

Eating Humble Pie

The Grace Factor – Part V

Romans 12:16

Introduction

In the 17th century, Lords of the Manor often held elaborate hunting expeditions. They would camp out in the open, complete with moving kitchens, dressing rooms, and libraries. The tents that followed were magnificent and it was not unusual for the aristocracy of Great Britain to have dozens of guests, musicians, and many servants along with them.

After they successfully shot and killed a number of deer, the expedition would turn into a festival of merrymaking with plenty to eat and drink. The host of servants, however, never got any venison to eat. Although they did all the work, the rich ate the venison. The servants were all too happy to be given the remaining organs of the deer, known as humbles, from which they created their own meal. Often the humbles, also called umbles, were cleaned, prepared, and then, along with vegetables and fruit, covered in dough and baked. It would come out looking very much like a pie. The servants referred to this special meal as umble pie.ⁱ

This phrase would change over the course of time and eventually come to refer to someone who had been forced to live in a state of humble circumstances; that is, “they ate humble pie.” The phrase would also come to refer to someone who had been taken down a notch or two because of some mistake or failure; he was said to be “eating his humble pie.”

That is what happened in the football game yesterday to N. C. State University, right? They lost to the University of North Carolina; they did not

score as many points. I am not trying to rub it in, I am just proving my point.

No one likes to eat humble pie. It does not go down easily, does it? In fact, I have never seen “Humble Pie” on any menu.

It is human nature to stay away from that stuff and instead, to love yourself and promote yourself and advertise yourself and defend yourself. We do not step down a notch or two – certainly not willingly!

Maybe you know someone – someone you work with or for or someone you go to school with – that you would love to see eat a slice of humble pie. Maybe you are living with someone like that – I do not want a show of hands!

I recently read about a woman who had been trying for years to persuade her egotistical husband to put an end to the idea that he, and he alone, was better than everyone else. He never stopped talking about himself – he was first in sales at the office and first on the list for the next promotion; he enjoyed tennis and golf, but only when he won . . .

One time, this couple went to the State Fair. The man’s long-suffering wife watched with interest when he stepped up on one of the fortune telling scales that describes who you are and gives your weight. He dropped a coin into the slot and the lights began to whirl and the dial on the scales began to move back and forth. Finally, it stopped and out came a little card which read, “You are a born leader, with superior intelligence, quick wit, and a charming personality. All this makes you most attractive to the

opposite sex.” The man handed the card to his wife and triumphantly said, “Ha, read that!”

She did and then, she turned the card over and said, “They got your weight wrong too.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In our last session, we began a study of grace – the active, dynamic grace factor that distinguishes us as a people of God. Our lives are marked with grace – our conversations and our activities and our relationships are marked by that same quality that so marks the character of our Lord, who is known by us for His amazing grace.

Paul is not pulling any punches; his quill is dipped in the reality of life and he writes in clear, undeniable, unavoidable language. There are simply no loopholes in Romans, chapter 12. If we belong to a gracious God, these are real life situations where we are to be identified as a gracious people.

In verses 14 and 15, we are challenged to be gracious to people who are rejoicing. We are to also be gracious to the heartbroken and even gracious to the heartbreakers.

Now, in verse 16, we are introduced to several more real life situations.

Grace to Live in Harmony

Turn to Romans 12:16 and let us look at that verse.

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Paul is referring not so much to unanimity, as he is to harmony.

When Paul exhorts the church in Corinth and in Ephesus and in Philippi and here in Rome to be of the same mind (“phroneo”), he is not saying, “Everyone has to think alike!”

Paul is referring to “a kind of harmony,” one author wrote, “which proceeds from a common object, common hopes, and common desires.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You may be very different from others in the body, but you have the same object of faith; you have the same hope; you have the same desire to glorify God. This is how the church can be so diversified and yet, so unified!

Yesterday, at the N. C. State University football game, there were thousands of screaming fans cheering for the same team, right? They were probably very different from one another, except for two things: they all wore red and, secondly, they

hated everyone wearing blue. They had a united passion – to win.

I noticed on the television screen, as I watched the seconds tick away, that there were a few fans who showed up, risking their lives, wearing blue. They also had the same desire – to make it out of the stadium alive.

When Paul says, “be of the same mind toward one another,” he is telling us that one of the marks of graciousness is harmony. This is not uniformity, but unity, and the outward evidence of unity is harmony.

In this church, we have entered the final stages of a building program which will tax this blessing of harmony. It is so easy for people to ask, “Why aren’t we building that,” or “Why are we doing this,” or “Why aren’t we using our money for that,” or “Couldn’t we do without this,” or “How can we do without that?” The health of this church will be seen in the level of harmony as we follow our leaders and ultimately, follow *the* Leader.

