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*“True Fellowship”*

ROMANS 12:9-21

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## AT A GLANCE

What we believe about God and Jesus and salvation impacts not only our worship and our individual lives, but also how we relate to fellow believers. In this section of Romans 12, Paul lays out marks of true fellowship. Fellowship is so much more than pot luck meals and social gatherings!

## INTRODUCTION

Romans 12 begins the fellowship section, the “therefore live” section of Romans. And while Romans 12:1-2 can be applied to individuals, the tenor of the chapter is corporate in nature. We saw that clearly in verses 3-8. We’re saved individually but we’re saved into a body. We’re placed by Jesus, according to His grace and mercy, into a local body of believers. This one of my core convictions, Jesus builds His Church.

The ESV titles today’s section in verses 9-21, “Marks of a true Christian.” These are marks of people who believe the right doctrine, praise the Lord in right doxology, and whose lives reflect it. We’re going to deal with these marks of true Christianity in three parts. This week we’re going to look at the first part of verse 9, then 10, 13, 15, and 16. I’m categorizing these as marks of true fellowship.

## ROMANS 12:9-16

**<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 wise in your own sight.**

## GENUINE LOVE

Right off the bat here in **verse 9**, Paul calls us to **Let love be genuine**. Jesus said the greatest commandment is, “...*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” *Matthew 22:37-39* Love is listed first in order of spiritual gifts in Galatians 5:22. Paul tells the Corinthians, “*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*” *1 Corinthians 13:13*

That Paul would tell us to **let love be genuine** implies there is a disingenuous love, or what I’d call a sentimental love. It brings benefits without cost. It’s the kind of “love” that the broke boyfriend gives to his girlfriend so she’ll pay his rent. It’s the kind of “love” a father gives to his kids so he can live vicariously through them. In the church it’s the kind of “love” that offers well-wishes, praying hand emoji’s, and a “good to see ya,” but is never followed-through when the need requires more than we want to give, or more than we expect they can return. It’s a transactional love.

## NO PARTIALITY

We tend to relate to people we think can reciprocate what we give them. Perhaps that's what Paul had in mind in **verse 16b** when he said, **Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.** This is similar to what James warns, *"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."* *James 2:1* Partiality has no place in the church. We must be a place where worldly categories of worth and value are dismissed and where love for one another is unconditional.

This phrase can also be understood as "don't be afraid to do lowly things." In other words, no one in the church should be above picking up trash on the ground, scrubbing a toilet, taking out diapers, or cleaning up vomit.

In His humility, Jesus became man and went to the least of these. No one stooped lower than Him. As we follow Him each day, naturally we ought to expect that will also involve humbling ourselves. **Do not be haughty**, Paul warns there in verse 16. Don't think too highly of yourself. Don't imagine you're more important than other people. Let love be genuine!

## BROTHERLY AFFECTION

Paul reiterates love in **verse 10, Love one another with brotherly affection.** There's a bond between Christians that ought to be nurtured. We're not called to simply feel love in our hearts, we're called to do something with it. Paul calls this love between believers **brotherly affection**, which is mutual concern for one another. Part of our brotherly affection is expressed in **verse 15a Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep**; something we naturally do when we love with genuine, brotherly love.

To **rejoice with those who rejoice** means to celebrate other people's victories, which can be difficult. Like over the pregnancy of a close friend when you're trying to get pregnant. Or watching your friends find their spouse while you're stuck in a relational spin-cycle. Or the cancer patient who was cleared of cancer while you continue to suffer.

Not only are we to rejoice, we're also called to **weep with those who weep**. One of the best ways to encourage someone who has reason to weep is to enter their sorrow with them. We call this the "ministry of presence." To weep with those who weep requires a sense of empathy and enough awareness of their pain to shoulder it.

But once again this requires genuine love. It's one thing to say, "I'm sorry for your loss." And another thing to put your arm around the person, take a few moments to understand the depth of the pain, and carry that load with them.

