

Healthy Relationships

Prior to my first semester of seminary, I devoured the seminary catalog. I was so eager to begin my studies. But as I surveyed the programs and required courses for my degree, one class kind of puzzled me: interpersonal relationship skills. Why would a future pastor or ministry leader need this course? I mean, biblical studies and theology made sense, but this class seemed unnecessary. However, the course was the result of research on why the graduates had a hard time in the local church. This wasn't due to their theology or preaching skills; it was due to their failure to cultivate and maintain healthy relationships.

So, in my first semester, I would go to a course on expository preaching at 8 a.m., and then I studied interpersonal relationship skills at 9 a.m. Looking back, I see this as illustrative of ministry. Pastors and church leaders must rightly handle the Word of truth (cf., 2 Tim 2:15; 1 Tim 3:2; 4:16), but we must also remember that pastoral ministry is people-focused. We must lead people humbly (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1–5), love people genuinely (cf. 1 Tim. 4:12; 2 Tim. 4:22), deal with conflict peaceably

(cf. Matt. 5:9; Rom. 14:19), deal with critics gently (2 Tim. 2:25), and love outsiders warmly (1 Tim. 3:7; Tit. 1:8). Further, Paul says overseers (if they are married) must love their wives faithfully (1 Tim. 3:2), and they must manage their own households well (1 Tim. 3:4–5; Tit. 1:6). Relationships matter—in the home, in the church, and among the outside world.

The call to honor Christ in our relationships by following the teaching of Scripture is the calling for all Christians—whether or not one is in vocational ministry. While there are some differences in how pastors relate to parishioners, this competency is primarily about basic discipleship principles for all believers. The unique challenge for pastors and ministry leaders is to set the believers *an example* in this area (1 Tim. 4:12).

Gospel-driven relationships

One could look to a number of texts to think about healthy relationships, but a go-to passage for me is Romans 12:9–21.

Romans 12:1 marks a new section in the letter to the Romans. Believers are exhorted to live in view of God's "mercies" (12:1)—the glorious gospel that we read about in Romans 1–11. Christians are to offer our bodies as "a living sacrifice" to God (Rom. 12:1) and to be transformed through the renewal of our minds (12:2). One of the primary ways Romans 12:1–2 will be lived out is by the Christian giving himself or herself to the church, through the use of their spiritual gifts

(12:3–8), and through gospel-centered acts of love in their relationships (12:9–16).

Paul is dealing in the book of Romans with a conflict between Jews and Gentiles (see 14:1ff). The church had become fractured along ethnic lines. The leadership was mainly Gentile. The meetings were not in synagogues but in house churches. The Jewish believers would have found many of the Gentile cultural practices offensive. All of this gives rise to Paul's glorious multi-ethnic vision for the people of God. All of this lies behind the entire letter.

Paul argues that unity between Jews and Gentiles could only be established in the gospel (not in preferences and opinions). So Paul spends chapter after chapter explaining the gospel before getting to chapter 12, where he will apply it in relationships. He shows us how we are to love, avoid division, and experience loving harmony in the church.

Romans 1–11 has some sections that are difficult to understand. Romans 12:9–21 is not that difficult to understand, but it's difficult to live! That's because it's about relationships.

I'm reminded of the cartoon where Linus quips, "I love mankind; it's people I can't stand." It's easy to love the idea of the church, but quite another thing to love real people in the church. This is why we need the regular renewal of our minds! Renewed minds lead to new attitudes, relationships, and practices that are not conformed to this world. It's easy to do the opposite of these instructions and be conformed to the world's mindset. Romans 12 is calling us to something beautifully different. We need

hearts that are saturated in grace to live these instructions out. We need to keep the gospel central to do this—especially in these divided days in which we live.

The fact is that if these verses were lived out faithfully, it would radically change our world. It changed the first-century, Greco-Roman world as the church lived as a counter-culture—a little outpost of the kingdom of God. They lived out these instructions in a hierarchal culture and in an honor and shame culture. In doing so, they said to the world, “You want to know what the kingdom is like—here’s a glimpse. It’s not perfect, but it’s a glimpse.” In God’s kingdom, there’s love and honor, passion and perseverance, generosity and hospitality, rejoicing and weeping, harmony and humility, and goodness and peacemaking.

