

40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY-FELLOWSHIP TOGETHER

Romans 12

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18th May 2008

The story is told of old Betty who made frequent trips to the local post office. One day she was confronted with a long line of people who were waiting to be served. Betty only needed stamps, so a helpful observer asked "Why don't you use the stamp machine? You can get all the stamps you need and you don't have to stand in line." Betty said, "I know, but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis." No matter our technology, people still need human contact. This is not just a human observation, it is a biblical injunction. We read in Genesis 2 that after making Adam, before the fall into sin occurred, God said "*It is not good for man to be alone*". We all need others to be with, laugh with, cry with, walk life together with. And for us as Christians it is especially important that we have fellow Christians to share our spiritual journey with. Today is the third Sunday in the 40 Days of Community and if you saw your fridge magnet recently you know that this week the theme is "***Fellowship together***". That will be the theme for your devotional readings starting tomorrow; the first devotion entitled "Admitting our need for each other". Now that is not an easy thing to do for many of us. Whether we come from Dutch, Afrikaans or even Aussie stock, we are fiercely independent people, many of us highly professional, with backgrounds where we needed to maintain a protective ring around ourselves; we are quite self-sufficient individuals. We have a determination and pride, and, especially for the men, to admit a need, to ask for help, to share a struggle, is seen as weakness and failure. But we must be careful that our strength does not become our weakness, our downfall. As some one said in a small group last week, we are in a "flood of people". Yet the irony is that many are lonely. Who remembers the words of the Simon & Garfunkel song (an oldie) "I am a rock, I am an island": "A winter's day/In a deep and dark December/ I am alone/ Gazing from my window to the streets down below/ On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow/ I am a rock/ I am an island/ I've built walls/ A fortress deep and mighty/ That none may penetrate/I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain./Its laughter and loving I disdain/I am a rock, I am an island....And a rock feels no pain/And an island never cries".

Yes, we may protect ourselves from pain, it can save you from crying if you put up your barriers. But have you lived? Have you lived as God wants you to live? Listen to what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:5 "*so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*" The Greek has an interesting turn of phrase here: "*One body in Christ we are and each one of one another members.*" So God's Word does not see us as rugged individuals, but people who are part of each other; we are parts of one body (you are my leg, I am your eye!). Our being one body has to do, first of all, with our relationship with Jesus. Notice how Paul starts off that verse speaking of us being "*in Christ*". How do you get to be "*in Christ*"? Well, when we come to Jesus, confess our sin and our need for him as Saviour, trust Him alone to make us right with God, then the Spirit dwells in us, and he connects us into a living relationship with Jesus. It's what theologians call the 'mystical union with Christ'. Now, as we respond to the Spirit within, we will want to live more and more for Jesus. As Paul writes in Romans 12:1 "*I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-which is your spiritual worship.*" And for us to live sacrificially, to live for Jesus at home, at work, at the football match, we need to first change our thinking. That's why Paul says

(verse 2) *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."* So being *"in Christ"*, being united to Jesus by the Spirit, being guided by the Spirit, we need to think differently. And one area where we need to think differently is how we relate with each other. Because the closer we get to Jesus the closer we get with each other as Christians. The one is in direct proportion to the other. It's like the spokes on a bicycle wheel, the closer the spokes get to the hub, the closer they are together. When you know the ratio you can actually work out how far you are from the hub by the distance between the spokes. We can actually get an idea of how close we are to Jesus by our fellowship with each other.

