



## **12 TRAITS OF A BIBLICAL CHURCH**

### **Biblical Fellowship**

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to Romans 12. Romans is right after the picture of the early church we have in the book of Acts.

It's good to be together around the Word, particularly on this Memorial Day weekend. We praise God today for His grace in the men and women who have lost their lives defending the freedoms we enjoy. We praise God for His grace and pray for more grace in families, even some in our church family, who have lost loved ones while defending those freedoms. And they weren't just defending those freedoms, but they were promoting those freedoms around the world.

Whenever I travel internationally, I'm constantly reminded of the grace God has provided to us. Even this last week in Thailand, Dale—our lead pastor—and I were exploring partnerships with some slavery/trafficking ministries there. It was nothing short of heart-breaking and gut-wrenching to learn how that system works, to hear stories of victims in it, to meet people who have been brought out of it—women and men, little kids. There were stories of horrible things that had happened behind the scenes that I can't even share in a setting like this. But we also saw how these ministries were working to see the peace, love, hope and grace of Christ in those areas.

Then we were in the Philippines among the ultra-poor. Desperate or extreme poverty include those who live on less than a dollar a day—and that's a little over a billion people. But the ultra-poor are those within that group who live on 25-50 cents a day. So a couple quarters a day for food, shelter, clothing, medicine—of which there's really not much. It's always humbling, life-altering, perspective-giving to be in the homes of the ultra poor.

Picture a tiny room with a dirt floor, where a family of four crams in to sleep, to eat whatever little amount of food they have. There is no sanitation system. We walked through these slums or through these rural areas with few or no resources—yet we also saw the church there and met pastors in these villages. I want to introduce you to a few pastors I met over the last week.

First, Pastor Eduardo. This brother is a farmer who has eight kids. He just got a certificate of pastoral training that McLean Bible Church has helped to provide through our giving. Pastor Eduardo pastors a church of about 25 people in a very rural area. He walks ten miles one way to meet with the

church on Sundays, then he walks back. That walk is in the middle of insurgents and bandits everywhere, but he is faithfully loving and shepherding those people.

Then there's Pastor Joel, who had been one of those insurgents, but he came to Christ and then told his insurgent commander that he wanted to go to Bible school. That was the first time that commander had ever heard that particular request. He said, "All right, you can go." So Pastor Joel became a tribal missionary in this animistic tribe where there was no church and no Christians. He goes into this tribe, he meets the tribal leader and his wife. He leads them both to Christ and they become the first members of the church in that village. Now where there was no church before, that church is established and Pastor Joel faithfully shepherds them.

Then Pastor Elias, a pioneering pastor who's married with seven kids, shared this with us: "I just want to reach the poorest of the poor in the mountains around me. Most Christians won't go with me into these areas. They're afraid, but I don't understand why. Do we want these poor people to go to heaven or not?" He said, "We're called, not just to believe, but to suffer for the spread of the gospel."

I'm introducing you to these pastors in particular because part of your giving, on a Sunday by Sunday basis, has gone to support these pastors being trained in the Word and helping to care for the poor in their communities. We were working alongside International Care Ministries (ICM) whom we partner with. It's awesome. The whole premise of this ministry is that the best way to care for the ultra-poor is through the church. They have reputable research to back this up and it's been published in a variety of secular journals and has confounded various scholars.

They have shown that churches that are proclaiming the gospel and teaching biblical values, then providing practical health and livelihood training can bring about a massive change among the poor. They've seen over 100% increase in income in those who've gone through these programs through the church. And not just income, but a significant increase in physical, emotional, relational and spiritual health. Basically they've proven that the best distribution center for helping the poor—by the design of God—is the church. Praise God for that!. We shouldn't be surprised. It's wonderful to see the world surprised by that, but we should not be surprised by that.

