



OPEN-HANDED COMMUNITY

Romans 12:1-21

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to Romans 12, and as you're finding Romans 12, I'm going to invite you to pull out the notes that are in the Worship Guide that you received when you came in tonight.

I'm so thankful for this community of faith. I so appreciate your desire for the glory of God, and your eagerness for the Word of God. Especially over the last couple of weeks, we've been looking at our church covenant, which I hope is an expression of the Word, your eager response to the Word. I want to thank you for that. We looked last week at what it means to be a God-centered community of faith. How to love one another in a way that centers on God, and not on ourselves. We're going to take that to another level tonight as we look at what it means to be an open-handed community of faith, and here's what I mean by that, and here's what I hope we're going to see in the Word.

The church is designed by God to be a generous people, an open-handed people, a people who believe that God has given us time and resources and energy to be used for the good of others to the glory of God. Now, the opposite of that is, obviously, closed-handed people, people who believe that God has given time, resources, energy to center on ourselves and to terminate with ourselves, instead of to meet the needs of ourselves instead of to meet the needs of others. That's the American way after all. We have things for the good of ourselves.

I was finishing up tax season and was talking with a financial planner recently, and he was saying to me, "Dave, first and foremost, you need to take care of yourself." That is worldly counsel, not biblical counsel; that's worldly counsel. "Take care of yourself, first and foremost." What I wonder is, if we have bought into that kind of picture wholesale, even in the way we do church. If we have actually designed church to cater to being closed-handed. To be less than generous in giving of ourselves and more in receiving for ourselves.

You look at the way we describe church growth. We have created a whole picture where people, when they come to church, are told they should expect certain things. "When I come to church, then I need to drive up and the building grounds need to look good to me, and parking needs to be accessible to me, and the children's ministry needs to be easy for me to drop off my kids. The music and the worship service needs to be pleasing to me. The sermon needs to be appealing to me. We need to leave in a timely fashion when we are finished," which obviously, you have disregarded completely. So, I thank you for that. So this is hypothetical. This goes beyond this faith family, but we need to leave in a timely fashion. Everything needs to be smooth.

You think about expectations. People think when they're visiting church, "All right, I want to come. I want to be able to have a good parking space. When I come in, it would really help if there's a latte waiting for me there. I could get a peppermint mocha for worship. That would be particularly good. I like this place. If I can drop my child off at a state of the art

children's ministry, so that when I come back I can press a button, maybe they even come sliding down and meet me there. I mean, it's really top notch if they've got face paint on as well, and they've had the best time of their life. This place is for us. I want to be able to drive away having my needs been fulfilled. I don't want to drive away feeling bad. I want to drive away feeling good about what I have just experienced."

This is American Christianity 101. You do these things, you draw the crowd, and you bring the church in the process. Think about it with me. These are phrases that you would never hear on the lips of 1st Century Christians. "I hope there's a latte waiting for me." Never hear that. "Do they have a state of the art children's ministry? Do they have a state of the art preschool or youth ministry?" You never hear those words on the lips of 1st Century Christians, or most of our brothers and sisters around the world for that matter.

"Is the music going to be appealing to me? Is this going to meet my needs?" These are uncommon phrases to the New Testament church and our brothers and sisters around the world, but they're so common in our day. I wonder if, in our attempts to cater to conveniences and grow the church, if we have undercut the very foundation of a biblical community, a community that revolves around the One who said, "I did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many." We center our community around the One who gave His life for His enemies, and we...we cannot reflect Him if we are closed-handed and looking to have our needs met at every turn. Christian community is fundamentally about being open-handed, about realizing that God has given us time and resources and energy to be used for the good of others, to the glory of Christ.

So, what does that look like in the community of faith? That's what we're going to dive into tonight. You'll see there on the front of your notes our church covenant that we've walked through to this point. The expression based on the Word of who we are. You'll notice there's three bullets down there, and I mentioned last week those three bullets revolve around the three "let us" phrases in Hebrews 10:19-25. "Let us draw near to God in faith." "Let us hold fast to the hope we profess, and let us..." We're going to see it tonight. "...consider how we can spur onward toward love and good deeds."

