



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

HOW EMBARRASSING

When my wife, Diana, and I met a new couple at church one Sunday, we stopped to introduce ourselves and to exchange pleasantries. We described the friendly neighborhood we lived in, and listened sympathetically as they lamented that theirs was just the opposite. Saying our good-byes, we got in our cars and drove home. As we approached our house, we were horrified to see that our new-found friends were pulling into the driveway next to ours. - Kent Eikenberry

How embarrassing but these sorts of thing happen – and so often happen in a church environment. BAD PRESS Over the years, church has had a bad press. Is it justified? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Churches can be hurting places where people can get spiritually and emotionally damaged. I know that in the past people have left this fellowship because they have been upset or deeply offended by the action of others. It's just about the same everywhere else. But we all know that's not the way God wants things to be: He wants His church to be a growing place where we build one another up.

For some who leave., they hold on to God and reject church. Someone once said cynically *"Every day people are straying away from the Church and going back to God."* It's true that going to church doesn't get you to heaven – only Jesus can. But He intends that our walk with Him should involve others. Part of having Back to Church Sunday is to emphasise that God's way for His people is that they are part of His people because that is the only environment where His people can grow and thrive properly.

So it comes down to us to make sure that we build healthy relationships with one another so that we do grow and thrive because God has given us one another to do that.

It will be no surprise to us to know that bad church usually stems from bad relationships. So what should our relationship with one another be like?

COMMUNION

Let's go to what we have just done. Communion is an expression of how God has entered into a relationship with us through Jesus when we put our faith in Him. Communion represents our common life and shared values. We share the same values with one another that God has shared with us.

God showed our value to Him by sending Jesus to suffer and die for us and the symbols of that are in front of us. Why did God do that? Let me re-introduce you to two words:

GRACE You know I like the word grace. It's one of the foundations of the Christian faith. God has shown His favour to us and expressed that in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. GRACE – God's riches at Christ's expense. It's not just a case of cleansing from sin, but His eternal promises which I have reminded you of time and time again over the last few months. The literal meaning of grace is UNMERITED FAVOUR. From beginning to end, our faith is based on the notion that everything we are as the people of God comes because God has shown us His favour and we could not ever have merited any of it ourselves – we are accepted, secure and significant in Christ.

Why did God show us His grace? This brings us to the second foundational idea – because God loves us. LOVE + AGAPE. God is love – His nature is that He puts the needs of others before His own – even His own created beings – us! God loves each man and woman – for God so loved the world...

We have come into the good of God's love through faith. What is our response? It should be a natural response. A response of gratitude, of joy, of love. We are made in God's image – if we have understood the meaning of communion – then the love should well out of us quite naturally as the Holy Spirit reveals it to us because we are alive in Christ and free to be the people of God.

COMMANDMENTS In our reading this morning we see that Jesus says that two commandments sum up the whole of the law and prophets. Sometimes see commandments as something we are obliged to keep whether we like them or not like the 30mph speed limit. In one sense they are.

But as we look at these particular words think carefully. You can't make yourself love someone can you? We can't love to order. It's something that comes out of us. If you fall in love, it just kind of happens as you

come into a relationship with someone. We've come into a relationship with God, we've understood His grace and love – and the mark of that is that the love for Jesus should just flow out. So why then does God command us to love Him and love our neighbour?

These commandments we've been given really instruct us in what we do with that release of love from us as we understand the amazement of what God has done in Jesus. They don't just give us theological information but they're there to help us refine raw emotions. God is love, we are beings made in His image capable of love – how do we express that love. And Jesus gives us the two directions God wants us to express love and that's outwards from ourselves.

1. To God – a true understanding of the love of God for us gives us the desire to love Him and that expresses in the desire to worship Him and the desire to obey Him and follow Him.

2. To Others – God's love and grace is outwards to others, so therefore our command is to show them the same grace and love and everything else as He shows to them and has shown to us. He does it, we do it.

We usually have no problem with the notion of loving God. But loving others? Showing them the grace God has shown us? GRACE IS UNDESERVED FAVOUR We have a problem with that don't we? BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS. It isn't a problem to love people we like. But what about the person we can't forgive, or the people whose lifestyle we look down on, the people who don't share the same interests, people whose attitudes we don't like, people we disagree with. Do we have to love them? Do we have to do be prepared to put them before us if necessary? Yes. And if we don't people look at us and the bad press that is attributed to God's people goes on.

So do we have to love them? God does and this table stands as evidence of what He has already done. God isn't discriminating in who He loves and on whom He was prepared to pay the price to save. We are called to have the same love. He loves – now go and do the same.

The celebration of Communion is a celebration of being church. A recognition that God has given us one another as well as Jesus as we gather around the table. God has made us part each of us part of His church – note His church – and we need to build our relationships with one another in that context here in the local church.

Next week we are going to explore the implications of what loving our neighbour and loving one another has in practice. It is the building of these kinds of relationship which will help us to grow as God's people. It would be good to reflect this week on those in our own fellowship who we may find a bit "unlovely"; God loves them and calls on us to do the same. Let's allow God to challenge us.

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
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by Neil Anderson and Steve Goss*

Matthew 22 Verses 34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they came together, 35 and one of them, a teacher of the Law, tried to trap him with a question

36 “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus answered, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

38 This is the greatest and the most important commandment. 39 The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’

40 The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”