As we're talking, I was drawn to one particular facet of their research that stuck out in light of what we're diving into in God's Word today. In their research, ICM found that the poor are often very disconnected from one another, so they lack a web of social relationships that are able to help when it comes to rising out of poverty. Basically what they've done is design poverty alleviation programs in the church to increase relational connectivity. So before the program starts, they survey the people in these communities asking questions like, "Who helps you in your daily life? Who could you go to in an emergency? Who could you go to if you need a loan of money because you have a dire need? Do you

know anybody who's praying for you? Who in the community is familiar with the specific needs in your family?" Then they chart the results.

So let me show you the graphics. At the beginning of the program, it looks like this picture on the left. Each one of these circles represents different people who are disconnected from each other. There are many people on the outside with one or maybe just a couple of connections. But then they go through this program in the church. They graph the same group—and it ends up looking like this picture on the right. People now have this well-woven web of relationships where they know each other, they're praying for each other and they're actively interconnected with and helping each other.

When I saw that, I was honestly thankful for the effects of that ministry. But then I couldn't help but think how much I desire that to be the picture here. I realize, obviously, that our circumstances are very different. We're not ultra-poor. But I knew what I was preparing to preach this week and I want us to think about relationships in our church for a minute.

We're a megachurch made up of thousands of people at different campuses. I wonder—if you were to chart our relationships with one another, what might it look like? Some people have strong relationships in the church, but many, many people are on the fringes and don't really know others in the church. They don't know other people who are praying regularly for them by name. There aren't people in the church who know what's going on in their lives enough to care for them in their needs. There aren't people who are close enough that you would be able to confess your sins and struggles to, knowing they're going to help you.

How many relationships in the church do each of us have at that level? Today I want to show you God's design for every one of our lives in the church—not just for a few people at the core, but for each of us. I don't think it's coincidence that the next trait of a biblical church we planned to dive into today is biblical fellowship.

"Fellowship" is a word that describes the interconnectedness God has designed for us to have in community with one another. I want to paint a picture of biblical fellowship and community. As I do, I want us to see that in many ways this picture goes against the grain of the large megachurch mentality we are a part of and are accustomed to. It is so easy for many people to come into our church today, sit down, participate in a service and then walk away pretty disconnected from the people they sat next to in worship. Many people actually prefer that kind of anonymity. They like it.

But what I want us to see today is that this is not God's design for your life and it's not His design for the church. I want to show you that there is a better way. I want to lead us to work hard in the days, months and years to come, Lord willing, to experience the kind of fellowship and community God has created us for. I want us not to be content with a church culture that is okay without meaningful fellowship.

I'm using the term "biblical fellowship" because that's the word the book of Acts uses to describe the early church in Acts 2:42. We've looked at this a few different times in this series. Right after the early church started, they devoted themselves to four things: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. We've talked about the apostles' teaching—biblical preaching and teaching. We've talked about the breaking of bread—the Lord's Supper. And we've talked about prayer. But fellowship is right up there with the others.

The Greek word for fellowship in Acts 2:42 is *koinonia*. It's a great word in the original language of the New Testament and it basically means "commonness" or "commonality." It refers to community. These people devoted themselves to community with one another. So I've been trying to think of all the places in the Bible we could go to describe what biblical community looks like. But I think the best summary of it is Romans 12. So let's hear directly from God what He is saying to us as a church, right now, and then to think through what this means for our lives, our families and for us as a church family of faith.

Romans 12—this is God's Word and it speaks to us as a community.

*<sup>1</sup> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

*<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. <sup>6</sup> Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; <sup>7</sup> if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; <sup>8</sup> the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.*

*<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

*<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This chapter is packed. But here's the interesting thing: it's filled with commands. I don't know if you noticed all the commands saying "Do this. Do that. Be this. Be that." There are all kinds of commands and exhortations that we're supposed to follow. But what I want you to see from the start is that these commands don't just come out of nowhere. Romans 12 doesn't just say, "Worship God. Love each other. Be devoted to each other. Honor each other. Bless those who persecute you..." just because. Period. No, all of these commands in Romans 12 are motivated from the very beginning by the mercy of God in our lives.