## HONOR

Paul continues in **verse 10** suggesting that genuine love and brotherly affection will be followed by honoring one another. <sup>10b</sup> **Outdo one another in showing honor.** I suppose one could take this verse out of context and find themselves playing an absurd game of one-ups-manship. One could treat it as a challenge to one-up their brothers and prove just how true of a Christian they really are! And they'd completely miss the point. The point is not to exalt oneself in one's humility!

Paul is calling for mutual deference, respect, and honor among the body. To show honor to another person is to esteem them, recognize their dignity, and seek their well-being. It means to not eclipse their light but to shine the light on them instead.

One of the ways we show honor is by recognizing the contributions of others around us. Our culture is so much about the right here, right now. "What have you done for me lately?" is like a

mantra for this age. It's so easy to treat people as if they're disposable. But we're called to show honor.

Wildwood Church, formerly Watertown Baptist, and originally First Baptist Watertown, is nearly 160 years old. What we have today is due in large part to the faithfulness of generations of Christians committed to taking the gospel across the street and around the world.

Some of them are here with us in this room, having served this church faithfully for decades. Would you stand if you have been part of Wildwood or Watertown for more than 10 years? More than 20? More than 30? More than 40? More than 50? More than 60? More than 70?! We ought to show honor to those whom the Lord has used to build His church. Thank you!

I also want to recognize that many of you have committed decades to building Christ's Church in other local bodies. We're kingdom-minded here. Your contribution to the Kingdom elsewhere matters, too! Thank you!

### CONTRIBUTORS, NOT CONSUMERS

Speaking of contributing, genuine love is costly. Where love is genuine, people put their money and their time where their mouth is. **Verse 13** says **Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality**. Don't just wish people to be warm and well-fed but do what you can to make that happen. Be generous with your time and money.

**Contribute** comes from the same word we translate *fellowship* and *partnership*. It's about building up the church together using all you've been given for the glory of God. It's what we mean when we say we need "more hands on the rope" pulling in the same direction! True fellowship is much more than pot-lucks. It's building something together.

Paul says **and seek to show hospitality**. It has always stood out to me that hospitality is one of the qualifications of elders. Why do you think it's so important that church leaders, whose primary task is teaching the Word and praying for the saints, is hospitality? Elders are called to set an example for the flock, so it seems to me that hospitality is a qualification because all Christians ought to be ready and willing to help our fellow Christians feel welcome and part of the family.

### MUSIC TO THE EAR

One of the reasons this is so important is because we're called according to **verse 16a** to **live in harmony with one another**. Now I'm not a musician, but I know what harmony is and what disharmony is when I hear it.

Why is harmony so important? Here's why: the enemy hates Christ's Church and is doing all he can to sideline it. Whether it's a marriage or a church, the enemy only needs a crack to get a foothold and get his hands on everything. He likes to see that root of bitterness growing in a church because, as the bible says, "by it many become defiled." (Hebrews 12:15)

The enemy can take one bitter, divisive person and wreak havoc on the whole body. The instruction here isn't to go on a witch hunt and accuse people of being divisive but rather that you and I do all we can to keep the peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ. The body of believers, true fellowship, ought to be music to the ears.

### WISE IN YOUR OWN SIGHT

I think pride is the root issue that keeps us from living in harmony with one another. We all tend to think we're right! Well, there's an antidote to that. **Verse 16c** says **Never be wise in your own sight**. True wisdom is humble. True wisdom seeks counsel. True wisdom eagerly seeks and yields to sound, biblical instruction. True wisdom trusts the Lord. "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on*

*your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.” Proverbs 3:5-7*

## SABBATICAL

One of the ways that I am trying to not be wise in my own sight is by stewarding my ministry. As I have told you many times, I would like to be your Lead Pastor until I retire at a good old age. I'd love to be the longest serving pastor in Wildwood's history, Lord willing. That would have to be a 42-year ministry and I'd be 81 years old if the Lord allows me to see that. It's about as audacious as our vision of raising up 50 of our own missionaries. If the Lord isn't in it, it won't happen. But as far as I'm concerned, that's my goal.

