

**“DISCIPLESHIP – THE BASICS: 3 – FELLOWSHIP”**

***Romans 12:9-21***

When we started out on this short series about the basic building blocks of our lives as disciples of Jesus, we had a look at the example of the very first Christian community in the wake of Pentecost as Luke reports it in *Acts 2*. It seemed a blissfully happy set-up, with everyone doing just what was needed for a powerful, united witness. What was particularly noteworthy in that community was the sense of unity and the enthusiasm for fellowship, for getting together and sharing.

Within twenty years, however, the apostle Paul was having to write to some of the new churches around the Mediterranean area to challenge them about the ways in which they were behaving as communities. In 55AD he had to write to the Christians in Corinth (what is now our *1 Corinthians*) and speak to them very directly about the disunity and in-fighting that was spoiling their integrity as followers of Jesus Christ. And a couple of years later he felt it necessary to include in his letter to the Christians in Rome the words which we’ve read this morning. You don’t need to say the kind of things Paul is saying here if everything is going well.

We are considering them this morning not because I believe the church here is necessarily failing on all these counts, but because we need to keep in mind what our responsibilities are as disciples of Jesus Christ in this area, and this is as handy a compendium of advice as you’ll find in the New Testament. It appears not be written in any particular order – in fact, these seem to be almost random thoughts. They are a series of short, staccato sentences which, in the Greek, have no connecting words (like “and” or “but”) which have been added by the translators. Paul is setting down on paper, in his usual enthusiastic way, what he believes to be the attitudes and actions which should characterise the community of disciples of Jesus.

And the whole lot, you’ll notice, is glued together by his insistence on love. It follows on from what he has been writing in the previous little section about effectively being “*the body*” of Jesus Christ. And you’ll probably be aware that the great chapter on love in *1 Corinthians* is also written in the same context. The love on which Paul is insisting is this New Testament love we know as *agape* love, from the Greek word which it translates. It is a self-sacrificing love – a love that is not mixed up with sentiment and emotion, that is not dependent on our moods and feelings. In his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, W E Vine defines it like this: “*Christian love [agape], whether exercised toward the brethren, or toward men generally, is not an impulse from the feelings, it does not always run with the natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discerned.*” And that is sometimes very hard work!

In the next verse, though, Paul uses another Greek word (in fact, two Greek words) for love which may help us to see a little better what he is driving at here. He makes it clear that this love is the kind of love you’d expect to find in a family. The word translated “*be devoted to one another*” is the word *philostorgia*, which means the love shown between a parent and child, and then he writes of “*brotherly love*” (*philadelphia*) between siblings. The church is, indeed, like a family in many ways, not least in the old adage that “*You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family*”.

As disciples of Jesus Christ we need to be together. We cannot make any progress on our own. The writer of *The Letter To The Hebrews* is anxious that there are those who are trying to live as Christians without the help and support of others. In *Hebrews 10:25* we read, “*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.*” And that sense of interdependence is very much at the heart of Paul’s use of the image of the body in *1 Corinthians 12* and in earlier in this chapter (v4). But it also means that, like the family, we sometimes get thrown together with people who don’t necessarily see eye to eye with us, people whose personalities don’t dovetail sweetly with ours, people who have other agendas, other ideas, other priorities. That’s why I would argue that this whole passage is to do with life within the church. Some people would say that at v14 or v17 Paul begins to address issues to do with the wider

community, but in my experience of church life over the past few decades, I'd say that these things are just as much an issue within the church as within the wider community. So what is Paul saying here? Let's draw these thoughts together under five broader headings – things we need to take seriously when we get involved in fellowship with other Christians.

## 1. **RIGHT AND WRONG**

Of course, we need to be clear from the start that the church is based on clear ideas of right and wrong. We are, Paul tells us, to stick to doing good and keep well away from evil. It would seem that there would be no problem with that, but there will always be those whose attachment to the Christian community is less than sincere, as Paul notes in his first sentence here. We all have our motives for doing what we do – some of which we recognise and acknowledge; some of which we don't – but we do need to ensure that we are involved for the right reasons, and we do need to try always to do right.