That first phrase in the first verse, *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God,"* sets the stage for everything that follows after that. When Paul says, "by the mercies of God," he has just spent 11 chapters (from Romans 1-11) giving us what I would say is one of the most—if not the most—beautiful, awe-inspiring picture of God's mercy anywhere in the Bible.

Let me summarize:

Romans 1-3 is a picture of how God's wrath is upon sinners, how all of us in our sin deserve the judgment of God. Then you get to Romans 3:21-26—one of the most beautiful paragraphs in all the Bible—where he talks about how we can be saved from the wrath and judgment of God. Romans 3:23, *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."* Verse 23 is the worst news in the world. Then verse 24 is the best news. We need to memorize this good news! *"...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."*

We are declared righteous before God by His grace. It's not based on what we do. That's what Romans 4 and 5 are all about. We're justified through faith in God. I had so many conversations this last week in the Philippines and Thailand with people who are trying to earn their way to God. I told them, "Good news! You can't earn your way to God—but you don't have to! He has come to you. He's made salvation possible for you. Just trust in Him."

I was sitting in one home in a slum, where a person was saying, "I know I'm going to heaven because of all these things I've done." I told him, "No. God loves you so much, He's not given you a list of things to do." For any non-Christian friends and family who are here today, please hear this. We have not gathered together as a church for worship to try to earn merits before God. That is not what we're doing. But that's how so many religions in the world work—totally opposite of the way God works according to His Word.

We are gathered together for worship because we're overwhelmed by the mercy of God, not to earn merit before God. We're not trying to save ourselves. Jesus saved us from our sins not based on anything we've done but based on faith in Christ and what He has done for our sins. We invite you—we urge you—to put your faith in Jesus. Be free from trying to earn your way to God. God has made a way to you through His mercy.

That's what Romans 6 is all about. We have died to sin and we're alive in Christ.

In Romans 7, Paul talks about his struggle with sin. It's like "schizophrenic Paul." "I don't understand what I do. What I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do. And if I do what I don't do, it's no longer I that do it, but sin living in me that does it." Ahh! But we all recognize this, because this is our lives. We all struggle with sin.

Then we get to Romans 8:1-2: *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."* Paul goes into one of the most triumphant chapters in the Bible and concludes in verses 38-39, *"Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Nothing—not even death—can separate you from God's love when you're in Christ.

Then it gets even better in Romans 9-11 which are all about God's free grace that He pours out on us. So after chapters, Paul says, "Now, in light of that..." and then there are all these commands. See the picture. We in the church are motivated and molded by the mercy of God. It drives everything we do—in at least three ways here in Romans 12.

### **We exalt the mercy of God in worship.**

As the church, we exalt the mercy of God in worship. That's what verses one and two are all about. We could spend the rest of our time on these two verses, but we're actually going to move pretty quickly here. Verses one and two take us back to the Old Testament, where God's people would bring sacrifices and lay them on the altar before God. Now Romans is saying, "You don't place an animal on the altar. It's yourself and your life." That's what it means to be a Christian: your life as a living sacrifice. Your life is to be lived before God—your mind, your will and everything about you is to be surrendered to God. Again, this is not because you have to—but because you want to, because you're motivated by the mercy of God. In light of His love for you, you lay your life down before Him. "Use my life however You want." This is worship.

### **We express God's mercy in community.**

We exalt the mercy of God in worship, and then, right after that, Romans 12 immediately starts talking about how we treat one another in the church. See the connection here. We exalt God's mercy in worship, then we express God's mercy in community. Our vertical relationship with God has a direct effect on our horizontal relationships with one another.

So you see in verse three, Paul says, “*By the grace given to me...*” and then he immediately starts talking about how we relate to one another in the church based on the mercies of God. Make this connection. All across our church, we’ve gathered together to exalt God’s mercy in worship and to express God’s mercy in community. It’s both—they go together. We cannot disconnect the two. We can’t gather together for worship and then have nothing to do with one another in community. That would make no sense. This is why Christians cannot be content with anonymously sitting in a worship service, then walking away without real, meaningful connection and community with the body of Christ.

