

# FAMILY OF GOD

## Romans 12:3-21

Live Sermon: [http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

Let me start this sermon by telling you a story. I used to travel from my home in Hillsborough to Prosser Brook where my grandparents stayed. The road was made of dirt, full of pot holes, twists and turns. I remember I had a really old Acadian Chevette. That car had weak breaks, little to no struts and burned a court of oil every half hour of driving! To travel to my grand parent's house in that car was a task fraught with all sorts of danger! When I first started driving the only way I could get safely to Prosser Brook on those treacherous roads was to learn how to read the signs. When the sign said twisty turn ahead I slowed down and navigated towards the direction of the turn. When the sign said bump ahead I slowed down and tried to avoid the pothole – lest my whole car be left in pieces on the road. In the way that I learned to read the signs to my grand parent's home Paul is inviting us today to celebrate our close, church family and to not forget to read the signs of unity that got us peace. After a while I stopped looking for the signs when I drove my car. My memory of every turn and pothole was flawless! So I thought! One day I forgot there was a sharp corner coming ahead and did not subsequently slow down. I soon learned going the speed limit was ok for only some parts of a dirt road, but not all parts! I flipped the car over a 100-foot bank. Praise be to God the car landed on a tree after only 20 of those feet. This is what can so easily happen inside of the church if we forget how we got unity and take just one sharp, conflict turn too fast! This sermon is about how to read the sign posts of unity so that we might keep on building on our family love that we have for each other.

### Sign Post 1: Jesus is the Head of the Church

**<sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:22-23, NIV)**

Appointed and called by God (Hebrews 3:1), after the order of Melchizedek (Psalms 110:4), of unblemished purity (Hebrews 7:26,28), Jesus offered His own life as a sacrifice for all so that through His death and resurrection there might be a path of reconciliation (Hebrews 2:17) and redemption (Hebrews 9:12) for all those who believe (John 3:16). Predicted (Psalms 118:22) and appointed by God (Ephesians 1:22) this lamb that was slain (Revelation 5:12) has once and for all ended the hostility between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free; for we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord (Galatians 3:28). No longer foreigners and strangers, God expects His friends and citizens (Ephesians 2:19) to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bonds of peace. Nothing helps us to keep this unity any better I think than being reminded that Jesus Christ is the Lord of everything seen and unseen. While intellectually you know this road sign is true that Jesus is the lead of the church, your heart might beg to differ.

I had a gentleman come into the church and made a statement that I found quite amusing. We have all heard of the quote: "when two or more are gathered in My name, there I

am with them (Matthew 18:20);” but what about his statement: “when two or more Christians are gathered together there are always at least five contrary opinions!” It is almost like I cannot agree with either myself nor me any more than you can agree with yourself and you. Stories of church splits, conniving church members, rampant gossip, and blatant hypocrisy are so numerous that they have informed and negatively colored the broader culture’s definition of “church”.

Let me give you an example of a strange church split. 100 years of Christian fellowship, spiritual love, Godly unity, and community growth ended last Tuesday in a fit of congregational discord not to be rivaled in this century. Holy Creek Baptist Church was split down the middle like the tabernacle cloth that tore at the point of our Lord's crucifixion. It is said that one could hear that rip a hundred miles away. Holy Creek Baptist was severed from the once stalwart cord of unity that bound them together. The fist of discord has pounded an army of Christian soldiers into two disheveled, unorganized factions of estranged members. The source of dissension in this once Holy house of God, is a piano bench which still sits behind the 1923 Steinburg to the left of the pulpit. Landover Baptist members who have friends or relatives at Holy Creek Baptist, say that the old bench was always a source of hostility. People should have seen this coming. "That congregation was getting ready to break for the last 10 years," some said. "It's just a shame that it had to be over a piano bench." One outside pastor commented, "However ridiculous it might sound, I'm sure the Lord is using this whole thing in some way that none of us can see or make any sense of at all or ever hope to comprehend." At present, Holy Creek Congregation will be having four services a day. There has been an unspoken agreement mediated by Pastor Deacon Fred of the Landover Baptist Church. Each faction will have it's own separate service with it's own separate pastor. Since the head pastor is not speaking to the associate pastor, each will have their own service, which will be attended by factioned members. We are told that the services are far enough apart that neither group will come into contact with the other. An outside party will be moving the piano bench to different locations and appropriate positions, between services, so as to please both sides, and avoid any further conflict that could result in violence (Source: <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0899/piano.html>)