Paul warns here about getting caught in a cycle of revenge or vindictiveness (vv17,19,21). It's something that can happen very easily, because we are all human. Someone says something to or about us and we get steamed up about it and decide we're going to let them know what it feels like. It may end up in a war of words, in malicious gossip, even in physical violence. But it will never end up resolved if that's the attitude we take. As one writer put it, "*Evil only grows through being requited.*" In other words, if you start behaving like that, things are sure to get worse. Leon Morris, in his comments on these verses, writes, "*To retaliate is to be overcome, not to win, for the enemy has then succeeded in bringing us down to his level.*" And "*the enemy*" is not simply the person you have the issue with, but the very devil himself, who does all he can to divide Christians one from another and so make them ineffective and useless.

## 2. **HUMILITY**

Part of the way in which we can overcome those kinds of difficulties is to cultivate a spirit of humility. "*Honour one another above yourselves*", writes Paul. Putting yourself at the centre of everything is one way in which we lose out on humility. Assuming everyone will be concerned only about you is another. But Paul puts it very succinctly in v16, when he writes, "*Do not be proud ... Do not be conceited.*" There are all kinds of things that can make us conceited, aren't there? It may be our education, or our wealth, our status, our office and responsibilities, our length of time in the church. But to use such things to elevate ourselves above others is clearly wrong. Paul has just been writing about spiritual gifts in the previous little section – and in *1 Corinthians* it's the same. We should never look down on others because of what God has graciously given us.

## 3. **ENTHUSE AND ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER**

Whenever you are part of a group of people who are basically trying to do the same thing – whether it's a sports team, a darts team, a charity, a reading group or whatever – being with those other people is a major factor in your enjoyment and success. You can encourage one another and spur one another on. Throughout Paul's letters there are exhortations to encourage one another and all sorts of particular reasons for doing so. Here, Paul tells the Roman Christians to be zealous, to "*keep your spiritual fervour*". That's easier said than done, sometimes. All kinds of things conspire to dampen our enthusiasm and keep us from really getting on with the tasks to which we have been called. But there are some hints here as to how we might deal with that.

Remember, first of all, that you are "*serving the Lord*". You have been called into this life to serve God – that in itself is a matter for great thanksgiving. You have the privilege of helping God in his mission in this world. The Master of the Universe has chosen you to be involved in his work – and that is well worth

celebrating and getting enthusiastic about. And in doing that he has given you a real hope – a *certain* hope, as we were saying last week – of a future with him. That is a cause for joy, as Paul says here – “*Be joyful in hope*”.

Now, if you’re in a group of people who share an awareness of the awesome privilege they have of serving God and who are filled with joy at the prospect of what God has in store for them eternally, then when things aren’t going well for you, when you wonder what’s going on in your life, you can draw on the joy and enthusiasm of others. In times of difficulty you can know patience and in times when things are going well for you but not for someone else, you can pray for them and encourage them.

#### 4. SHARE

But it’s not just enthusiasm, joy and prayer that we can share as part of the fellowship of Jesus’ disciples. There are more tangible things, too. You can share with the needy out of your own plenty. That happens on a broad scale as we share with our needy brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, but it can also happen between members within a congregation. Remember what we read of the first Christians in *Acts 2 & 4*. We all have things we can share with others, whether we give them away or lend them.

And part of that is shown in hospitality, sharing the home and the food that you have. Doing it, as we read elsewhere, without grumbling (*1 Peter 4:9*). It can be done as a church, too, as we welcome others into our services and our other activities. Again, it is part of passing on the blessing which we have received from God ourselves – blessing and not cursing.

#### 5. LIVE IN PEACE

This really sums everything else up, I suppose. We are called to live in peace with each other, “*as far as it depends on you*”. Some people just don’t want to live peaceably, but that is their problem, not yours. When others might be kicking up a fuss, do all that you can to show them kindness and share with them God’s blessing. Again, there is no room for resentment or vindictiveness in the Christian community.

Living in peace means empathising with others. Join in their joy and celebration when they are clearly delighted by things that are happening to them. Have a look at their wedding photos. Make encouraging noises when they pull four packs of pictures of their new grandchildren out of their handbags. And when they weep, be there for them. Let them know that you do care when they are struggling with loss and sadness. (But don’t say you know how they feel, because you don’t.)

