

Community and Comfort in God's Family

Lesson 3

GROW DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM

Engaging the Learner

"Group Pastor." A smile forced itself to Juan's lips as he considered the proposal. Rachel Porter, the leader of the small group at the church Juan attended, had asked him to call absent group members and pray daily for needs in the class—to be the "group pastor". His brothers would never believe this! "Pastor Juan." He said the words softly to himself, shaking his head. That might take some getting used to. Still, Rachel felt certain he possessed the gifts for the job.

Juan thought back to when he began attending Westside Cathedral with Raul, a cousin, soon after moving to Atlanta a year and a half ago. Growing up in a large, close-knit family near Boulder, Colorado, Juan's decision to move to Atlanta to find work had been a difficult one. His family, technically Catholic, had never been practicing Christians. Nevertheless, hoping to forge new friendships and fight the loneliness that hung on him since moving, Juan had agreed to try the small-group Bible study his cousin attended. That first week, the people were warm and nice enough. Though it hadn't felt exactly like home, Juan decided to return. As the weeks went by, he found himself more and more comfortable.

After two months, Rachel approached Juan about taking weekly attendance for the Bible study. Although the task was small, Juan was excited to be a part of his new group of friends. Shortly afterwards, during a prayer time, Juan accepted Christ as his savior. He quit going to bars and strip clubs. Soon, he was rising a half hour early to read Scripture and prayer. Several other men in the group invited Juan to an accountability group they were starting. They quickly formed into the close family Juan had missed since leaving Boulder.

And now Rachel had asked him to be "group pastor," showing Christ's love to others in the group. Although apprehensive, Juan knew this was where he belonged, ministering to this body of believers he now viewed as family. He smiled again. "Pastor Juan." On second thought, his brothers, at least his brothers at church, might just believe it.

Exploring the Lesson

In passages such as Romans 12, the Bible calls Christians into loving fellowship in order that they might thrive spiritually and emotionally. The Book of Romans is Paul's letter to the various churches of Rome. Paul wanted these churches to experience unity in Christ, both within each congregation and between their several congregations. In the letter, he chose to include both basic Christian theology and practical instruction for living a Christian life. Romans 12 forms the transition between these two sections. He was saying, in effect, "Because of the theology I've written in chapters 1-11, you need to live in a particular way." That "way" consists of two inter-related dynamics: total commitment to God and full engagement in the life of the Body of Christ. This lesson focuses on this 12th chapter of Romans. Take a moment to read Romans 12.

Commitment

A person becomes a part of God's family only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus. Assurance of belonging to the family comes when, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children"

(Romans 8:16). You can enjoy the blessing of God through participation in the church only after you continually commit yourself to God as a living sacrifice.

Read Romans 12:1-2. God has always desired that people be fully dedicated to Him and His design for life. God gave Moses instructions to pass on to the people of God: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus affirmed this statement as the greatest commandment (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). When Paul urged his readers to present themselves as "living sacrifices," he repeated this message found throughout the Bible.

The Christians in Rome must have been surprised by the idea of a "living" sacrifice. All the sacrifices with which they were familiar were dead. But the believers had been made alive in Christ. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, they had spiritual life. The transformation was ongoing, so the commitment to God needed to be ongoing. Hence, the challenge to be a living sacrifice.

Clarity

One of the benefits for the person totally committed to God is clarity concerning God's will. In the Bible, we find many passages where God said, "Do this and you will live." Other times, God said, "Do that and you will die." The committed Christian carefully follows these directions. Paul reminded the Roman Christians that God's will is "good, pleasing, and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Good, meaning "suitable, honorable, and reliable." Pleasing, meaning "gratifying, agreeable, and satisfying." Perfect, meaning "complete, excellent, and precise." A Christian has no reason to fear God's design when it is good, pleasing, and perfect.

Clarity comes to the disciple of Christ as her or his mind is renewed through continuing spiritual transformation. Christians view the world differently than they did before becoming part of the family of God. Priorities change. Lifestyles change. God changes our perception of the world until it becomes aligned with God's design for life.

Self Talk

Read Roman 12:2-8. As Paul moved into the heart of his discussion concerning how a person is to function in the church, he began with a word of caution: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought" (12:3). The opposite is true too: do not put yourself down. Instead employ "sober judgment," that is, have a realistic view of yourself.

How does a person develop a realistic view of himself or herself? Paul answered that question with a discussion of how God wants the church to function. God's design is that the church operates like a human body with each organ and limb perfectly performing its role. In the same way, members of the church do not all have the same function, but each person has an integral role to play according to how God has gifted the person. The "sober judgment" Paul mentioned in verse two comes from an awareness of my contribution to the life of the congregation. I learn to know myself as I offer myself as a living sacrifice, first to God, then to the family of God.

Service

Paul urged the Romans to create a church that feels like home through each person freely giving what he or she had to the community of faith. To the believers in Corinth, Paul said that the gifts of the Spirit are "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). The family of God grows and matures in the faith as each member serves others.

Paul listed several gifts needed by the church to function well: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leadership, mercy. This is not a comprehensive list, and other Bible passages identify additional gifts (1 Corinthians 12:10-11; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Paul's intention was to show the range of gifts that help the church be all that God intended it to be. The challenge is clear: however God has equipped you for ministry, serve the Lord joyfully as you serve your brothers and sisters in the church.

Attitude

Paul closed Romans 12 with a discussion of the manner in which a Christian is to be involved in the life of the church. He urged the believers in Rome to serve each other with love and cheerfulness and understanding. Read Romans 12:9-21.

For the church to function as God intended, the members must “be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves” (12:10). To love is to seek the best for the other person. Love, as Paul discussed it in this passage, is not an emotional response as much as it is action, compassionate behavior—a lifestyle. “Brotherly love” signifies that the church is to function like a family where each person cares for and serves the other members of the family. Love is a key to building God’s family.