To use the picture from the research in the Philippines, not one follower of Christ is designed to be on the fringe of community in the church—not one. I’m concerned about how, in a large church like ours, that is what happens all the time. There are all kinds of people on the fringes. Some of them want to be there and some of them don’t want to be there. I’ve seen the surveys in the past that show how some people feel very connected, but so many others don’t. It’s actually one of the main reasons people give for why they have left our church—because of a lack of community.

God longs for that not to be the case in His church. So we need to think through how to express God’s mercy to one another in community and then encourage one another to work toward this. As we’re going to see, this involves every one of us. Starting in verse three, the rest of Romans 12 contains about 25 different commands and exhortations for biblical community, based on the mercy of God. Whenever we see these commands, nearly all of them are specifically applying to relationships within the church. This chapter isn’t just saying do this with all people; it’s saying do these things together with one another in the church. When we see “one another” in the Bible, it’s referring to Christian community in the church.

There are 25 commands, so I thought that’s probably too many points, so we’re going to take that down to ten. Some of you might still think that’s too much, but we’ll go through them quickly. I want to show you ten one-anothers that characterize biblical community and biblical fellowship. What does biblical fellowship look like? What does it mean to experience biblical community?

## **1. We belong to one another.**

This is the language in Romans 12:3-5:

*<sup>3</sup> By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*

Listen to that last phrase: individually, we are members of one another. We belong to each other. Just as the parts of a body belong together and are connected together, so in Christ we are connected to one another. That sounds simple, but it's vital to remember. Christ is the One Who connects us together. We are not connected together by our ethnicity—we represent all sorts of ethnicities. We're not connected together by our socio-economic status. We are not connected together by our politics. We are not connected together by our preferences. This is why we always have to be careful not to look to any of those things to connect us.

In fact, this is why, in the church, we really need to regularly be around people of different ethnicities and different socio-economic levels and different political persuasions and different preferences. This is where I would encourage those of you who are connected to the church to think about the people around you. Do they look like you? Do they think like you? Are they like you when it comes to things like socio-economic levels or political persuasions? If so, be cautioned—you may be looking to those things to connect you.

We're actually designed to be in the kind of community at church where we're around people with all kinds of differences, where we can look at each other and think, "The only thing I really have in common with this person is Christ—and that is enough." This is distinct community. In Christ, we belong to one another like a body, like a family.

This reminds me of coming home late Thursday night, after close to two weeks of being away. Heather and the kids were at the airport and jumped out of the car to give me a hug. I remember thinking how much I love my family! Brothers and sisters, this is how God has designed His church to be. But I fear we often miss this. I fear that far too few people think of church as family, when that's how God designed us to be. Actually, God designed us to be deeper than physical family.

Some of you are nodding your heads, I'm guessing because—like some people I met in Southeast Asia over the last couple weeks—you may have been adversely affected in your physical family by coming to faith in Christ. There are all sorts of people who have been kicked out of their family because they came to faith in Christ. Church is deeper even than physical family. Now, like in a physical family, the church family can be challenging.

My younger brother is about to get married and our whole family—siblings, grandkids, aunts, uncles, cousins—were together just a few weeks ago. It was total craziness. I don't know how your extended family gatherings are, but do the dynamics and the drama ever cease? You're all nodding your heads. It's predictable in not so helpful ways.

We were sitting around and in the midst of all the craziness, I looked over at my brother's fiancée and wondered what she was thinking. Did she realize that in getting my brother, she was getting us as well?



This is kind of like the church. When you get Christ, guess what? You get us. You get the church, a community that's marked by having some drama sometimes. We've got our own craziness and unpredictable dynamics. But that's kind of the point. We belong to one another in Christ.