Harmony says, “Even though I don’t have any pre-schoolers, let’s give the children everything we possibly can. Let’s give the teenagers and the college students everything we can. Let’s give the men and the singles and the seniors everything we can. And for goodness sake, let’s give the women as many bathrooms as we can build this time – amen?”

I am reading a small paperback book by Warren Wiersbe entitled, *On Being A Servant of God*. In it, he reminded me that we have never been asked by God to manufacture unity in the church. It is already there. We are already one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). But we do have the obligation to maintain the unity that Jesus Christ died to create. So this is a common passion,

endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)^{iv}

It is not our responsibility to produce unity in the church – it is our responsibility to protect it.

One of the attributes of the true church is unity – one body! Now our actions should match our attributes!

One of the marks of a gracious people of God is not that they have the same personality, but that they have the same purpose.

Simply put, this first phrase is nothing less than a call from the apostle Paul to get along!

You may remember from verse 10 of Romans 12, there is the principle to,

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; .

..

There is also the principle of deference to one another, to,

... give preference to one another in honor;

These are the marks of a gracious people. The world can only wonder how people, with so many opinions and so many tastes and so many backgrounds and so many different accents, can get along.

One answer to that is, we who belong to a God of grace, are a people of grace.

Now, verse 16 could be divided according to three phrases which act out the same Greek root word, “phron: phronountes and phronimoi”. They all relate to thinking or setting your mind on or considering. In fact, you could circle that word as it is translated “mind” in your text,

- 16a – ***“Be of the same mind [‘phronountes’] . . .”;***
- 16b – ***“. . . do not be haughty in mind [‘phronountes’] . . .”;***
- 16c – ***“. . . Do not be wise [‘phronimoi’; high minded] . . .”.***

It is obvious that this one word, repeated three times in the text, is emphasized for a reason.

Remember that Romans 12 began by calling us to be “transformed by the renewing of” what? Our minds!

Coming to Christ does not mean you begin to think a little differently from the world; coming to Christ means you have a new mind – a new mindset; a new perspective; a transformed way of thinking.

One of the most significant changes in believers is the way in which we think of each other!

Three tests of gracious thinking

Now, in verse 16, Paul gives us three very specific ways to think. We can easily divide these three phrases and rewrite verse 16 into the form of three tests of gracious thinking!

1. The first phrase will deliver the test of harmony.

Be of the same mind toward one another; . . .

Harmony in the body of Christ is as important as harmony in the human body. When there is disharmony in our physical bodies, with one group of

cells devouring another group of cells, which we call cancer, it is life threatening. Disharmony is no less serious to the local body of believers.

When you go to the doctor to have your physical, how important are the results to you; how concerned are you? Extremely.

In my recent message to the student body of Shepherd’s Theological Seminary at the fall convocation, I shared that a couple of months ago, for the first time in my adult life, I was lying in a hospital bed, hooked to an IV, preparing for an outpatient procedure. I had arrived at the age that I was told to have an endoscopy and a colonoscopy. It had been thirty years since any kind of hospital visit for me. It was a delightful time.

I lay in the bed, dressed in that lovely blue gown. Who invented that thing? You only get the front half! The nurse came in and said she needed to take my temperature and blood pressure. I mumbled, “Sure,” as she enclosed my upper arm with the blood pressure wrap and took it. Then, she stopped and said to me, “Now listen, honey,” which reminded me I was in the South where everyone is “honey,” “your blood pressure is way out of line. I think what you need to do is think some happy thoughts.”

I said, “What?”

She said, “That’s right. You need to think happy thoughts. Then, I’ll take your blood pressure again.”

What kind of theology is that?

It was embarrassing to know that my inner turmoil and worry over that examination could be graphed! So, I thought happy thoughts. She took my blood pressure again and said, “Now, honey, that’s more like it.”

Does it ever bother us that we can have a good physical examination, but not pass a spiritual examination?

This is one – the spiritual test of harmony. Look at the first phrase of verse 16 again,

Be of the same mind toward one another; . . .

I can just hear that nurse saying, “Think happy thoughts about each other.”

That is actually very good theology.

2. The second phrase of verse 16 will deliver the second test, which is the test of impartiality.

... do not be haughty in mind, . . .

Paul expects everyone to say, “C’mon, Paul, we’re not haughty,” so he adds,

... *but associate with the lowly* . . .

The first test asked the question, “Are you stubborn?”

This test asks the question, “Are you a snob?”

Will you associate with the lowly; with people who grew up on the other side of the tracks?

