

Community of Devotion & Honor

Romans 12:9-13

Scripture

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (NIV)

Main Idea

Background

It is extremely important to note that chapter 12 of Romans follows 11 chapters of Paul laying down the theological foundations of the gospel. This is where Paul is saying, "Here's how those 11 chapters of gospel truth impact our lives!" Notice that Paul moves directly from what Christ has done for us to the new community he creates (12:3-5). The implications of the gospel are always fleshed out in a living flesh and blood community of people.

Focus

The focus of this discussion is on the call of the gospel to develop devoted friendships that are characterized by the mutual giving of honor. Verse 9 is the topic sentence of this entire section in chapter 12 (12:9-21). Love is to be genuine or "without hypocrisy". Hypocrisy can be literally translated "without mask". The passage is a description of a community without masks, a community that loves authentically.

It is interesting to note that in verse 10 Paul uses terms for devotion and love that were most often used in family contexts. One author comments on this choice of words, "Paul reflects the early Christian understanding of the church as an extended family, whose members, bound together in intimate fellowship, should exhibit toward one another a heartfelt and consistent concern." (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.777).

Another author comments that this passage emphasizes the close, familial nature of a community founded on the gospel of Jesus: "It is in the Spirit of Christ, then, that the early Christian communities sought to become communities of love, to become familial and familiar settings in which the art of love could be learned, to become places where the love that bound together Son and Father could be a visible, corporate reality in the lives of those who had committed themselves to the gospel." (Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p.56)

Starters

- What are the hobbies or interests in your life that you are most devoted to?
- Share a story with the group about a time when you felt publicly honored.

Discussion

Q1: Verse 9 says love should be "sincere". A more literal translation would be "Let the love of your community be without masks". What does it look like to be a part of a community that loves each other without the masks we often wear?

A1: This question is meant to help start a discussion on what it means to be a part of a genuine loving community. I think we all long for this, we long to put aside our masks and be loved as who we are – scars and all.

The masks we often wear with each other are designed to hide our true selves and protect against hurt. We fear that we won't be accepted or liked if people "really knew us". We don't want to risk the pain of rejection or risk hurting others so we put up a false front.

But a community centered on the gospel is called to strip off the masks. We can strip off the masks because the gospel covers us with grace. Before God we have nothing to hide. He has taken all we are ashamed of and guilty of and nailed it to the cross in Christ. He has taken away all the false ways we have defined ourselves and given us a new identity in Christ. Because we have this grace in Christ, we become grace givers in our relationships with others, accepting others though they may hurt us or fall short of our expectations.

Here are my thoughts on what a community without masks might look like: A community without masks will relate to one another in the safety and acceptance we have in Christ. The flaws, the sins, the scars of the past, and the ways we hurt each other will not drive us apart but will drive us to the gospel and from there back toward each other in reconciliation and grace. A community without masks will feel safe. This community will invite people to relax and put aside all attempts to impress others. This community will be a place of growth as people own their sin in all its ugliness but receive the gospel in all its beauty as each member models God's grace.

The genuine love of verse 9 is the central idea of the rest of chapter 12. All the other community commands flow out of the command to love each other with a genuine love, to be a community without masks.

Q2: How does the second part of verse 9, "hate what is evil, cling to what is good", help us understand what authentic love looks like in a community? In other words, what is the relationship between love and the shaping of our moral character?

A2: This one may take a little time to process and think through, but it may be a helpful exercise for your group. The main purpose of this question is to help us see that the Bible's picture of love is far from our culture's often mushy and sentimental notion of love. Often, in the name of love, we stand by silently as loved ones become entangled in evil (immoral relationships, financial scandals, addictions, etc.). When we question people about their moral choices, we can often face the manipulative question, "Don't you love me?" (meaning – if you love me, you'd want me to be happy, and this particular form of evil makes me happy). Loving someone, according to this kind of understanding, means validating whatever the other person does. This is not authentic love.

The Scriptures present love as seeking someone's true good, unconditionally and at all costs. The truly good life is the one lived in submission to God's commands. So our love for one another includes the responsibility for each of us to point each other toward good and away from evil.

The reality is that we are shaped morally by the communities we are a part of – our society, our families, and our friends. We probably can all share stories of how high school "peer pressure" caused us to make bad choices. This "peer pressure" extends beyond high school as our communities reinforce or challenge our ideas of what is good and evil. It might not be an overstatement to say that what we see as good and evil will largely be determined by the community to which we are most connected.