Conventional wisdom says the Lead Pastor is too important to take extended time off. A two-week vacation? Maybe, but a sabbatical? No way! Well, I am defying conventional wisdom with two convictions in my heart:

1. Christ builds His church.
2. Wildwood Church is ready.

One of the temptations of the pastorate is coming to believe that you're ultimately responsible for the growth and well-being of the church. If there's growth, it's because you grew the church. That temptation to associate good things happening at the church with my leadership is ever-present. And I would be lying if I said I've always navigated that well.

I'm defying conventional wisdom because I don't want to be wise in my own sight. Wisdom says that Christ builds the Church, not the Lead Pastor. By taking this sabbatical starting after second service on June 16<sup>th</sup>, I'm saying to you and to the Lord I actually believe that. I believe that Wildwood is, and has always been, in the hands of King Jesus. He is the head of the Church, our Chief Shepherd.

## GODLY LEADERSHIP

Secondly, I am confident that Wildwood is ready. I look at our elders and I see godly, competent men. I see faithful men who are ready to step into the pulpit while I'm away and carry the mantle of leadership without me. They will all come to you with a message burning in their hearts and a resolve to preach the Word of God and point you to Christ. I also see a body of members who are vitalized, excited, growing, and willing to follow their leaders.

Speaking of the body, conventional wisdom says when the Lead Pastor is out, you can skip church. C'mon, we all know it. I'm sure not so much here, right?! I'm asking you to commit to defying conventional wisdom, to not be wise in your own sight, and to instead accept biblical wisdom of seeing all the elders as your elders and following them and coming to be transformed by their preaching just as you do me. To say nothing of the impact you have on other members when you serve and connect.

Elders have differing gifts, but the bible does not recognize differing levels of elders. Nor does it permit scaling one elder's sermon as more significant than another's. If you ever see me sitting under another elder's preaching, like Pastor Josh last week, you will see my bible opened and my attention fixed on the preacher. The significance of an elder's sermon is in the Word that is preached, not in the preacher. If He's properly preaching the Word of God, it matters not who he is or how long he's preached or his education. The Holy Spirit speaks when His Word is being preached and His people are paying attention!

I know people have had bad experiences with pastors on sabbatical. If news of my sabbatical is new to you today, I want to assure you this isn't a last-minute thing. I've been talking about it since February and planning it since November. It's a renewal sabbatical meant to prolong my ministry at Wildwood, not a cover-up for a transition out.

## WILDWOOD NEEDS YOU

And I'm asking you to embrace true fellowship that I've been speaking of today. I'm asking you to get your hands on the rope and pull in the same direction because this church belongs to Jesus. And Jesus has placed you here and given you resources and skills that He wants you to use. This body needs you. It needs you to show up, it needs you to serve, and it needs you to support.

Finally, let me speak to the subject of volunteerism. By all appearances, this is a well-established church. This building was built in 1978. Formerly Watertown Baptist, this church began in 1865. But here's the deal with churches: churches aren't buildings, they're bodies. And bodies change every time new members join. It may be subtle, but it changes, nonetheless. Well, since COVID in 2020 there's been more than a subtle change to the body at Wildwood.

By my estimation about 80% of you have come to Wildwood in the last seven years. About 50% in the last four years and about 25% in the last two. Why do I tell you this? I tell you because conventional wisdom says you join an established church and you wait your turn, you put in your time before you get really involved and take ownership. You look around and you see thriving ministries and assume Wildwood has this locked down, no need for newbies.

The truth is we need volunteers in every ministry we have. Not the least of which is Children's ministry. We'd like to offer our awesome volunteers a summer break and need others to step into the gap for that short duration. If you've been here for at least six months and you're willing to get a background check, be trained, and serve our kids in the months of July and August, I'd like you to go see Marge in the Fireside Room at the Vacation Bible eXperience table today.

As I said, we've got needs across the board. You can sign up for all our ministries by visiting [www.wildwoodchurch.com/serve](http://www.wildwoodchurch.com/serve). Jesus builds His church, so if you're here, if this is your church, then it's your church to serve and your church to love and your church to nurture.

If you're new here, and there are a lot of you, once you've discerned this local body is the Lord's will for you, it's time to find your place and jump in. Get your hands on the rope and start pulling. Let love be genuine! Amen?!

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