- Will the white collar worker associate with the blue collar worker?
- Will the Hispanic person get along with the Portuguese person?
- Will the Chinese native and the Taiwanese native serve together in the church?
- Will the black man and the white man share a hymnbook?
- Will the doctor and the mechanic laugh together in church?
- Will the home-schooler and the public school principle care about each other?
- Will the business woman and the mother of six share a cup of coffee together?
- Will the old man seek to understand the young man?
- Will the single individual appreciate the marriage conference at church?
- Will the “empty nesters” pray for the single parents?
- Will the drummer thank the violinist?
- Will the PhD’s be taught in Sunday school by a college drop-out?

Paul gives us the test, “do not be haughty in your thinking”. Will you partition your life from others or participate with others?

One of the first charter members of this church was a native North Carolinian. She had lived in this town her whole life. Our church was a few weeks old when she showed up. She was an older woman, in her 70’s, who did not say much, but came to love this church.

I went to see her a couple of times. She was unable to get out much. She lived in the same little house that she had lived in for decades. The house was no more than eight hundred square feet and had bare wooden floors – before wooden floors were popular. When I showed up, she would say, “C’mon in preacher,” and she would spit out her chewing tobacco and put in her teeth.

That woman was part of our early days, before she went home to be with the Lord. I am sure she has now stopped chewing tobacco and has real teeth again.

She happened to worship in the same assembly as an IBM executive, a medical doctor, a former secretary from the Pentagon who worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a mechanic, a painter, a campus missionary, some housewives, some college students, and a pile of kids.

The church does not pull from one side of the railroad tracks or another.

The average church planter graduating from seminary today, is advised to target his audience; to target an income bracket; to advertise specifically to attract the upper class; to pursue a certain segment of society. That happens to be disgusting!

I think Paul made it very clear – “Don’t be haughty in mind, but associate with ordinary people. Don’t think others are beneath you or out of your class.”

In one of his books, Chuck Swindoll tells the story of some children in his neighborhood who worked long and hard on their little cardboard clubhouse. This was the place where they would meet, play, and have fun together. Since a clubhouse has to have membership rules, they came up with these three:

- Nobody act big.
- Nobody act like you’re worthless either.
- Everybody act medium.

That is Romans 12:16 to the “T”!

- Nobody in here can be a big-shot.
- Nobody in here act like you’re worthless either.
- When you enter this special place, everybody just act average.

These should be the new rules for membership in the church.

I have had people over the years, say things to me, thinking they were giving me a compliment. They have said things like one man, who said, “You pastor that church? I’ve heard that anybody who’s anybody goes over there.”

How tragic is that?

I do not want be in a church of somebodies, I want to be in a church of redeemed nobodies, who follow a divine Somebody.

By the way, the word “lowly,” in Romans 12:16, is the same word that appears in Matthew 11:29 (KJV) when Jesus Christ describes Himself,

... *for I am meek and lowly* . . .

Paul wrote, “Our Lord humbled Himself,”

... *taking the form of a bond-servant* . . .
(*Philippians 2:7*)

The Lord pulled a chair up to the table where the servants ate, willingly took a piece of humble pie, and ate it without hesitation.

- He was not born into a high ranking family. The people wondered, “*Is this not the carpenter’s son? . . .*” (*Matthew 13:55a*).
- He had no special property or wealth, “. . . *the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*” (*Luke 9:58b*).
- He had no special upbringing, “. . . *Can anything good come out of Nazareth? . . .*” (*John 1:46a*). In other words, “Can anything good come from that crummy little town where nothing interesting has happened and nobody important has come from?”
- He certainly did not have a special reputation. He was, “. . . *a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*” (*Luke 7:34b*).
- He had no special physique – Isaiah described Him as unattractive (*Isaiah 53:2*).
- He had no special record of success, “*He was despised and rejected . . .*” (*Isaiah 53:3a KJV*). Even His business partners, so to speak, abandoned Him at the hour of His greatest crisis.

Let me paraphrase what Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

And what kind of people has He chosen as His followers? He has not chosen people who are wise in the ways of the world; He has not chosen many noble born or well connected; but instead, Christ has chosen the unskilled laborer, the one who isn’t a mover and shaker in the world system; He has chosen people who are looked down on as unsophisticated and ordinary . . . these are the ones who make up the majority of the church, so that no one can boast. (I Corinthians 1:26-29)

The point is, there is no aristocracy in the church; no place for an elite upper-crust.^v

The church should be marked as an association of ordinary people. Nobody acts big or small . . . just medium.

Before we leave this second phrase of Romans 12:16, I think it is interesting to note that Paul’s word for “lowly” (“tapeinos”) can be understood two different ways, depending on how it is understood.