So, follow along with me, and let's just kind of review again in our minds where we've been and where we're going tonight in that third bullet so to speak. "As members of The Church at Brook Hills, we affirm this covenant with one another by God's grace, for our good, and ultimately for God's glory." That's what we looked at in Nehemiah a few weeks ago. Then, last week, we looked at 2 Timothy 3 and saw the Word as the foundation for our community of faith.

Having been brought by divine grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to surrender our lives to Him, and having been baptized as Christians in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we covenant together to glorify God by making disciples of all nations.

Together, we will draw near to God in worship. We will delight in the glory of God, depend on the presence of God, grow in the knowledge of God, and submit to the Word of God as the all-sufficient authority in our lives and in His church.

Together, we will hold fast to the hope we profess. We will regularly participate in communion as we solemnly and joyfully remember the past work of Christ on the cross, celebrate the present work of Christ at the

Father's right hand, and anticipate the future work of Christ in His return for His bride.

Together, we will spur one another on to love and good deeds. [That's what we are looking at tonight.] We will meet with one another consistently, pray for one another regularly, and serve one another selflessly. We will share each other's joys and bear each other's burdens. We will edify one another with our speech and encourage one another with our example.

What does it mean to spur one another on to love and good deeds? We looked at Hebrews 10 a couple months ago now, and we saw this language...and just as a reminder, this word, to "spur on", it's the exact language that's used there in Hebrews 10:24. We'll spur one another on to love and good deeds, and we talked about how that word is such a unique word because it's usually used in a negative context with negative connotations. It means to irritate, or to provoke somebody.

I love what the author of Hebrews does. He just takes that word, and he redeems it, and he says, "Okay, to irritate, provoke." He turns it on its head and says, "This is what we do in the community of faith. We provoke one another to love and good deeds. We spur one another on to love and good deeds." Notice that the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 10:24 does not say, "Be loving and do good deeds." Instead, he says, "Live with each other, among each other, in such a way that your life causes others to be more loving and do more good deeds." Focus, consider how to spur the people around you on, and be around people who provoke love and good deeds in you.

We've all been around people. We know people that, when you're around them, you have a desire to love more and to love better. Just being around them makes you a better person. Spurs you on. You don't have to spend very long in a place like Northern India with brothers and sisters who are working in the slums of Delhi to see a desire in them that provokes a desire in you to love more and to love better. What the author of Hebrews is saying is, "This is what the church is about." People, who just by being around each other, provoke one another to be more loving and to do more good deeds.

The Mercy of God in the Community of Faith ...

So, what we're going to do is we're going to dive tonight into Romans 12 again, somewhat like I did last week, looking at all the Scriptures that filled that last part of the covenant that we're looking at. Is there one passage that really sums up the others, and in Romans 12, I believe does it. Last week we looked at the Word of God in the community of faith, and tonight, we're going to look at the mercy of God in the community of faith.

So, we're going to read through the whole chapter, Romans 12, and I want you to imagine...this is a letter that was written by Paul to the church at Rome in the 1st Century, and he's encouraging them. This is practical encouragement. Just fills the pages. It's the verses, the words, the phrases of this chapter. So, I want you to imagine us, here we are, a community of faith, and this being written to us, and since, by the Holy Spirit saying this is how your community is to look, The Church at Brook Hills.

The Spirit writes,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: 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. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith; if it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, 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 everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That chapter is full of commands, challenges, exhortations for the community of faith. There are around 25 different commands and challenges and words of encouragement for the community of faith. "This is how you're to live among one another." However, I want you to see the foundation of the whole picture. It's the very first phrase. "*Therefore, in view of God's...*" What? "*...mercy.*" In view of God's mercy.

This is where we remember, anytime we see the word "therefore" in the Bible, we know that what is about to come is based on what has just been said before that. So, this command to worship, and this definition, New Testament definition of worship here in Romans 12:1-2, and all of these commands...25 different commands for how to love, serve and care for one another...they don't just come out of a vacuum. There's a foundation that's been built. It's the basis for all of these commands, and that foundation, that "therefore" is referring to eleven chapters that precede this chapter. Eleven chapters of Scripture that give us probably the most glorious portrait of the gospel in all the Bible.

You've got three chapters. The first three chapters in Romans talk about how God's wrath is set against sin and sinners. Then, you come to the end of Romans 3:21-26 to probably one of the most potent paragraphs in all the Bible. The paragraph that I would encourage every follower of Christ in this room to memorize and hide in your heart. Romans 3:21-26. We've studied it before here. Talks about how God has taken His wrath and poured it out on His Son, Jesus, instead of pouring it out on us, so that, by His grace, when we trust in Christ, we are delivered from His wrath, saved from our sins, and brought into a relationship with Him.