Some of the conflicts have even become the stuff of legend. For example, rumors abound that a church split over which direction to roll the toilet paper. Now, just in case you do not think there is room for a deep theological argument here, consider the fact that Christians are called to carefully administer church resources and that the pull of gravity may cost the careless, frivolous church (that rolls the toilet paper toward the floor rather than over the top of the roll) a couple of squares every month. I am sure that this travesty ranks up there somewhere next to human sex trafficking or religious persecution in the eyes of the Almighty (taken from: <http://churchlawinstitute.com/toilet-paper-quarters-and-church-conflict/>). In both of these stories it was not the material things that caused the church to split, it was a lack of love for each other! They simply forgot that loving God and one another was the summary of all the commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

## Sign Post #2: Loving God Means Indiscriminately Loving Each Other

Lest we think too little of these churches and too highly of ourselves let's look at the story of the Good Samaritan as found in Luke 10:25-37. As I tell the story think about which character you represent in the story. The expert in the law stands up and asks Jesus a simple question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? This was not necessarily a hostile question but merely one in which he genuinely wanted to know the human responsibility in attaining eternal life. Jesus counters this question by asking two of his own: what is written in the law and how do you interpret it? This was this person's area of expertise so Jesus knew he would easily come up with an answer. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, the expert in the law states the summary of the laws is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and to love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus immediately affirms that this indeed is the right answer. Then in verse 29 the expert attempts to justify his own actions by asking Jesus: "who is my neighbor?" The audience probably would have been ok with naming the priests, the Levites or the Jewish people. For the expert in the law, he was probably a good neighbor to all three of these. Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan to get a central point across to not only the expert in the law but also to the audience as well.

Let's hear the story in Jesus' own words.

**<sup>30</sup> In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' <sup>36</sup> "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" <sup>37</sup> The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:30-37).**

So tell me who are you in that story? We can all relate to the one who was beat up. We have all experienced trials and tribulations and as a result have felt like life has beaten us up! Our pain might not be physical like the man beaten by the robbers but we certainly have lots of emotional scars that are either have not healed or are being carried around like badges of honor. Inside of the church we are usually more than ok with others doing good deeds for us, after all we deserve it, right? When it comes to the good Samaritan we are more than

comfortable in being just like him, full of mercy to anyone that we meet. When it comes to walking a mile in either of the priests or Levites shoes, well for this story, we prefer to take a pass! Who wants to be seen in such a horrible light?

That being said are we not somewhat like the priest and Levite in this story? You see every body of Christ is made up of all sorts of personalities, some of which you will find very attractive. There are people that we meet in this world that look like us, talk like us and act like us. It is almost like God made them as a reflection not only of His own image but of ours as well. Their life experiences are the same, they like the same foods, they like the same sports and they always laugh at our jokes. They love to talk and they are always interested in our well being, as you are with theirs! These are the people that we tend to make the strongest bonds of friendship with and spend most of our times sharing our life adventures. That being said what about all the rest of the body of Christ? Have you made room for them in your lives? What if they are going through great pain and you could be a source of great comfort to them, would you help them? Let's make this really personal: are you helping them right now? If you really want to know which character you are in the story then simply ask the following question: do I bake, play cards, go for walks or play sports with all people inside of the church or only a select few? You might object at this point and say: if I saw anyone in need I would be right there to fulfill that need! That might very well be true but if you are not actively involved in other people's lives then how will you ever know they are hurting and need mercy?