If translated as neuter, it would be understood as, “lowly or ordinary things”; if translated as masculine (both are spelled the same way), it would read, “lowly or ordinary mankind”.

In cases like these, the context would have to determine whether the word meant “things” or “mankind”. But the context does not help in this verse.

After studying this textual issue, I believe the Spirit of God purposefully moved Paul to write something that would be ambiguous. Why? So we could take it both ways!

Whichever way you take it, it becomes a great test of graciousness.

A gracious believer does not turn up his nose to ordinary tasks in the church. He is not above sweeping the floor or cleaning up after kids or watering the grass.

Furthermore, a gracious believer is not above ordinary people. He does not stick his nose in the air as he walks by someone he thinks is not in the same class.

Either one of these has no place in the church. It is the opposite of graciousness.

The main course in the church is humble pie. If you will not have a slice with the servants, then you probably are not developing the gracious spirit that should mark the people of God.

3. There is one more test of gracious thinking. The last phrase of Romans 12:16 delivers the test of accountability.
... *Do not be wise [high minded] in your own estimation.*

Let me put it plain English:

- The first phrase tested our harmony and asked, “Are you stubborn?”
- The second phrase tested our impartiality and asked, “Are you stand-offish?”
- The third phrase tests our accountability and asks, “Are you stuck on yourself?”

“Do not be wise in your own estimation” is another way of saying, “Don’t be stuck on yourself.”

The trouble is, the natural man is incurably addicted to himself!

“Don’t be high minded in your own conceits.” Being high minded in your own conceits is exactly what the natural man or unbeliever does, right? His greatest thoughts are of himself; his highest thoughts are to do something for himself; his grandest thoughts are all about himself. He is wise in his own eyes; in his own conceits.

The only biblical writers to use this same phrase are Paul and Solomon.

Solomon said it this way,

***Do you see a man wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.
(Proverbs 26:12)***

Later, in verse 16, Solomon wrote,

***The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than
seven men who can give a discreet answer.***

In other words, everyone knows the man is a sluggard; a loaf; a lazy man, but if he is ever challenged on it and held accountable for it, he will defend himself better than seven men put together, who are known for their oratorical skill.

He is unaccountable! He is stuck on his impression of himself. He is above correction and beyond rebuke.

However, then the Holy Spirit performs the miracle of grace – this man’s eyes are open to his sin and need for the Savior and he places his faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation. Then, he enters the church and discovers how much transformation needs to occur in order to renew his mind!

In the world he has been told to always be on top of his game, but in the church he is informed that he does not always have to be right; and that he probably is not.

So, be open; be honest; be accountable. God has designed us to need one another’s counsel and

perspective. Learn to laugh at yourself and admit when you are wrong.

These are probably two of the clearest evidences that you are accountable – you can laugh at yourself as someone or something reveals who you are and you can admit when you are wrong. Neither one is ever easy, but they are always profitable.

A. W. Tozer said, “Never be afraid of honest criticism. If the critic is wrong, you can help him; if you’re wrong, he can help you. Either way, somebody’s helped!”^{vi}

You may know the old saying and in fact, someone said it to Charlie Brown in the *Peanuts* comic strip, “Well, just remember that you learn more from your failures than from your successes.”

To this, Charlie Brown replied, “That makes me the smartest person in the world!”

Will you own up to it? Or resist it?

Conclusion

Are you stubborn?

Are you stand-offish?

Are you stuck on yourself?

It is possible to be all of that inside the assembly. Otherwise, Paul would have never written this to the redeemed in Rome.

Paul is saying, in effect, to us all, “I highly recommend you develop a taste for humble pie. Pull up a chair with the servants and dig in. It will truly make you a man or woman of grace – usable by God.”

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary who laid the foundation of the gospel in China several centuries ago, said on one occasion, “I often think that God must have been looking for someone small enough and weak enough for Him to use . . . and He found me.”^{vii}

That is the heart of it – becoming a gracious servant, available to experience the blessing of God, and able to become a blessing for God to everyone else.

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ⁱ <http://www.wordorigins.org/humblepie>.

ⁱⁱ Michael Hodgin, *1001 More Humorous Illustrations* (Zondervan, 1998), p. 263.

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- iii William R. Newell, Romans (Moody Press, 1938), p. 473.
- iv Warren W. Wiersbe, On Being a Servant of God (Baker Books, 1993), p. 49.
- v John MacArthur, Romans (Moody Press, 1994), p. 199.
- vi Wiersbe, p. 52.
- vii R. Kent Hughes, 1001 Great Stories and Quotes (Tyndale House, 1998), p. 213.