How does that happen? Romans 4 and 5 talk about this happens by faith. How we're justified, we're made right before God. Romans 5:1. We have peace with God through faith and faith alone. Not based on what we do, but trusting in what Christ has done. Then, you've got a chapter on how we're dead to sin as a result of faith, and we're alive to God in Christ. The exact picture we've celebrated in baptism tonight. Dead in sin, alive to God in Christ.

Then, you've got a chapter about how we still struggle with sin, and that leads into Romans 8:1 that says, "*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" That chapter goes to the end and reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Then, you've got three chapters...Romans 9, 10 and 11...that talk about how God has pursued us by His grace, and our salvation is not based on our merits or our work, but solely based on the grace of God expressed to us.

So, you've got eleven chapters. "In light..." Paul is saying, "In light of the fact that you were dead in sin and under the wrath of God, you've been delivered from the wrath of God by Jesus on a cross, and you are justified by faith, and you are no longer condemned, and all because of the grace of God. In light of all that, worship." Now, that makes sense; that makes sense. Now, worship is not a duty that we feel like we must do. Worship is now a delight that we long to give ourselves to. We want to worship. When we realize the magnitude of Romans 1-11, Romans 12:1 is just natural. Offer yourselves.

Then, the same thing, Romans 12:3-21. All of these commands to love one another, they don't just come out of a vacuum. The Bible's not saying, "Love each other and serve each other just because." The Bible is saying, "Love each other and serve each other because of the mercy that has been expressed to you and that overwhelms and compels your heart."

We are mercy-driven worshipers.

So, I want us to see the effect of the mercy of God on the community of faith in three different ways. First, because of the mercy of God in the community of faith, we are mercy-driven worshipers; mercy-driven worshipers. Let's picture worship. I mentioned kind of a New Testament definition of worship in a sense. What Paul does is he reaches back into Old Testament history. This whole picture in the Old Testament of the people of God bringing animals as sacrifices. They would bring them, and they would lay those animals on the altar, and they would offer these animals as a sacrifice, a blameless sacrifice, pleasing to God.

What Paul does is he says, "New Testament, totally different picture. You don't bring an animal and lay that animal on the altar. You're on the altar. This is worship. You're life, a living sacrifice, your life laid on the altar before God." This is so much deeper than songs and religious routine. This is surrender and sacrifice. We sacrifice our bodies. Offer your body, yourselves, to say, "My body and my entire self belongs to you, God." Our minds, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Just like we talked about last week, as the Word of God fills our minds, we saturate our minds with the Word of God that leads us to worship.

This is why we must be careful not to fill our minds with the stuff this world offers. Not to fill our minds with Oprah and reality T.V. shows and stuff this world clogs our minds with that crowds out knowledge of the greatness of God through His Word. To fill our minds, to be saturated in our minds with the Word of God so our minds are being transformed. That's worship, so that our thoughts reflect the glory of God, and our bodies, our minds, our wills...His good, pleasing and perfect will...we surrender our wills to Him in worship. We say, "You determine the direction of my life. You determine where I go, how I go. How I live. The decisions I make; they're not my own. I do not belong to myself. I belong to you." This is worship.

Now, the picture is, all throughout the Old Testament in the sacrificial system that they had, they continually missed this; the people of God were prone to miss this. I'm convinced we're prone to miss it as well. Hold your place here just a second and go back to the left, to the Old Testament. Isaiah. Find Isaiah 1. I wasn't going to take us here, but I was...in my devotional reading in the Word this week was in the beginning of Isaiah, and this passage just leaped out as a reminder to me of what we're looking at tonight. Of the mistakes, the errors that the people of God all throughout history have made when it comes to worship. How the people of God are prone to look at worship as religious routine or religious exercise or religious duty, as opposed to surrender of our lives and our hearts before God.

Listen to what God says to His people in Isaiah 1:10. We're going to make a connection here, parallel, between what Isaiah is prophesying here and talking about, and what Paul is saying in Roman 12. Look at Isaiah 1:10. This is God speaking to His people through His prophet Isaiah. *"Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!"*

Isaiah 1:11, God says,

"The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of the fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths, and convocations - I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts, my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them."