Living in peace means living in harmony with one another, as Paul says in *v16*. Notice that Paul doesn’t say “living in **unison**.” I don’t know what his musical knowledge was like, but unison is everyone playing or singing the same notes at the same time. Harmony is blending all kinds of different notes and sounds and textures together to make something that is far, far more than the sum of the parts. But the various instruments or singers all have the same end in view, they are all moving in the same direction, all trying to make the best possible sound that they can. As disciples in fellowship with one another, we all have different things to contribute, we all bring something unique to the overall mix, but we all have a common attitude and purpose. It is the way in which we share those things and incorporate the contributions of others that helps create the rich mix that is the church.

I’d like to think that, by and large, that’s happening here. But we need to be ever watchful that we do not allow ourselves to slip into a situation where our witness is tarnished by unhelpful attitudes, words and actions creeping into our life together. We have our example in the life of Jesus Christ himself, who was able to draw others to himself and who lived a life that was full of humility and grace. He blessed others and so managed to prevent evil ever getting a hold in his life. May we be given the grace by his Holy Spirit to follow where he leads.

**"DISCIPLESHIP – THE BASICS: 3 – FELLOWSHIP"**  
***Romans 12:9-21***

This is a handy compendium of advice on what Christian fellowship is all about. Paul is setting down on paper, in his usual enthusiastic way, what he believes to be the attitudes and actions which should characterise the community of disciples of Jesus. It is glued together by his insistence on love – *agape* love, self-sacrificing love (v9). In the next verse Paul makes it clear that this love is the kind of love you'd expect to find in a family. The word translated "*be devoted to one another*" is the word *philostorgia*, which means the love shown between a parent and child, and then he writes of "*brotherly love*" (*philadelphia*) between siblings. The church is, indeed, like a family in many ways, not least in the old adage that "*You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family*".

As disciples of Jesus Christ we need to be together. We cannot make any progress on our own (see *Hebrews 10:25; 1 Corinthians 12*).

### **RIGHT AND WRONG**

We all have our motives for doing what we do – some of which we recognise and acknowledge; some of which we don't – but we do need to ensure that we are involved for the right reasons, and we do need to try always to do right. Paul warns here about getting caught in a cycle of revenge or vindictiveness (vv17,19,21).

### **HUMILITY**

Part of the way in which we can overcome those kinds of difficulties is to cultivate a spirit of humility. "*Honour one another above yourselves*", writes Paul, "*Do not be proud ... Do not be conceited.*" We should never look down on others because of what God has graciously given us.

### **ENTHUSE AND ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER**

Paul tells the Roman Christians to be zealous, to "*keep your spiritual fervour*". Remember, first of all, that you are "*servicing the Lord*". You have been called into this life to serve God. And in doing that he has given you a real hope – a **certain** hope – of a future with him. That is a cause for joy, as Paul says here – "*Be joyful in hope*". When things aren't going well for you, when you wonder what's going on in your life, you can draw on the joy and enthusiasm of others. In times of difficulty you can know patience and in times when things are going well for you but not for someone else, you can pray for them and encourage them.

### **SHARE**

You can share with the needy out of your own plenty. (Remember what we read of the first Christians in *Acts 2 & 4*.) And part of that is shown in hospitality, sharing the home and the food that you have.

### **LIVE IN PEACE**

We are called to live in peace with each other, "*as far as it depends on you*". Some people just don't want to live peaceably, but that is their problem, not yours. Living in peace means empathising with others and living in harmony with one another, as Paul says in v16. Notice that Paul doesn't say "living in **unison**." As disciples in fellowship with one another, we all have different things to contribute, we all bring something unique to the overall mix, but we all have a common attitude and purpose. It is the way in which we share those things and incorporate the contributions of others that helps create the rich mix that is the church.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Do you find it helpful to think about the church as a family? Why/why not?
2. Why do you think Paul stresses that we should not take revenge? Are we particularly prone to that as human beings or as Christians? What can we do about it?
3. How can we enthuse one another in the life of discipleship?
4. What does it mean to live in harmony with one another? Give practical examples.
5. "Some people just don't want to live in peace." How should we deal with them?
6. What do you find most difficult about Christian fellowship? What do you most value about it?