Paul was instructing the church of Ephesus to hang onto the love they had for God and each other. He wanted them to not take for granted the unity they had when Corinth and Philippi were not nearly as fortunate. To be a true body that loves one another, one must learn how to open one's heart to all others. We desperately need to share our love with others and have their love extend back to us. It is precisely in showing indiscriminate love to all people that one becomes a loving family of God. This is what I believe has already happened at McKees Mills. You truly do love one another. Harold testified a week ago that your love compelled him to stay at the church because you made room for him in your lives. I want to say that me and my family feel honored to be here for the love we have extended to all of you has been more than returned to us! For Paul, the sign post of indiscriminate love for one another is how we got and will keep church unity.

### **Sign Post #3: All Members are of Equal Value**

**<sup>3</sup> 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 (Romans 12:3, NIV)**

Another sign post that keeps us on the road to church unity is the one that says: avoid creating a social pecking order based on pride. When two or more people are gathered together it is human nature to assign a pecking order. Hierarchies of social groups are often assigned based on who has the most money, charisma, power, good looks or social connections.

While one would like to think those standing at the foot of the cross would be impervious to creating a pecking order, that simply is not always the case. I remember the first time I went to a Baptist Convention gathering. As I was getting ready to go to the first conference activity I remember the butterflies raging inside of my stomach. I had no idea what to expect. How do pastors, Convention leaders and laypeople interact with each another at a social setting? I soon found out! Let me start out with the positive. The people at the conference talked to me and made me feel like I was part of the group. They were genuinely interested in the pastoral ministry path that I had just begun and frequently told me they would pray that God would sustain my calling. That being said, I also noticed that there was a pecking order there as well. Those who were pastors naturally wanted to talk to other pastors, especially the ones of the largest churches. Those who were the leaders of Convention wanted to talk to each other or with the pastors of the largest churches. It is not that they would not talk to others of lower stature but simply that their preference was to talk to those who had attained a professional level equal to that of their own. If you ask anyone one of them, is there a pecking order here?, their minds would say but who they primarily associated with would indicate otherwise!

Paul is telling the church at Rome that the bonds of unity inside of the church are best obtained when its members view their roles and accomplishments as being God given and not a product of their own abilities. While the tassels and garments of our accomplishments might tempt us to sit in Moses' seat of honor and prestige, one must never forget spiritual gifts are worthless without the blessing of He who opens and closes the doors of our accomplishments (Revelation 3:8). McKees Mills does excellent job of loving each other with equality. Paul is warning us as a church to be on watch for pride so that a pecking order inside of the church will never exist!

#### **Sign Post #4: Unity Inside of the Body of Christ Suffers When Members Don't use their Spiritual Gifts**

**<sup>4</sup>For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup>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 (Romans 12:4-6, NIV)**

Another sign post that keeps us on the road to church unity is the one that says: the family suffers when its members do not use their spiritual gifts. Paul in this verse uses the illustration of the human body to make the point that unity can be maintained precisely because there is diversity! For the human body to function well as a whole all parts must function in unison. Ever try to do something without one part of your body? Remember getting blind folded and then trying to pin the tail on the donkey or bust a piñata? These are tasks that can easily be accomplished with sight but blindness success is almost impossible. Some of you might have heard of Nick Vujicic who was born without arms or legs. While he can do many of

the same activities that we can do he still has limitations that keep him from doing what we take for granite.

The body of Christ functions in a similar way as the human body. If one part of the body of Christ is not functioning, then all parts of the body suffer. Can you imagine what it would be like if we had no singers, no instrument players, no pastor, no deacons or no Sunday School teachers? How would we effectively worship or preach or teach to one another? Can you imagine what it would be like if no one prayed? How would we ever come to know the will of God? Without His will how could we accomplish anything? The spiritual gifts a person is given is how God assigns their role inside of the church. When each member is performing their God given role the church functions smoothly. When members refuse to identify or use their gifts the body of Christ suffers because we truly are interdependent upon one another.