Does God hate worship? Is that possible? Absolutely, it's possible. Worship. Bringing religious exercises, religious offerings devoid of surrender of life. That's what you see all throughout the prophets in the Old Testament. A people who were a worshiping people, who walked through the routine of worship, but missed the whole point. Disconnecting worship from the mercy of God all over their lives that led them to surrender themselves.

Then, don't miss the picture. Not just in their relationship with God, but their relationship to each other, what was so detestable to God. Keep going. Verse 15, *"When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean."* Listen to the second half of the way through verse 16. *"Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."* We see how they were participating in religious exercises, but they were ignoring the oppressed and the fatherless and the widow.

Go down to verse 21. *"See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her - but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts."* Listen to this, verse 23, midway through: *"They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them."* Do you see this picture?

The people of God were not only missing the whole point of worship in their relationship to God, but their worship was having no effect on their relationships with others. They were still ignoring the oppressed, or the widow, or the fatherless, the needy among them. That's where we just...we need to remember. We need to remember that our songs disconnected from hearts who surrender to God miss the entire point of worship. Religious exercise disconnected from radical abandonment of our lives to God misses the whole point of worship in the same way...in the same way. It really does not matter...The Church at Brook Hills in wealthy Birmingham, Alabama...it does not matter what we do or say on Sunday. If our lives are ignoring the needs of the poor and oppressed around us here and around the world, then no matter what we do or say, we are not worshiping when we gather together. We're fooling ourselves.

This is a reminder that God's people receive over and over and over again, and when you get to Romans 12, come back there. It's exactly what Paul is saying. Follow along with your notes. We experience the mercy of God in worship. This is what he's saying. As we offer our bodies and our minds and our wills, we give our bodies as a living sacrifice. We experience the mercy of God in worship, but then after two verses talking about worship, what you've got is verse 3 all the way to verse 21 talking about how we express the mercy of God in community. These go together.

Worship propels us to love one another, to care for one another, to serve one another. We experience the mercy of God in worship, and then we express the mercy of God in our community with one another, which means what we do in a worship gathering like this tonight as a community of faith is important, extremely important, but it is only one part of what it means to be the people of God, because our worship gathering should propel us to love, serve one another. The New Testament definition of worship followed by New Testament explanation of community. See the two linked together.

We are a mercy-molded family.

That leads to the second part in this passage. We are mercy-driven worshippers, and we are a mercy-molded family. Love is what comes next in verses 3 through 21. This portrait of biblical community molded by the mercy of God. A family together serving one another, loving one another, gifted for one another, praying with one another. Blessing, rejoicing, mourning together. All of these pictures. A mercy-molded family.

My younger sister was graduating this weekend from nursing school at UAB, and so we had family in town from all over the place, and they were everywhere in the house. Everywhere, everywhere, everywhere...family just everywhere. You look everywhere, and there they are. You know the sense. You just look around, and it's chaos. It's everywhere. I sat back, just kind of looking around the room. All ages. We don't all come together like this, which is not necessarily that bad of a thing. We don't all come together like this in one place that often, and just to look around, just to think about the years of being family together and the additions in that process and knowing that there are struggles represented in this or that, and pictures represented here or there in the room. Just to see...just to be reminded of just the beauty, for the most part, the beauty of family as you look around.

Last night, it was late by the time all the family everywhere was getting to sleep, and it's getting quiet finally. I was looking over this passage, and I was just reminded, I was struck by this reality that Scripture teaches. I'm like, "We are a community whose relationship to and with one another is deeper than that of physical family. It's deeper than that of physical family." That's not just talking; that's not just trite. This is a real picture in the New Testament. Even physical family, as wonderful as physical family can be, is still a temporal reality.

What we experience with one another in the community of faith is an eternal reality. We are an eternal community. We are united together spiritually, supernaturally, in a way that supersedes any other type of relationship. This is why the church is certainly no club or religious organization even. Even deeper than physical family, we're a community of faith whose interconnectedness runs deep, and that's what Romans 12 is all about. God, help us not to miss this. The beauty of what is experienced in the community of faith.