The effective member of the church will be cheerful and enthusiastic about serving the Lord by serving others. In verse 11, Paul used the words “zeal” and “fervor,” both of which have an energy and excitement about them. A faithful disciple seeks to contribute to the life of the church and does so with passion and optimism.

Paul also urged Christians to understand and identify fully with others. In verse 15, he encouraged them to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” As a member of the family of God, the concerns of another person become my concerns. We share burdens and victories.

Enhancing Our Lives

Do you want to be part of a church that feels like home? Do you want to help build the family of God? If so, you will get involved. Use the gifts and talents God has given you to serve others, and in the process you will make the congregation stronger. Contentment in the community of faith has more to do with what you give than what you get.

Action

Just as it is impossible to change the path of a car if it is not moving, so you will be unable to discover God’s will for you and your involvement in the church if you are inactive. Do something. Try new things. Trying, with the risk of mistakes, is preferable to doing nothing. In your activity, seek to better understand the gifts God has given you. Then, try to use those gifts with ever-increasing effectiveness for the sake of God’s kingdom.

You may already be involved in ministry of some kind. Continue your involvement with renewed vigor. Pay attention to those things that interest you. God may use your natural curiosity to build the family of God. Are you passionate about something? That may be a God-given drive to propel you forward. Have you become aware recently of a need in the life of another person? God may be calling you to action. You may be the answer to the other person’s need.

Resist the urge to try and make everything fit in the “grand scheme of things.” You probably won’t be aware of the big picture until you are down the road a ways. Instead, faithfully respond to wherever you find yourself. There are no little people in God’s eyes. No insignificant situations. In all circumstances, “be ready to do whatever is good” (Titus 3:1).

Assessment

In Romans 12, Paul called the disciples to think well. In verse 2, he urged them to renew their minds. In verse 3, he challenged them to think realistically. He wanted them to accurately assess how God has gifted each person so that the family of God may be built up. Careful assessment will follow action.

A person must thoughtfully consider her or his actions. What energized me? Exhausted me? Did I feel equipped for the task? Poorly prepared? Did the role fit who I am? Or might a shift be wise?

Involve yourself in those things that energize you. Look for a mentor to help train you. Try new roles—like you would try on a jacket at a clothing store until you find a fit.

While the assessment process can be done in solitude, involving other Christians in the process would be ideal. Just as Paul challenged the Romans to form a realistic view of themselves through involvement in the community of faith, so we will benefit from interaction with brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Christian group known as the Friends or Quakers often utilize what they call a “clearness committee” to assist a person faced with a major decision. When the small group gathers, they begin with a time of quiet meditation, then the person begins to talk about herself or himself in relation to the decision. The other persons listen carefully. They may ask questions to elicit clarity, but are not permitted to make comments. Not threatened by periods of silence, the group patiently moves through the agreed upon length of the meeting, usually at least one hour.

People in the family of God will help you discover how God has gifted you for ministry. They will assist as you learn to “think of yourself with sober judgment” (Romans 12:3). Treasure the gifts that your brothers and sisters give you as you seek to discover God’s will for your life and ministry.

Assurance

The affirmation you receive from your friends should be valued, as they help you discover God’s will for you. Sometimes, you may be encouraged through an explicit confirmation of your service to the family of God. Other times, it might be a smile or simple “thank you” offered in a moment that lingers in your memory. Graciously receive the blessing. Generously give blessings to others.

Ultimately, however, it is God who assures you that you have found a place of service. John wrote, “Those who obey his commands live in him and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:24). Nothing satisfies like the assurance from God that the “living sacrifice” we offer pleases Him. The response to God’s affirmation is a prayer of thanksgiving for the privilege of helping create a church that feels like home.

Expanding Our Love

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal or small group reflection. In this chapter, a single, extended small group activity is placed after the questions. Small groups should discuss the preceding questions before moving to the exercise. An individual learner can easily modify the exercise for his or her personal study.

Engaging the learner

What are some of the emotions Juan felt upon moving to Atlanta?

Have you ever dealt with these types of emotions? When?

Commitment

Read Romans 12:1-2. What is the significance of being a “living” sacrifice?

Clarity

What can you do to foster a renewed mind?

Self Talk

Read Romans 12:3-8. How does a person develop a realistic view of herself or himself?

Service

Who do you know that exhibits the gift of serving? Encouraging? Mercy?

Attitude

Read Romans 12:9-21. Agree/Disagree: Love is not an emotional response as much as it is an action.

Agree/Disagree: Contentment in the community of faith has more to do with what you give than what you get.

Group Exercise

Action

Distribute paper and a pencil to each person. Tell the class members that they will be creating four lists, each in a one-minute period. They should write continuously. Two or more of the lists may have identical items. Their papers are for their use only and will not be turned in.

Ask each person to write "Current Service" on the sheet. For one minute, each person will make a list of ways he or she is currently helping others. Add the heading "Interests." For one minute, each person will make a list of personal interests. Add the heading "Passion." For one minute, each person will make a list of things for which he or she is excited. Add the heading "Needs." For one minute each person will make a list of other's needs of which they are aware.

Ask the class to look over their lists. In each category, circle one item that stands out for whatever reason. Then, select one of the circled items to consider in the next section.

Assessment

Each person should quietly consider her or his involvement in the selected area.

- What about this activity energizes me?
- What do I have to offer?
- Who might help me grow as I serve in this area?

After about five minutes, form groups of three or four. Invite each person to share what he or she has been considering about service to others. After about four minutes of sharing, have someone in the group pray for the person. Repeat this sequence until all persons in the small group have an opportunity to share.

Closing

Close the small-group activity with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's gifts of opportunities for service.