asks me a question I don’t have the answer to?” Awesome! Be honest about it and curious with them. Let us help you.

“My house isn’t big enough, nice enough.” What makes it special is being welcomed into it. You can always host at the church, too!

“I like the group I’m in.” We get it. I get it! But if we want everyone to experience the blessing of living in community, we have to be willing to love sacrificially and pursue a life that helps strangers become friends. You can create that kind of space for others. And it can be hard to see now, but I promise you, it’s such a blessing seeing others find that kind of connection. (See Beth Long, blong@socc.org)

Final thought. Back in verse 11 and 12, Paul tells us to never be lacking in passion for the Lord and to keep serving Him. He tells us to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. These are words for all of us who are followers of Jesus to put into practice, but they’re really at the heart of our Deacon’s ministry, and I’d like to invite them up to join me now.

Interview Joseph Curry

1. Tell us about the Deacons ministry and what you all do.
2. How have you seen the Deacons live out what we talked about today?

Today, we’re setting apart a new Deacon, Derek Bailey. (Introduce and pray over.)

These are faithful men and women who love and serve others so well. They are living out Romans 12 in our church, but they don’t live it out for us. Paul calls all of us to be devoted to one another, love sincerely, practice hospitality, rejoice and mourn together.

The Gospel creates a new kind of community where everyone can belong. We were made for this kind of connection and our lives find a new sense of purpose and satisfaction when we live in community with one another. So, let me ask you...

Who knows the real you?

Who rejoices when you rejoice, mourns when you mourn?

Who would notice if you’re gone?

Who is one person God is calling you to pursue this week?

Imagine a church where no one grieves alone. People celebrate together. Strangers become family. People don't feel like they have to pretend. We are being transformed by Jesus together. That's the picture Paul is painting in Romans 12. It's a picture of what the Church can be and should be because it's the kind of people Jesus is shaping us into.

People that pursue a life that helps strangers become friends, who create a place where everyone feels like they can belong, and who make room for more people to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Gospel is the story of Jesus leaving the comfort of Heaven and making room for us. We were strangers. We were outsiders. We were people who didn't belong, but Jesus made room for us by His death, burial, and resurrection.