That's what I want us to do. I want us to take verses 3 through 21, and we're just going to run through. We've got about 25 different commands here. I'm trying to bring it down to ten overarching ways that we are to display the concept of being a mercy-molded family. Follow along with me.

First, we belong to each other. This is Romans 12:3-5. We don't think of ourselves more highly than we ought because...listen to verse 4. "*Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body, and each member...*" Listen to this, "*...each member belongs to all the others.*" What a profound interconnectedness. Literally, we are individually members of one another. We belong to each other. Just like a body, this is the analogy that Paul uses...just like a body has many different parts that are connected together in the same way, we are different parts of a body dependent on one another, belonging to one another, attached to one another. That's the picture here. Think about that. Let that soak in as you consider the people that are sitting around you. We belong to each other.

Second, we are gifted for each other. This is a great picture. Verse 6, "*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.*" He begins to list these different gifts. Catch what Paul's saying here. He's saying that every member in the body, every part of the body, is gifted for a purpose. Let this soak in, this reality. Whether you're eight years old or 88 years old, the Spirit of Christ dwells in you. If you've trusted in Christ for salvation, the Spirit of Christ lives in you. Then, what Paul is saying here is, "No matter how old you are, no matter where you are in life, what you're doing, you have been given...brother or sister, you have been given spiritual gifts, supernatural gifts from the Holy Spirit of God in you, in each of you, intended for the building up of the body."

One of my favorite things to do as pastor is to spend time in the new members workshop, and at the beginning of each new members workshop, go in and spend time there with those who are joining with this faith family. It is just exhilarating to me to look around the room and to see individuals and to see couples, and to see families, and to just picture the spiritual reality as expressed there. To see people gifted by the Spirit of God that God is entrusting to this community of faith to build up this community of faith. What an awesome picture!

We have a tendency to undercut this. We need to be very careful because we kind of exalt those who have this gift or that gift, and we kind of minimize those who don't seem to be very gifted, or this or that, and we have a dangerous tendency to lose sight of the fact of what Paul saying here. Everyone counts in this picture; everyone contributes. He gives this

list of gifts that's not intended to be an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts. You compare this with other lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament, and you'll see all kinds of different gifts. I don't think the point is he's saying, "Here's what the gifts are." Instead, he's saying, "You've been gifted." Some have this, some have this, some have this, but the point is whatever gift you have, use it. Use it for the glory of God.

I want you to watch something with me on the screen. It's a picture of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon, and I want you to think about the reality that's been expressed here in Romans 12 in light of this picture represented in American history. Watch this with me.

[Video]

Did you know that there were a million different parts on that Apollo 11 spacecraft? A million different parts. Just think about that. That means even if 99.99% of the parts on that spacecraft worked, that would still leave 100 parts, components, of that spacecraft that would fail and possibly jeopardize the entire mission. Talk about needing every single part to come together. This is the picture.

What happens...what happens when the church realizes that we have a far greater mission, the greatest mission on this planet? You've heard it expressed in these baptism testimonies. To make the gospel known among all the peoples of this world, that kind of mission cannot be accomplished with 50% participation, or 60 or 70 or 80 for that matter. This is the picture of what Paul is saying. It's the body of Christ coming together, each with different gifts. Some with more gifts than others. Some with different gifts than others. However, the picture is the whole body of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, equipping this body, The Church at Brook Hills, with all kinds of different gifts for the accomplishment of a mission that is greater than ourselves.

You saw that quote at the end from a secular anthropologist who'd studied peoples and tribes all over the world. She said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world." She was right, but she totally did not come up with that. Jesus shows us this. A small group of men. Small groups of believers scattered...scattered throughout house churches in the 1st Century. Small groups of believers scattered throughout China and North America and around the world who, together, are accomplishing something greater than they ever could experience. This is what the church is about. We are gifted for each other. Realize this; let this soak in, every brother or sister in this room. Watchman Nee said, "The church is suffering, not so much from the prominence of the five talent members, as from the holding back of the one talent members." The life of the whole body is hampered and impoverished by the burial of those single talents.

So, what happens when everybody is together on that kind of picture? It's not a pastor movement or an elder movement, or this leader or that leader movement, or a staff movement, but it's a people movement of people who are accomplishing the purpose for which God has created us as a community of faith. God, may it be so. We belong to each other, and we are gifted for each other. Gifted to build each other up. Let's not undercut this with thinking, "Me, me, me in the community of faith." It misses the point.