Now in thinking about how we relate with others we need first to have a proper assessment of our selves. That's why Paul writes in verse 3 *"...Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment..."* So none of this pride business, I'm better than you, I have it all together, I'm going to succeed even if you don't, look at my house, look at my car, I am making bucket loads of money. I am fine on my own. That is not on. But on the other hand, there should not be the thinking at the other extreme, either, that I am nothing, I am a worm, I can't do anything properly, I am useless, everyone can see how hopeless I am etc. Expressions of low self-esteem are not more Christian than expressions of pride. Look carefully again at what Paul says *"do not think of yourself more highly that you ought, but with sober judgment."* That is, a balanced view, recognizing both your strengths and your weaknesses. We need to recognize that each of us is made in God's image, so valued by God that he gave his own son for us. God has made you in a particular way so that you have a unique set of strengths, via your life experience, the character God gave you, the spiritual gifts you have been given. And you have your areas of weakness, things you are not so good at, things where you need some one else's help. Now this is not just an unfortunate way things have turned out. You might think that way if you assume we are all meant to be self -sufficient self -contained individuals. Having our particular strengths and weaknesses is by design because it makes us reach for each other, we see how much we need each other. Paul in verse 4 talks about our human bodies, which he says has many parts, like a leg or an eye. Paul points out that these various parts *"don't all have the same function"*; which is as it should be. If the whole body were an eye you wouldn't be very mobile (roll around). If the whole body were a leg you wouldn't see! You get Paul's point. We belong together as a body with various parts. We need each other. Paul goes on to mention the gifts of prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy. The design of the body of Christ is such that we don't really experience the fullness of life as God intended by being fiercely independent. We need each other. Christian life is meant to be lived in fellowship with each other.

Now for fellowship to work well, we need not only to discover our spiritual gifts and use them for each other, we also need to have a certain attitude. For example we need to respect each other. Note how Paul writes (verse 10) *"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."* The word 'honor' can mean 'something weighty, valuable, high esteem, dignity, respect.' If we are going to be devoted to each other in real **fellowship together** we need to hold each other in high regard. That starts by remembering that Jesus gave his life for that fellow believer. So imitate Jesus and honor their worth & dignity as well. Paul would say that fellowship is about sharing our stuff together and supporting each other. Look at verse 13 and 15 *"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality... Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn."* Fun times, important times in our lives are so

much better when we have friends to share them with. Imagine your first child has just been born, you have a great job offer, or you have just bought that house, and you have no one to tell. How bad is that! Tough times also should not be suffered alone. No one should be sitting in the hospital waiting room alone, no one should be grieving after hearing tragic news alone. If we have deep fellowship, we are not only there for each other, we feel for each other, in fact, we feel it too. Have you ever hit your thumb with a hammer? Your whole body is jumping around. You feel it all over. So if one of us faces loss or pain, we all feel it. We all share the grief. Paul writes that for us to have decent fellowship we need to get along together. In verse 16 he writes "*Live in harmony with one another.*" Verse 18 "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*" The Leadership magazine in an article compares the human race with a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. Says the writer: "The colder it gets outside the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of winter we eventually begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness". Jesus gives us an alternative: forgive each other for the pokes we receive. Always come back to Jesus and remember what he has forgiven us. That will allow us to stay together and stay warm.

We need each other, we need fellowship from each other, for our spiritual survival. We need to support each other, be patient, be honest, to use our spiritual gifts for each other to keep each other strong in the faith. A Zambian proverb says "If you run alone you can run fast. If you run together you can run far!" The Christian life is not a 50 meter sprint. It's a marathon. We need each other to keep going in life. Paul writes in verse 11 "*Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.*" What keeps you going? Our Lord uses his body to keep you going. If you are going on leave for a while, you get your neighbour to put out your rubbish bins, to get your mail, to keep an eye on your place. The neighbour covers for you. We need others to watch out for us. Let me ask you: do you have anyone looking out for your soul? Isn't your soul more important than your stuff? So who's helping you out in your spiritual journey? Who's watching out for you? Who's asking you the hard questions in life? Who cares enough to be honest with you, to make sure you are still growing in your spiritual walk? Who's watching out for you when you get discouraged, depressed and feel like giving up? You see how important Christian fellowship is? How unhelpful it is to remain rugged individuals who don't need any one else? Can you say to each other "I need you"? It's not easy for us, is it? "I need you and you need me"? Leonardo Da Vinci, with his engineering insight made the observation that "An arch consists of two weaknesses which leaning against each other make a strength." In the Bible the writer of Ecclesiastes sums up what we are saying in chapter 4:7-12. (cf). Let's as a church ***fellowship together***, let's be humble and honest, we need each other. And in meeting each other's needs, we are actually glorifying God as we display our unity in Christ.