## 2. We're gifted for one another.

Romans 12:6 continues, "*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...*" Then he starts listing the different gifts. Paul says God has gifted every one of us in the church by the Holy Spirit with gifts for the building up of the church. Every person in this church—from the eight-year-old to the 78-year-old and everyone in between—every person who has put their faith in Christ has a spiritual, God-given, Spirit-empowered gift for the building up of the church.

Now, our gifts are different and have different functions. That's the whole point. The beauty of what Paul is saying here is that everybody counts. Think of this image of a body. Each body part is interdependent and necessary for the body's health. So brothers and sisters in Christ, this means that God has created you, right where you're sitting now, with gifts that are of immense value to the church.

This is another reason why we can't be content with being on the fringes. That's not how we're intended to be. We're supposed to be using the gifts in the body. Paul lists seven gifts here: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy. But then you get to 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 4 and you see other lists of gifts. The purpose here is not to give an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts so we'll ask, "Which one of these do I have?" The point is to say every one of you is gifted by the grace of Christ—so use your gifts to build up one another.

What happens then when each of us, all across the church, grasps this reality? We sometimes have a picture of the church as everyone sitting and watching one person up front using their gifts. We need to realize every single one of us has gifts. Every single member in the body has gifts for the building up of the body and for the advance of Christ's mission in the world. I just think we're prone to miss this. We're prone to think, "Yeah, others are gifted, but I don't know about me." That is not true. We can so easily become content with some people using their gifts and everyone else just kind of being here. No!

I want you to watch an old video with me. It's not high quality, but I think it will make the point here. It's describing the Apollo XI mission to the moon. Watch this with me, and then I want to share something with you.

**Video:** Three men to represent the culmination of a dream and the beginning of a new concept of reality. "Twenty seconds away from the Apollo XI lift-off. All the second-stage tanks now pressurized. Thirty-five seconds and counting. We are still go with Apollo XI. Thirty seconds and counting. The

astronauts report, 'It feels good.' T minus 25 seconds. Twenty seconds and counting. Fifteen seconds. Guidance is internal. Twelve, 11, 10, 9. Ignition sequence start."

Praise God! We've been to the moon! I share this video to remind us of this moment in our history. Neil Armstrong actually stepped on the moon. But did you know that on that Apollo XI spacecraft, there were over one million parts. That meant that even if they had an astounding 99.99% reliability, that means over 100 parts would fail on the way to the moon. Every single part mattered. Not just one man, but thousands of people and individual parts everywhere.

Then they took off and it worked. The quote at the end was from a renowned secular anthropologist who studies people and travels around the world. She said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world." I think she was right, but I don't think she came up with that.

This is also the picture of a small group of fledgling disciples who were gathering together at the risk of their lives in the first century—in Acts. They had a mission and they knew that everybody mattered. Two thousand years later, that same thing is true in this church. McLean Bible Church, if we're content, if we're satisfied, with 50% participation in the Great Commission, or 75%—how great would that be? Or 80%? But we will miss what God has created us for. We have a greater-than-Apollo-sized goal here. We want to make disciples and multiply churches among all nations, beginning right here in greater Washington, DC.

We cannot accomplish that goal if many of our parts are on the fringes. Just think about what happens when every part supernaturally gifted by God—every member of McLean Bible Church—is meaningfully engaged in this mission with the talents, gifts and abilities we've each been given. We have no idea what God will do in and through us, if we will refuse to settle for less than that. We are gifted for each other. This is a glorious thought that we don't want to miss out on—this is what it means to be the church. We belong to one another and we're gifted for one another.

### **3. We love one another.**

Romans 12:9 states, "*Love must be sincere.*" This is not fake, superficial love—this is deep, authentic, real, powerful commitment kind of love. The word Paul uses for love there is *agape*, which was extremely unusual in pagan Greek literature. It wasn't a common term. It referred to selfless love. To love like that was ridiculed by many in the Greek culture as a sign of weakness. But that's the word Jesus used in the New Testament church to describe how we love others. We don't love other people based on what we can get from them. We love one another selflessly, sincerely, to the point of hating evil on behalf

of one another—which we’ll talk about more next week in what will be a particularly challenging, politically incorrect topic. [That’s just a teaser for next week.]