Third, we love each other. "*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*" This is not a fake, superficial, shallow surface kind of love. This is the depth of selfless love. The word here for love is "*agape*". Some of you are familiar with that. Unconditional love, selfless love. This was very uncommon in pagan, Greek literature, the literature of that day, to use this kind of word to describe love for each other. That's the word that Jesus uses, and the word that Paul uses here. You do you not think, "Me, me, me, me, me." This is

what sets us apart; this is what sets us apart. We don't come together with one another thinking, "Me, what am I going to get? What am I going to get?" We come together thinking, "How can I give for the sake of the people around me?" This is what the church is about. Let's not miss this in our day.

Love each other. We care for each other. "*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.*" Two great words in the original language of the New Testament. Both of them talking about the love. "Be devoted to one another." "Brotherly love." Both of those words...I won't go into the intricacies of the Greek, but the picture is the love of brothers in a family is what is expressed in the community of faith. We care for each other; we honor each other. "*Honor one another above yourselves.*" Literally, "Prefer one another in honor; prefer to honor rather than be honored. Outdo others in bestowing honor." That's the picture here.

I want to pause real quickly. Go to the right real quickly to Ephesians 4. You go to the right, you go past 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, and then Ephesians. Ephesians 4:29. This is another one of those passages that's mentioned in our church covenant, and as I was praying about what text we would study tonight, it was either Romans 12 or Ephesians 4, and I went with Romans 12. I want to take us real quick to Ephesians 4. Look at verse 29.

How do we honor one another? I want you to just see one practical way we honor one another. Ephesians 4:29. Ephesians, one of the greatest books on the church in the New Testament. Paul writes in that book, verse 29,

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building up others according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you are sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.

Now, this is in no way...what I'm about to say is in no way a reaction to anything that I've observed in this faith family that needs correcting. I've not seen a lot of brawling going on. That's a great thing that we're not brawling, but this is where I want to remind us that God tells us to honor one another with our mouths, with our tongues. To honor one another with our speech. We all know...we all know that one of the deadliest weapons that the Adversary uses to undercut the community of faith is gossip. We justify it in such ludicrous ways in the church, and we must be rid of that. Be rid of it. We grieve the Holy Spirit of God with gossip, with anything...anything that does not build up each other's character in Christ and benefit those who are listening.

Your name needs to be safe in my mouth; my name needs to be safe in your mouth. Each other's names safe in each other's mouths so that we are always speaking to honor one another. When you speak about people, ask the question, "Are you speaking in a way that honors them, and builds up the character of Christ in them?" That will cut down on a variety of conversations. It'll save a lot of breath this way, if we ask those kinds of questions. When we have concerns, conflict with a brother or sister...we're going to talk about this next week...go to them. Go to them and speak to them about these things. That's a good thing.

Now, don't go to them and go tell everybody else what you went to them about, but just go to them. Address this with them and let Christ show His glory in reconciliation with brothers and sisters you talked about those things with. That's a great process. It's not an easy process. We'll talk about that more next week. However, we honor each other. The last

thing we want to do is grieve the Holy Spirit of God in this community of faith by speaking about one another in a way that does not honor Christ in them. Speak with kindness and compassion about one another.

Next, come back to Romans 12. We spur on each other. I think this sums up Romans 12:11-12 when Paul talks about not being *"lacking in zeal, but keeping spiritual fervor and serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."* You live like that? Here's the picture. In the community of faith, when you live with the zeal for Christ, this is the purpose of the church. That you would come together, we would come together. You would see zeal in me for Christ, and it would spur you on to greater zeal for Christ. That I would see zeal in you for Christ, and I would be spurred on to greater zeal. This is the picture.

We're a snowball effect...intended to be a snowball effect. We come together, and we spur one another on, and you live joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Praying for one another. You saw that on our church covenant. 1 Samuel 12:23, *"Far be it from me that I should sin against God by failing to pray for you."* You catch that? 1 Samuel 12:23, *"Far be it from me that I would sin against God."* Sin against God by failing to pray for you. We spur on each other.

We share with each other. Share with God's people who are in need. Literally, we participate. Root word there's the *"koinonia"*; it refers to fellowship all over the New Testament. We share with each other, practicing hospitality, sharing our homes literally with one another. The language here is, *"You pursue hospitality."* You go after people. You look for ways to share in others' needs, and you see needs, and you share in meeting those with them.

