



How to Experience Authentic Community

Romans 12:9-13

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In this first season of the new year we are studying Romans 12, considering what it means to be faithfully spiritual but not religious. That is, we are questioning how to live lives faithful to God's will and ongoing work in the world today, hearing our call to discipleship as more than just an invitation to rote rule-following. To be faithfully spiritual disciples, we must do more than speak the rules of the Biblical text, we must immerse ourselves in God's ongoing work. Faithful discipleship is about much more than knowing the commandments, it's about devoting our lives to the spiritual task of faithful service.

In the past month, we have identified that faithful spirituality calls for commitment, intentionality, and authenticity of self. We have to be committed to seeking God's will; we have to be intentional about rejecting the cultural invitation to greed and self-promotion; and we have to be authentic to who God has created us to be. Each of these steps requires humility – naming that our ability to be faithful is fully dependent on God's grace and love. We can only be who God has called us to be because of God's will to work in and through us.

Last week, in considering verses 3-8, we named that to be faithfully spiritual, we have to discern the gifts of God's grace in our lives, and acknowledge how we are called – as individuals – to participate in the body as a whole. The call to be honest about one's individual self is just one step to sharing authentically in the community of the faithful. So, if last week's focus was on being authentic to who God has created you to be as an individual, today's focus is on living in to authentic community.

In his book, *Living on the Edge*, author Chip Ingram sums up this passage by claiming, "Authentic community occurs when the real you shows up and meets real needs for the right reason in the right way."ⁱ Let's use his definition as we walk through Paul's message here in verses 9-13.

First, authentic community begins when the real you shows up.

To note, it's interesting here that in the original text, Paul doesn't write with the imperative demands that we read in our English translation. Paul isn't writing to say 'here is how you must live;' he's writing with no verbs at all. The original text is more of a checklist for faithful community. It's as if Paul is just defining the characteristics of faithful living, and is expecting the reader to infer their own conclusions for living accordingly.

So, verse 9 reads, according to the Greek text, “The love, sincere; the evil, dislike; the good, maintain.” Right up front, Paul says love is to be sincere. If living faithfully in community with others, the love that is present must be genuine.

In reflecting on this text in Romans 12, Rev. Scott Hoezee, a professor at Calvin Seminary, recalls the release of some of the Nixon tapes back in 2002. Rev. Hoezee writes, “Some years back some more of Richard Nixon’s infamous White House tapes were released, this time revealing no less than the evangelist Billy Graham being complicit with some virulently anti-Semitic rhetoric. Not only were Rev. Graham’s remarks at variance with his public approach to Jewish-Christian dialogue but they were more significantly so very, very un-Christian. To his credit, Rev. Graham apologized back then.

“But in response to this incident, an Op-Ed appeared in the *New York Times* in which Rev. Graham found a rather unlikely defender in the person of former Nixon legal counsel, Leonard Garment. Mr. Garment claimed that the real tragedy of this incident lay less with Rev. Graham’s public shame and more with the way this eroded the boundary between private life and public life. Garment asserted that despite the revelation of Rev. Graham’s private anti-Semitism, the evangelist’s positive public actions toward Jews should be largely unaffected. In a free-speech society, the private realm must be protected. So we should limit our assessment of public people to what they do *in public* and not pry into what should remain properly private. The problem with this incident is that finding out about Rev. Graham’s private words may cause some to regard his public actions as a facade, as fake. But that is a wrong conclusion to draw, Garment wrote. A person should be able to say whatever he wants in private even if he acts another way in public. Both realms can be genuine.”