God intends for us to be morally shaped in a community that He creates by the power of the gospel.

The commands of verse 9 – "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" are corporate commands. There are in the 2 person plural. So really it's saying ya'll hate what is evil and ya'll cling to what is good. So, Our moral character is formed into the image of Christ in the 2nd person plural – in community.

Q3. Noting the warm "family" words that Paul uses in verse 10, one author says, "Paul conceives of the church as a family that is even closer than one's biological family, for all are united to Christ as brothers and sisters" (Schreiner, Romans, p.664). What is your response to this?

A3: This is a question designed to encourage open-ended sharing. This can be a great time to get a feel for how people have experienced community in their past and present church experience. Has the church felt like a family to them? Is it hard for some who come from really close families to imagine that the church is intended to be an even greater family? Are some skeptical? Do some have stories to share where the church as a loving family became a reality in their lives?

Encourage everyone in the group to share as this can be a great time for everyone to learn more about each other's stories, specifically what type of intimacy and closeness each has experienced in the church.

Q4: What does a devoted friendship look like (verse 10)? What obstacles do we face in this group as we seek to become devoted friends (and how might we overcome these)?

A4: Devoted friendships include such traits as time, commitment, understanding, shared interests, laughter... If your group is like most community groups there may be only a few devoted friends in the group. Some members may have no devoted friendships at all or only devoted friendships with non-believers. So be sure to spend quality time on discussion of the obstacles of devoted friendships – the reality is that we all devote ourselves to something and often we place friendships on the backburner of our lives.

I like to think of the practice of devotion in economic terms. It operates according to "opportunity cost" (remember microeconomics?). It means we only have so much of it and every bit we use on something, we are choosing not to use it on something else.

Here are a few common obstacles:

- limited time – devoted relationships require significant time. Many are more devoted to career, work and money than to quality relationships
- fear – fear of rejection and desire for relationship not be reciprocated
- lack of intentionality – we sometimes just hope friendships will just happen, but just hoping rarely produces quality relationships
- individualism – our culture emphasizes the individual over the community and even the individual family over the community.

Overcoming these obstacles can happen as we gradually begin to value the developing of relationships as top priority in life. We will only begin to make a change in our priorities when we see that the gospel calls us to new community. Our growth in Christ and our participation in God's kingdom only happens in community.

Q5: Scripture often assumes that we naturally seek honor more than we seek to give honor. Is that true? What needs to change in us in order for us to become honor-givers instead of honor-seekers?

A5: In order for us to become honor-givers before honor-seekers we need to let the gospel soak into our desire for honor. God actually doesn't say that our desire for honor is evil. In the gospel, God, who deserves all of our honor, took a place of dishonor in our world. He came as a poor man, a man without a home, a man rejected by the religious and political leaders of the day. He was dishonored most of all by being killed like a common criminal – naked on a cross.

Though we dishonored God in infinite measure, he took a place of dishonor to give us honor. Through Jesus, he makes us sons and daughters of the King. We are heirs with Christ – that means

we equally share the coming kingdom with Jesus. We are God's right hand men and women in Jesus. Jesus – at the resurrection – was honored as the greatest, most honorable person to ever live. And we share in his honor by faith. Pretty cool. This could change the way we look at each other. Each of us has a unique place of honor in God's kingdom.

The gospel shows us that the pathway to honor is humble, self-giving service (John 12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.)

Q6: How can we as a community group celebrate each other's giftedness and talents and show appropriate honor for these?

A6: Here's where your group can be really creative. One idea would be to take time each group meeting to affirm each other by sharing what we appreciate about each other. Sounds cheesy, but in groups I've been a part of, its been really powerful. You could also commit to writing short notes of encouragement highlighting people's strengths and gifts and read these aloud next group meeting.

Prayer

Look at the list below drawn from Paul's list of spiritual characteristics created by the gospel (12:11-13). Share the one in which you are in the most need of the prayers of this community group. Spend some time sharing why and pray for one another. As a group, commit to praying for this specific need during the time in between your meetings.

- Zeal/diligence
- Spiritual fervor/fire
- Service
- Joy
- Patience in affliction
- Devotion to Prayer
- Generosity