We rejoice with each other. We'll skip over verse 14 and come back to it in a minute. Verse 15, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice."* We do not envy each other's successes. We rejoice with each other. We do not compete with one another. We celebrate with one another in the community of faith. We rejoice with each other. We weep with each other. Not one person...not one person in the community of faith intended to hurt alone.

This is why I love the picture in 1 Corinthians 12. I think it's verses 24, 25, 26. 1 Corinthians 12 talks about how when one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. Now, you know that feeling physically. I was laughing this last week. We had just an overnight staff retreat where staff got away and just kind of stepped back, *"Okay, where are we? Where are we going?"* We prayed together. It was good spiritual refreshment time. At the same time, we had a little bit of rec. time together and played bazooka ball, which is a whole other story we won't get into tonight. Let me just say that there are some ladies on this staff who are mean bazooka ball players.

So, we were running around playing bazooka ball, and I realized, it hit me, I have not run ten yards since that marathon in January. Like, I've not exercised a bit to my shame, okay? However, I realized I woke up the next morning, and it was clear that I had not run ten yards since that. It's that feeling. When one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. I was just aching all over; still aching today. This is the picture of hurt in the community of faith. When you hurt, when one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. This is why we must...we must, absolutely must identify with our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, and be knowledgeable about what they're going through, because they are our brothers and sisters, and when they hurt, we hurt. The same thing with the people sitting next to us this evening. We weep with each other.

We accept each other. Verse 16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." We accept each other. This is humility. It's the basis for Christian community. Redeemed community is marked by humble concern for one another as all are treated with this value before God.

We are on a mercy-giving mission.

So, this is the picture. Mercy-driven worshippers who come together as a mercy-molded family, and give themselves to a third part: A mercy-giving mission. Now, we skipped over verse 14 because in verse 14, and then in verses 17 through 21, what we see is Paul focusing on the way we respond to non-Christians, those outside the community of faith, and particularly, those who would persecute us, or those who would wish evil towards us, who do evil towards us.

So, we've seen that Paul has been focusing, "Here's what you do with one another, with one another, with one another", but then how do you respond to those who persecute you and those who do evil towards you? What Paul says...two things sum up. There's verse 14 and verse 17 through 21. First, we trust in God's justice; we trust in God's justice. Now, this was written in a time when brothers and sisters, believers, were being persecuted. Obviously, we're not in this context in the same kind of situation that they were in. At the same time, think about this when it comes to trusting God's justice. All of us have been wronged at some point. You've been wronged; I've been wronged, and some of us, in hurtful ways, we've been wronged.

What happens is, when we're wronged, there grows in us...I'm guessing we can all identify with this...there can grow in us a root of bitterness and anger towards the person who has wronged us, and especially...that grows especially when that wrong is not made right, when it's never dealt with. Sometimes for years...sometimes short-term, sometimes long-term...for years it's not dealt with, and that bitterness and that anger just kind of grows and kind of hardens in us.

Part of us...part of the root of that is we want there to be justice in this picture. Someone has done this to us, and we want there to be payment for that in some way. We want there to be justice, some closure on that. In and of itself, that desire for justice is not a bad thing. It is good to desire justice. God is just. It is good to desire justice. However, what Paul is saying all throughout here is the key is blessing those who persecute you. Not repaying evil for evil. Verse 19, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay.'" Trust in the justice of God. It may not be immediate. It may not be in the next year. It may not be in the next ten years or more. However, know this: God is just, and His justice will prevail.

When we believe that, when we trust in that, then this frees us up. How do you bless those who persecute you? That's an active thing. That's not, even, just sitting back and saying, "Okay, I'm not going to go after them." That's saying, "I bless you. You come after my life, and I bless you." How do you do that? You trust in the justice of God, and second, you triumph with the love of God. You trust that God is going to carry out justice. That is not something you have to take responsibility for in that situation, and you triumph with the love of God.

This is one of the most revolutionary statements in the New Testament. We see it in Jesus, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." "Bless those who persecute you," Paul says here. Triumph with the love of God. Nowhere in pre-Christian Greek literature are you going to find people saying, "Bless those who want to kill you." That's a radically different way to live.