#### **4. We care for one another.**

Romans 12:10 commands, “*Love one another with brotherly affection.*” That’s a great phrase. The word in the Greek is similar to a word you would recognize: *philadelphieia*. That’s a combination of *philos* (love) and *adelphos* (brother). So, brotherly love—again, the picture of family affection. But take this to a deeper level. Think about your family and the responsibility you assume for their care. I think about my wife and my kids. I’ve assumed responsibility for their care. In a similar way, I care for my mom and in some sense for my siblings. When we picture family, we often picture this responsibility to care for the family around us.

Now take that and apply it to the church. As I was thinking about this, I thought about the way this reality is being reflected right now. Even knowing that as I’ve been preaching this, as we’re sitting here right now under the teaching of God’s Word, there are people in this church who are caring for kids, who are teaching kids the Bible like they would their own children. That’s a powerful picture, isn’t it? Many of you have children with disabilities and during this hour and a half, a team of people is caring for them like they’re their own, loving and serving them.

I think about all the men, women and students who, week by week, take responsibility to care for people in this church like family. I want to encourage you—those of you who have already done that today and now you’ve come into this worship gathering—that is the right mentality with which to approach church. We should constantly think, “How can I help care for people in the church like they’re my own family?”

The opposite of this is not good, but unfortunately the opposite is a common approach to church in our culture. The opposite is when people drive up to church thinking, “Okay, I want church my way today. So the grounds had better look good, the parking had better be convenient, the building had better be accessible, the childcare had better be seamless, the people had better be friendly, the music had better fit my taste, the sermon had better keep my attention—and I’d better drive away in a timely fashion with the whole experience meeting my needs—or else I will look elsewhere.”

I want to be careful when I present that picture, because here’s the deal: we do all have needs when we come together and we all want those needs met. But here’s where the problem comes. When we think the way to meet our needs is by centering on ourselves; when the Bible actually gives us a totally different picture. God has actually designed our needs to be met as we center our lives on others.

That is a different way to think from the rest of the world and it’s a different way to approach community. Everyone else in the world is inclined to say community is focused on what you can get. But

in the church, community is designed to be focused on what you can give. So let me just ask the question—obviously not to be answered out loud—but how many of you walked into this building today with the primary thought on your mind, “How can I glorify God by caring for other people? Who can I pray for? Who can I encourage or edify or build up? How can I help somebody else in what they’re going through?”

That’s what I’m looking for today. I know some of you came with that perspective, and if that’s you, I want you to be encouraged in God’s Word. If you didn’t, I want you to be corrected by God’s Word. Contrary to everything the world says—and even what we often communicate in the church in our effort to appeal to everybody’s preferences—you’re not the center of this picture. God is. And that’s good news, because God has created you to find fulfillment in selfless, not selfish, community in the church that is unlike any other kind of community in the world. It’s a kind of community that will totally change your life. Think about it. What person doesn’t want to gather together with a group of people who are totally focused on loving and caring for each other? How attractive is that?

One of my favorite apologists from the early church—a man named Aristides. Now, an apologist is not somebody who says, “I’m sorry” a lot. An apologist is somebody who defends the faith. In the early centuries of Christianity when there was a lot of persecution and because Christianity was new, there were a lot of defenders of the faith in the second and third centuries. A lot of times when we think about defending the faith, we think of intellectual arguments for the resurrection of Christ, or some other doctrine. But what I want to read is a defense that says, “If you want to see the truth of Christianity, look at this people group called the church, the way they live and the way they interact with each other. So listen to Aristides’ letter to a king:

Now, the Christians, O king, by going about and seeking have found the truth, for they know and trust in God Who has no fellow. They refuse to worship strange gods, and they go all their way with humility and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them. They love one another. The widows’ needs are not ignored. They rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting.