Rev. Hoezee continues, ‘Mr. Garment may or may not be making a valid point for the functioning of a free society. However, from a Christian vantage point, his attempt to wall off private words from how people behave in public is wrong-headed. There is a word for ranting against Jewish people in private while embracing them as your friends in public, and the word is not “anti-Semitism” but rather “hypocrisy.” Christians regard hypocrisy as a grave sin. But if you disconnect private thoughts from public deeds, then you cut the nerve of hypocrisy, you undermine the very possibility for such a thing as hypocrisy to exist.’ⁱⁱ

For true authentic community to exist, the love that is present must be sincere and authentic. We cannot speak ill of others in our homes, and tell them we love them to their faces. We cannot come and claim we need to work toward justice as a community of faith, but yet, hold prejudice in our hearts against those for whom justice is needed. For there to be authentic community, we must be sincere in our love for one another – the real us must show up.

It’s interesting then that Paul must name our relationship with good *and* with evil. One would think that saying *have sincere love* would be sufficient for instructions regarding faithful living. But the love Paul mentions here, *agape* love, the love that is generally used to talk about our deep love for God, is the same love mentioned in John 3:19, which reads, ‘People *loved* darkness rather than light.’ *Agape* love isn’t limited to our love for God, it just indicates a deep,

soul-based love. Thus, Paul must define not only how we are to love – sincerely – but he must also be clear what we are to love. He does this by saying evil is abhorred and rejected, while the good of God is to be claimed and maintained.

Continuing into verse 10, Paul once again, with no verbs written, continues about our relationships with one another. He writes, “brotherly love, mutually to one another, affectionate kindness; in honor, preference for another.”

Fitting on this Super Bowl Sunday the Greek text speaks this word, *philadelphia* – brotherly love. Not saying it means anything for tonight, it’s just an interesting note. I can assure you, *New England* doesn’t show up anywhere in the Greek text. ... moving on ...

If verse 9 says our love must be sincere – that the real you must show up – verse 10 says **the real you must show up to help with the real needs of one another.**

By saying that brotherly love is what is needed, by saying we are to put the honor of others first, Paul is addressing how we relate in authentic community with one another. “Authentic community is more than sipping coffee and sharing Bible verses in a living room. It’s more than being nice to one another in the hallways of the church ...”ⁱⁱⁱ Authentic community demands the real you meet the real needs of one another.

Paul goes so far as to say you should put the honor of another ahead of yourself. I don’t think Paul is speaking here about honor from a perspective of who sits at the head of the table. Paul has time and time again been saying that we are all as one in the body of Christ. He isn’t trying to get you to move another up the hierarchy on the status pole in the church. This isn’t about status at all. Paul’s point to honor others is better understood in relationship to authenticity. Thus, Paul’s call to authentic community here is two-fold. First, the real needs of the community are only made visible when we stop trying to honor ourselves, and instead admit where we have need. When we seek to honor ourselves, we tend to hide the real us, never admitting where we have real needs. Secondly, Paul is encouraging the offering of thanks to others, of acknowledging the good in others, and of giving credit for the faithful work of others. We honor others for the work they have done, not holding out in hopes that we may be honored for the work we have done. It means honoring the other even if it means you won’t be honored.

In Verse 11, Paul continues on this path of addressing how we share in community with one another. Again, with no verbs written, Paul writes, “The work, not slothful; the spirit, fervent; the Lord, serve.”

If verses 9 and 10 articulate that authentic community is only possible when the real us shows up to meet real needs, **verse 11 says it must be for the right reason.** Stemming out of verse 10, it seems clear Paul is still focusing on our relationships with one another. Our shared work with one another – our engagement with one another – must be done with zeal, not lacking in

fervor. We must offer this work in ardent spirit – we must not do it begrudgingly. And we must see our shared familial love for one another as service to the Lord.

“So often authentic community does not happen because people’s motives are not focused on serving God but on using the Christian community as a means to heal personal wounds of the past and gain affirmation. ... Loving people isn’t about doing it so that you’ll be affirmed and esteemed, and become the object of the praises [of one another].”^{iv} We share in authentic community not because we believe the community can fix or help us, but because God has said that each of us have gifts to bring that, unless offered, the body of Christ can not fully live in to its full God-willed potential.