How do you live like that? How can we be that kind of community? Do you realize this changes the way we view Fox News or CNN, or whatever we're watching around the world? When we hear of this or that happening in militant Islam or radical Hinduism, we do not respond the same way the world responds. The community of faith responds in a different way. The community of faith responds to that with blessing.

That's weird. How do you do that? How unusual is that? How is that even possible? This is where we come to the reality, and we mentioned it earlier. We follow...brothers and sisters, we follow the One who died for His enemies, of which we were one. When we were enemies of God in our sins, He blessed us. He loved us. He pursued us with mercy.

So, how will we ever demonstrate the character of God to a watching world if we respond any different to persecution or those who would evil towards us? Thankfully, we have pictures all throughout church history of what this looks like. Even just a few years ago, some of you may remember the story of Graham Staines. He'd served for 34 years in India, down in Orissa. He was a director of a leprosy mission there in Orissa, India. Orissa is a place where, even now, our brothers and sisters have been persecuted. Over the last year, we have been involved. You may or may not know, but The Church at Brook Hills has been involved in serving our brothers and sisters there and providing for them in the middle of some heavy persecution that they have experienced.

However, the picture with Graham Staines...he and his wife and their three kids...two boys and a girl...lived there. He lived there for 34 years, and one day, he and his two boys...Philip, ten years old, Timothy six...were in their car, and they were mobbed by radical Hindus and trapped inside their vehicle. These radical Hindus surrounded their vehicle and set the car on fire, and burned Graham Staines and his two sons alive.

News reports said three charred bodies were recovered clinging to each other. Graham Staines left behind a widow, Gladys, and his daughter Esther. If you followed that story, you may have remembered that response. It was all over the pages of the news in India. She said, "I have only one message for the people of India: I'm not bitter. Neither am I angry. But I have one great desire. That each citizen of this country should establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who gave His life for their sins. Let us burn hatred and spread the flame of Christ's love."

Everyone thought that she would move, but she said God had called her to India. Her words, "My husband and our children have sacrificed their lives for this nation. India is my home. I hope to be here and continue to serve the needy." Then, perhaps most remarkable of all...listen to this. If you're a teenager, student, listen to this. Esther, 13 years old, asked how she felt about the murder of her dad, and she responded, "I praise the Lord that He found my father worthy to die for Him." God, raise up daughters and moms, and sons and dads, and husbands and wives, men and women who, when they find themselves in horrible situations like this, display the glory of Christ. Such radical love! How do you say those kinds of things? Only by Christ in you; only by Christ in you. There's no other way to say those kinds of things.

Don't miss the connection here. Why Paul brings this in after talking for verses about loving one another, he says, "Bless those who persecute you." It makes sense. How will we ever look in the faces of enemies, those who would persecute us...how will we at Brook Hills go into nations around the world where our brothers and sisters are being persecuted and say, "We bless you. We love you." How can we say those kinds of things if we do not love one another?

How can we speak blessing to those who would persecute us if we do not build one another up with our sweet cheer? This is the picture of a Christian community overflowing to a lost and dying world in radical love and kindness and compassion that makes no sense. If we're honest, really makes, in a way, no sense to us. Picture ourselves in that situation. How do you say those kinds of things? You can only say those kinds of things when you have experienced the mercy of God in your heart, and it's transformed the way that you relate to people around you, inside and outside the community of faith.

This is why...this is why we must dive in and look at texts like this, and realize we are an open-handed community because if we are a closed-handed community, and if church is built on catering to our needs, we will never go to the nations to make this gospel known. If all we're looking for is our own interests and the interests even of our families, "We need this, and this, and this, and this", then we will never sacrifice our lives to make the gospel known among those who have never heard it before.

Why Open-Handed Community Is So Important ...

So, this is why we look at each other, and we say, "We want to be an open-handed community here, so that when the times come, and we look upon the non-Christian community around us, they will see in us love, radical love. A different kind of love and care and support. People who rejoice with each other, and weep with each other, and accept each other." This is why an open-handed community is so important. This truth just rises to the forefront. The gladness of the family...the gladness of the family reflects the glory of the Father. When the world sees sons and daughters enjoying life together, and building one another up, and loving, and serving one another radically, then this is a reflection on the Father who has brought that family together. Gladness of the family reflects the glory of the Father. God, may it be so in this community of faith.

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