When the Christians find a stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as a true brother. They do not call brothers those who are bound by blood ties alone, but those who are brethren after the Spirit and in God. When one of their poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear any of their number who are in prison or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs; and if it’s possible to redeem him, they set him free. If they find poverty in their midst and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the need might be supplied with the necessities.

They observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah, living honestly and soberly as the Lord their God ordered them. Every morning and every hour they praise and thank God for His goodness to them, and for their food and drink they offer

thanksgiving. Such, O king, is the commandment given to the Christians, and such is their conduct.

May this be our conduct. When somebody is hungry in their midst, these people fast. They don't eat for a few days so this person could eat. That's not coming to a worship service and going away. That's real, authentic community that God has designed for the church so that we care for one another like this.

**5. We honor one another.**

Romans 12:10 says we “*outdo one another in showing honor.*” We work hard to honor one another and build one another up, never tearing one another down. Ephesians 4:29-32 warns against gossip, which is a community killer in the church. It is sinful to speak about a brother or sister to their face or behind their back in a way that does not build up the character of Christ in them. Have nothing to do with it. Ephesians 4 says it grieves the Spirit of God. It quenches His movement in the church. We must guard against it. We must guard our tongues and look for opportunities to outdo one another in showing honor.

**6. We motivate one another.**

Romans 12:11-12 is a picture of spiritual fervor and zeal for Christ—serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation and being constant in prayer. All of these are one-anothers we see in Scripture. We pray for one another. We encourage one another. We consider how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 11:10).

Have you ever been around someone who makes you think, “I’m just a better person for having been around that person?” That’s the kind of relationships we want in the church. May this be the commentary on your life and your relationships. Live so that people grow closer to Christ by being around you. What a glorious picture of community!

**7. We share with one another.**

This applies specifically to our resources. Romans 12:13 says we “*contribute to the needs of the saints.*” The word translated “contribute” is from the root word *koinonia*—that word for fellowship. Twelve different times in the New Testament, it’s used to refer specifically to giving resources, sharing resources and building up of community. This is what we have from the very beginning in Acts 2, when they were selling lands, houses and possessions, then bringing those resources together to share with everybody as they had need. From the very beginning of the Bible, we’re intended to share our resources together in selfless, sacrificial generosity.

I saw this powerfully portrayed in the Philippines this last week. These are ultra-poor people. I mean, they're struggling every day for basic needs, yet they have a savings program where they put aside a little bit of money every week. They're all doing it there in the church. As a result, whenever somebody faces unexpected and dire need, the whole community is able to help. How much more should this be the case among us in all of our affluence? We're not going to go into biblical giving again, because we've talked about that as a trait of the church, but this is why we take up an offering unapologetically every week in the church.

Being in a Christian community involves contributing to one another in a way that provides for one another in the community. We're able to experience this together, then it helps us accomplish mission in the world together. It is a good and right and biblical thing to share our resources as the church.

Again, what happens when every part is doing that instead of just a few at the core? Think of the possibilities for displaying the glory of Christ in the world! At the end of verse 13, sharing with one another includes hospitality—sharing by bringing people into your home.

#### **8. We rejoice with one another.**

Romans 12:15. We don't envy others' successes. We rejoice with them. Unlike so much of the world, we're not in competition with each other. We are in celebration with each other in all kinds of ways.

#### **9. We weep with one another.**

Who do you know in the church who will rejoice with you in your highs? And who are the people in the church you know will weep with you in your lows? I'm guessing that for some—hopefully many—there are specific names that come to mind. I'm also guessing that for some, maybe many, there are not specific names in this church that come to mind. I want us to work to change that.

