

I Believe in the Church

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Lent: I Believe Series

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

March 16-17, 2013

INTERACTING WITH THE SERMON

SYNOPSIS OF THE SERMON

Despite all the many things that divide us as Americans, the one thing that unites us is our commitment to individualism. For us, the individual conscience is sacred. No one has the right to tell us what to believe or how to live (e.g. what to do with our bodies or who to marry!)

It is individualism that is at the heart of the challenge to the Christian church and today that objection takes the form of SBNR—"I'm spiritual but not religious!" Many think they don't need the church to be spiritual. Religious institutions like the church are rejected because they are viewed as sinful—guilty of all kinds of oppression and hypocrisy

The problem with the SBNR position is that one, sin is found everywhere—both inside AND outside the church. And two, it's impossible to be truly spiritual apart from the church. We need God AND we need others to challenge us and change us and grow us up. We need the church to teach us humility and that we are not the center of the world—to show us our blind spots and our wrong thinking.

So according to Paul, what should the church be like?

First, the church is to be like a family. Five times in our passage Paul calls us "brothers and sisters." At its most fundamental level, the church is a family, and it's a family across geography (around the world) and across time (throughout the ages). That is what the creed means by "the communion of saints."

The church is the answer to the most fundamental problem of human beings—that it is not good for us to be alone. Marriage is one solution to that problem, but not everyone can or does get married. The church offers us family, friendship and community!

Paul goes on to describe the church's leaders. They are to be first hardworking—literally toiling like a farmer or manual laborer. Second, they are to be servants—caring for the flock—the rest of the family. And third, they are to "admonish" the church, which means to warn against bad behavior. Leaders must be willing to rebuke, correct, warn and challenge.

Admonishing is the hardest thing for leaders today. Most are good at upholding the love of God but many balk at upholding God's holiness and righteousness. Leaders must do both.

The church's responsibility is to carry out many of these same things! It's not just the pastors/leaders who "get to play"—we all get to play. Everyone in the family together encourages, supports, cares for, counsels, warns and challenges.

Today, many view the church as a commodity, like a tire warehouse or a Walmart. When Walmart does something we don't like, we stop shopping there and begin shopping somewhere else! So... when the church does something we don't like, we leave and go to another church.



That's NOT how we should live in the church. As family, we hang in there when there are disagreements or someone offends us! We work it out because we are family. We persevere because we have something that can never be taken from us: the love of God for us in Christ Jesus.

Finally, the church has power that is beyond its members. It's not just what we can accomplish, but it's what God can do through the power of His Spirit. That makes church not only safe (where we know we are loved by God and cared for by family) but also surprising (where God does what only God can do). The church must welcome the Spirit but also discern what is and is not the Spirit.

In 5 minutes or less, briefly give a synopsis of this week's sermon. What insight, principle, or observation from this weekend's message did you find to be most helpful, eye-opening, or troubling? Explain.

GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

These questions can be used as ice-breakers in the beginning OR interwoven between the questions below to draw the group into the discussion.

1. What were some unexpected truths you learned from this week's sermon? Did you discover any misconceptions you've always believed about the church? Discuss.
2. Do you see in yourself a tendency towards individualism? If so, if what ways does it manifest itself in your life? Discuss.

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Context: Paul's letter to the church at Rome is the most thorough, systematic explanation of the gospel and its implications in the entire New Testament. It is both theological and practical—it touches on all aspects of the Christian life and doctrine. In this letter we find a clear description of what Paul thinks of the church and how he thinks we are to relate to each other as members of the church.

Chapter 12 is a turning point in Paul's letter. It begins with the word "therefore." Now, Paul is saying, because of everything that God has done for us in salvation, here is how we are to live! He wants it to be crystal clear that the high standards to which he is about to call us to does *not* earn us salvation. It is simply the only reasonable response to the grace and mercy of God.

Read – Romans 12:3-21

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.



6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; **7** if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; **8** if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. **10** Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. **11** Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. **12** Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. **13** Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. **15** Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. **16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19** Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. **20** On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

- In verses 4-5 what metaphor does Paul use to describe the church? Why do you think he doesn't just stick with the "family" metaphor he used in 1 Thessalonians? What additional insights about the church do we get from *this* one?
- In verse 3 Paul exhorts us, his readers, to "think of ourselves with sober judgment." What do you think he means? Why is this so important as we begin our consideration of the church? (Isn't it more spiritual to not think of yourself at all?) Discuss.
- Paul says two basic things about the church as "a body"—we belong to each other and we have different gifts or functions. What does this mean? Then he lists some of these gifts. How might a person with these gifts use them at Vineyard Columbus?
- Paul does not intend this list to be exhaustive. What are some additional gifts you can think of that would be useful within the church?
- Note that Paul gives specific instructions on how each gift should be exercised. Why do you think he does this? Do you observe anything unusual or interesting in what he says? Discuss.
- The theme of verses 9-22 is "love must be sincere." This section is like a code of conduct for how members of the church ought to behave. Its placement is similar to 1 Corinthians 13 (Paul's love chapter), which is right in the middle of his discussion of gifts in the church. Why do you think Paul does this?



- “Love must be sincere” summarizes the following verses. How are the following statements good descriptions of what it means to love sincerely? Which of these do you find the easiest? Which do you find the most challenging? Why?
- We don’t expect to find persecution or evil within the church, between Christians, but in reality we do! What are some examples of how Christians can “persecute” each other? Read verse 17-21. Describe how Paul wants us as the church to relate when this happens. What is he saying in this passage (and what is he *not* saying)? What are some of the keys to helping us carry out this high calling?

MINISTRY APPLICATION

Below you'll see some options for ministry time with your group. We always encourage you to reserve time in your group to pray for one another and wait on the Holy Spirit.

- Often it is hard for us to “think about ourselves with sober judgment”—to have an accurate view of who we are. Take a moment to pray and “think soberly” about *each other*. As everyone feels comfortable, have the group share what gifts they observe in other members, making sure to be sincere and not just flattering. Then lay hand on each other and bless the gifts that God has given to those in the group for the benefit of the church.
- In our passage, Paul tells us to bless those who persecute us and not seek revenge for being hurt. There may be those in the group struggling not to return evil for evil! Take time to pray for those who feel this applies to them, reminding everyone that we can do *all things* (even this) through Christ who strengthens us!