I’ve done this myself, prior to stepping in to a pastoral role where the Bishop told me where to go on Sundays ... as we look for a church community, as we look for a church home, we tend to look for a place that says what we want do believe, that can offer us help in our brokenness but doesn’t ask us to give too much in return, that doesn’t challenge the way we think, the words we speak, or the way we live. But here, Paul challenges this entire mentality toward finding a faith community. It seems here, Paul isn’t interested in how the church community can help you, but is instead wondering, what gifts has God given you that are needed within the life of the community? Are we as fervent in sharing of our gifts as we are in being filled? Are we as ardent in being driven by the spirit to serve the Lord in authentic community, as we are finding a community in which we feel affirmed?

We have to bring the real us to meet the real needs of one another for the right reasons – to serve the Lord, and be faithful to God’s call in our lives.

And finally, for true authentic community, we have to do all of this in the right way. Verses 12 and 13, in the verb-lacking fashion, say, “The hope, rejoice; the tribulation, patient; the prayer, constant. To the necessity of the saints, give; to hospitality, pursue.”

Left to our own vices, authentic community would never be possible. Yet, here, Paul names how such a shared witness of God’s love becomes possible. “Although there is not explicit imperative [in this text], there is certainly an implied expectation.”^v This isn’t simply a set of laws Paul offers that we should be following. This is, rather, a list of admonitions that shapes one’s life according to the great grace of God, which makes authentic community possible.

To begin, we have a foundational hope on which we are called into authentic community. As a community of Christ, we have a shared hope in Christ – and because of such hope, we rejoice. Such a hope leads us to action – and when responding to God’s grace and the hope we have in Christ, we will face tribulation. We are to meet such trying times with patience. We cannot turn and run when things are not going well, nor can we bully our point, but we stand by one another in our shared hope for God’s great eternal love. In the midst of all we do together, we share with one another in constant prayer. Just as we are devoted to one another, an upward focus and hope in Christ demands that we seek strength and resources from the Spirit of the Lord through prayer.

In sharing in the work together, we offer our gifts to the necessity of those in the community, that we may all be able to fully give to the joint work of the church. If any is lacking, others are called to give, to ensure each person is able to fully join in the work of God. And we are not just called to take care of those who are already part of the body, but we are to pursue great hospitality for all who come and join in this space. Each person who comes into this community is gifted by the grace of God, called to play a role and fill their calling to be a part of God's great work in the world. Without hospitality, there is no welcome place for God's beloved to feel invited to participate in God's love, or to join in enhancing and joining in the authentic community Paul clearly thinks is essential for faithful living.

For us to share in true and authentic community, the real you must show up to meet real needs for the right reasons in the right way. God has created us to live in this way – sharing in this life of faithfulness with one another. Paul admonishes us time and time again, this is the call of Christ – to share in deep spirituality with one another, wherein we faithfully give ourselves to the will of God to participate in the work of God in the world today. This is the greatest need among people of faith. All of Paul's letters, written to these first Christian communities, makes clear, we cannot be faithful in and of ourselves. Our faithfulness begins in God's grace, wherein we are each gifted, that we might join in faithful and authentic community. And such a model for true community is the greatest need for an unbelieving world to begin to believe that what we say about Jesus is true, because our witness becomes a living testimony to the words we profess.

Paul says that spirituality, while often claimed as being deeply personal, is most authentic when shared in the body of Christ. You have a place to belong here in the community of the faithful because God has gifted you and called you to be part of the body of the faithful. So may we show up, may the real us show up, that we might share in caring for the real needs of one another, for the right reasons as we serve the Lord, in the right way, looking to God as our strength and provider. In the power of the Lord, let us live into authentic community. Amen.

ⁱ Chip Ingram. *Living on the Edge*. New York: Howard Books, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved January 30, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ingram.

^{iv} Ingram.

^v Sarah Heaner Lancaster. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.