I would even ask it the other way. Who in the church would come to you with something to rejoice over? Who in the church would come to you with a struggle and know that you would weep with them? Be that kind of person who is pursuing others in the church in such a way that these commands to rejoice and weep will play out in and through your life.

#### **10. We bear with one another.**

Romans 12:16: "*Live in harmony with one another.*" Now, I phrased this, "Bear with one another" because living in harmony with one another is sometimes easier said than done, right? Harmony with one another necessitates humility before one another, which is why the very next word from God here is, "*Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.*" Here's the

reality. In the church—in this church specifically—we are a community full of sinful men and women. It won't always be this way. When we get to heaven, our community will be perfect. I can't wait for that—amen? We want that. But for now, it's not. So for now, sometimes we say things we shouldn't say and we wish we wouldn't have said them. Or we do things we wish we wouldn't have done in our community with one another.

I was thinking about this as I was preparing. I talk a lot. There are so many opportunities with my words when I need people to bear with me. We need one another to do this. None of us is perfect. We can get so wounded so quickly, then grudges and bitterness rise up. This is not God's design. We are to bear with one another.

If we're going to live in harmony together, we'll have to bear with one another some. It's another reason why we have to be very careful, particularly in the church, not to surround ourselves with people who are naturally like us or whom we naturally like. If we're not around people we're having to bear with, then maybe we're missing out on what God has designed for us in community. This is why Romans 12:16 says, “*Associate with the lowly.*” Go out of your comfort zone, where you will learn to live in harmony with people who are unlike you. Learn to bear with one another and experience the kind of unity that's only found in Christ.

So there it is—a tenfold summation of all the commands we see in Romans 12 for the church. Let me wrap up with these two principles: We exalt the mercy of God in worship. We express the mercy of God in community.

### **We extend the mercy of God on mission.**

Basically, the other commands here that we didn't look at are focused on how we relate to the world around us. Outside the church, we want to be a reflection of the mercy of God on mission to the world. We won't go into depth on the end of Romans 12 here, but I want you to think of the “how.” This picture in Romans 12 is powerful in the world around us. The church is not supposed to be a picture of people who just come into a building once a week, go through some religious motions together, then return to their normal lives. Who wants to be a part of that?

I was talking on a very long plane ride this week with a woman who basically said she got tired of organized religion, because that's all it had become. It was just people gathering together for a religious routine, then walking away and their lives didn't really look that different. Their relationships with each other really weren't affected. She said, “I just didn't get it. It wasn't worth it.” I said, “I don't think it's worth it either.”

Then I said, “You’ve got to hear what I’m preaching on this Sunday.” So I went through the whole sermon with her. We had time, so she got the whole deal. I was just saying to her, “Yes! That was not God’s design for your life. God’s designs are so much better.” So let’s be what God has designed.

I’ll leave you with this concluding statement.

### **When we love one another as family in the church, we will glorify God as our Father in the world.**

The gladness of the family reflects the glory of the Father. When a family is glad in relationship with one another, that is a reflection on the father. When a family is disconnected, that’s a reflection on the father—and that’s not a picture we want to give. We don’t want to give the world a picture of individual followers, totally isolated in their lives. That’s in some ways easier. You just come in and participate in the service, then walk out and don’t have to deal with all the hard-to-love people in the church—like you and me. It’s a lot easier to live in isolation. It’s a lot harder to take time to be with people who are different from you, to carry their burdens, to serve and work together with them to reach those without Christ.

But we see the glory of God on display in people who are committed to that kind of community that’s totally different from any other kind of community in the world. And that is what God has invited us to be a part of—so let’s not miss it.

Let’s pray.

O God, our Father in heaven, we come to You right now. We bow our heads before You, having heard Your Word as Your sons and daughters, as brothers and sisters in this church. We pray that You would help us be the kind of community You’ve created us to be. Make us, we pray, more and more and more the kind of community that reflects connectedness in Christ and love for one another, care for one another, honoring one another, weeping and rejoicing with one another. God, please, make us a people marked by biblical fellowship. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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