Pursuing and maintaining gospel-centered relationships

What Paul urges the Romans to do is essentially to allow the gospel to shape and empower their relationships with others. We can observe them in six categories.

Love and honor (12:9–10)

Paul says, “Let love be genuine” (12:9a), which serves as a kind of header over the whole section. Real love is sincere. It’s not fake. There’s no deception or play-acting. Christian love is never to be a guise for ulterior motives. As pastors, we’re called to genuinely love the people in our care, and not see them as “numbers” or as a means to

some end. As undershepherds of the Chief Shepherd, we love the sheep. We follow Jesus' example in John 13.

Further, genuine love means that we're quick to forgive and quick to apologize. It means that we avoid partiality and love each member in our care. It means we know our people, and we pay attention to their cares and needs (cf. Phil. 2:20). It means we display warmth and welcome.

Paul helps us avoid a misunderstanding of love when he says, "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good" (Rom. 12:9b). Love doesn't allow evil to persist in the name of "love." Love actually hates certain things. We are to pursue holy love. Love is not genuine when it leads a person to do something evil, allows a person to do evil, or when it avoids addressing evil. Love knows the difference between right and wrong (cf. 1 Cor. 13:6). Good parents don't allow their kids to do just anything in the name of love, and good pastors will also address evil as an act of love for the church fellowship.

Further, this genuine love is marked by "brotherly affection" (Rom. 12:10a). Christians should seek to cultivate tenderness, warmth, and affection. In his *Lectures to My Students*, pastor Charles Spurgeon exhorted his students to cultivate this kind of heart, saying:

I love a minister whose face invites me to make him my friend ... on whose doorstep you read "Welcome," not "Beware of Dog." ... Give me the man around whom the children come. ... An individual who doesn't have

a friendly, cheerful manner about him had better be an undertaker, and bury the dead, for he will never succeed in influencing the living. ... A man must have a great heart if he is to have a great congregation. ... When a man has a large, loving heart, men go to him as ships to a haven. ... Such a man is hearty in private as well as in public.²³

May God make us these kinds of leaders!

Regarding honor, Paul says to the church, "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10b). This was a radical command in the first-century, hierarchical world (cf. Rom. 12:17; 13:7; 1 Pet. 2:17). I'm always struck by the kind of respect Paul conveyed as he preached the gospel to Felix and Agrippa at the end of Acts. It is also striking how Paul honors faithful servants in the church throughout his letters (cf. Rom. 16:1–16). As planters and ministry leaders, look for ways to honor faithful servants in the church.

Passion and perseverance (12:11–12)

The next verse drips with passion: "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord" (12:11). Christian love is not cold or indifferent! In the previous passage, Paul singled out leaders saying that those with the gift of leadership must lead "with zeal" (12:8). That is, we are to be set on fire by the Spirit (12:11), who empowers our leadership, and keep in constant view the focus of our ministry: serving the Lord. Jesus is the object of our zeal. A passion for Christ and a compassion for his people are at the heart of faithful ministry.

This verse hangs over my bed in my home: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (12:12). The theme of perseverance ties these three phrases together.

Life and ministry are hard, but we can derive hope and joy in Christ, and we can find strength through prayer. How do we endure "tribulation" without murmuring and self-pity? By applying the other two parts of the verse: *rejoicing and praying*. If a ministry leader is not rejoicing and praying personally, then that leader won't be persevering faithfully.

Generosity and hospitality (12:13)

Here are two practical ways to love and pursue harmony: generosity and hospitality. Christian leaders are to set an example of generosity (cf. Acts 4:36–37; 20:35). And we must never be driven by greed (cf. 1 Tim. 6:5; 1 Pet. 5:2). Rather, we are to be cheerful givers, as we remember that our God is a giver (cf. Rom. 8:32).

Further, we are to welcome others as we have been welcomed by God in Christ (cf. Isa. 25:6–7; 55:1–3; Matt. 11:28; Luke 14:12–24; Rom. 15:7; Rev. 21:3). Peter urges Christians to do this without grumbling (1 Pet. 4:9). Here in Romans 12, Paul speaks of the intentionality of it: *pursue it*. For pastors, this is a qualification for ministry (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2). If one does not welcome others into their home, their church, and their lives, then that person doesn't belong in ministry. Interestingly, I have heard of potential pastors "preaching in view of a call," but I've

never heard of them “practicing hospitality in view of a call.” However, this practice is vital for pastoral ministry, for evangelism and mercy ministry, and for the work of church planting.