### **Sign Post #5: Love is Action**

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

Love is not an emotion without action, it is the primary fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). To start off his passage on love in action Paul states love must be sincere or it casts doubt on our professed love for God. To show our sincerity we must first learn to love for each other. 1 John 4:20–21 states “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”<sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” The word “sincere” in this passage means to lack hypocrisy. If we say we are one family of God then we must learn to love all members, even when some might want to be our enemies (Luke 6:32). The Lord Jesus Christ emulated what it truly means to love others above yourselves when He emptied Himself to take on the nature of a servant that would be sacrificed on a cross (Philippians 2:3-7). In a similar manner we are to honor the other members in this church above ourselves and become their servants. True love that never lacks zeal is one that always looks for new ways of expressing that love. What would a church look like if everyone was a servant to all others? Praise be to God I think if this ever happened the world would never doubt we are true disciples of Christ (Matthew 13:35).

Sincere love in action must be firmly grounded in a desire to emulate God who hates evil and clings to good. Love in our modern age can either mean sex, lust or some kind of touchy feely sentiment. True love commits to doing good for others, even at the cost to self. It is the ability to see the eyes of Christ in all members and as a result being willing to provide for their physical, emotional and spiritual needs (Matthew 25:31-46). True love is not complacent in the eyes of evil but always strives to do good. A church family that tries to keep the bonds of peace (Ephesians 4:3) at the expense of doing what is right in God's sight will not obtain unity but

instead an atmosphere of masked pretenders of the faith! Instead, to become a loving, unified body of Christ we must learn how to confess our sins to God first (1 John 1:9) and then to one another so that we might be forgiven and keep our relationships between our members truly wholesome (James 5:16).

Since God makes the rain fall on the righteous and unrighteous (Matthew 5:45), Paul encourages the church to secure their love not in the present but in the future. All churches go through difficult times. I remember being at a church that had a really bad weekend. It first started with a large snow storm in which we got almost a foot of snow. Next day we had a torrential down pour of rain. This caused the snow to melt but when it did so all the water migrated to the back door of the church. The flood was enormous – over 6 inches of water all over the basement floors. We had to throw out all of the basement flooring and cut 6 inches of gyprock off the walls. It was not an easy time! Paul says one can be joyful in such a situation if one keeps one's eyes fixed on winning the race (Philippians 3:14), which is to spend an eternity with Jesus! Like the church who shared what they had to rebuild that basement, we too need to share with anyone who is going through a difficult time inside of our church family.

#### **Sign Post #6: Love is Offered to all People in all Circumstances**

**<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (Romans 12:14-16, NIV)**

Love is an action that seeks to live in harmony with all members of the church body. For those members who chose to persecute you, bless and do not curse them! This is not a contradiction with Paul's earlier command to hate evil for Christians are to hate the sin and not the sinner. It is natural to want to retaliate when our enemies attack us but Paul says to do what is countercultural – love them despite their actions. When we love those who harm us Proverbs 25:22 states we heap coals of shame on their heads. This is not done vindictively but with a genuine desire to see that person repent and have their relationship with God and the person they have attacked restored to a healthy one.

Living in harmony with all members also means we should share life experiences and emotions with one another. Those who are mourning a loss should be comforted by the body of Christ. Often we avoid those who mourn because it is not an emotion we like experiencing. We also have a hard time comforting others because we feel we lack the words to make the situation better. Without the Holy Spirit we would have nothing to offer but as it is He who lives inside of us is the only one who can heal a broken heart. To help another in difficult times can involve action – like donating time or money – but in the case of losing a loved one to death it is the tender, loving heart that helps the most! Having been a person who has lost many loved ones who were in the prime of their lives, I can honestly say support from family is critical in surviving these kinds of experiences.

The last part of this passage ends where it began: do not be proud but be willing to associate with all people. Everyone here is created in the image of God. Christ died for each

and everyone of you so He obviously thought each of you were worth His every life! If we are to be like Christ are we not to feel the same way? Are we not to love each member of this body of Christ regardless of age, sex, status, wealth or beauty? YES, we are. It is precisely in loving all people indiscriminately and without reservation that we are able to function as one body of Christ that is constantly building each other up in the faith!