Certainly, church leaders must use wisdom in practicing hospitality, but this doesn’t mean we should neglect it or minimize its importance. Instead, we should promote hospitality and set a good example of doing it.

Rejoicing and weeping (12:15)

I’ll deal with Romans 12:14 in the sixth category, as it relates more to our relationship with our enemies. In verse 15, Paul says: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” All Christians are to come alongside their brothers and sisters in the highs and lows of life, with pastors setting the believers an example in this area. When one person succeeds, rejoice with them! And when they are hurting, weep with them.

Many Christian leaders have a ministry of *truth* but not a ministry of *tears*. Jesus displayed both. He brought people the words of life and he wept at Lazarus’ tomb—even though he knew he was about to raise him to life. The Good Shepherd in John 10 demonstrated this pastoral care in John 11. He entered into the grief of his friends and wept with them (John 11:35). We, too, need an integrated ministry of both mind and heart, emotions and theology, tears and truth.

Harmony and humility (12:16)

Paul tells the Roman Christians, "Live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16a). He later prays for such harmony (15:5). He wanted them to be of the same mind (Phil. 2:1-5). This unity reflected the nature of God and gave a powerful witness to the world. An ongoing challenge in pastoral ministry is helping brothers and sisters deal with conflict, hurt feelings, and misunderstanding. Harmony takes hard work. The kind of harmony we're after is not merely an absence of strife but the presence of unity (cf. Ps. 133).

To have harmony, humility must be present: "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight" (Rom. 12:16b). This fact is taught elsewhere in the New Testament (Phil. 2:1-4). One of the signs of humility is associating with all kinds of people. As church leaders, we should constantly evaluate our own lives to ensure that we are pursuing humility, but we must also teach and lead in such a way that we're fostering humility in the church.

Goodness and peacemaking (12:14, 17-21)

In Romans 12:14, Paul reflects on the teaching of Jesus regarding our enemies (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:28). Notice we're not simply to refrain from retaliating, or should we simply forgive our enemies; we're also to actively seek their good as we pray for God's blessing on them! This verse is particularly relevant for those in ministry because you will have many opportunities to apply this verse, for there are many adversaries out there.

In verses 17–21, Paul highlights more action steps regarding our relationship to our enemies, emphasizing non-retaliation and peacemaking. We're to seek to live honorably among everyone, to do everything we can to live peaceably with all, and to leave vengeance to God. He ends the section with a summary admonition: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21). We must disciple and counsel our members in this area!

Of course, on a civil level, we need courts and law enforcement. Paul isn't teaching that you let abuse or violence go unchecked. The very next passage (Rom. 13:1–7) is about how the state has the right to bear the sword, how God has appointed government as the institution to carry out judgment on earth. As good citizens, we need to promote biblical justice now, but ultimately, we trust in the Lord's final judgment in the future.

Christians deal with their enemies by grace and goodness, not by vengeance and vitriol. We do this motivated by Christ's work for us on the cross in the past, and by our belief about the coming day in the future. At the cross, Christ loved his enemies. He has made sinners—former enemies—his friends (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:20–23). He overcame our evil with his goodness. And one day, he will have the final word on all those who oppose him and his people. So we can focus now on blessing, not vengeance. We can be people of grace, peace, and honor until the final day.

Conclusion

Relationships matter in the Christian life, and church planters and ministry leaders are to set the believers an example in cultivating and maintaining Christ-honoring relationships. The gospel must be proclaimed by church leaders, but the gospel must also shape and empower our relationships with those inside and outside the church.

Reflection questions

1. How are you seeking to cultivate and maintain healthy relationships?
2. Who are some of the people with whom you have cultivated close relationships? How long have you known them and what do your conversations sound like?
3. How would you say your own practice of hospitality has built community around you?
4. How have you sought to lay your preferences aside and genuinely love others? Can you provide an example of this?