

January 27, 2008  
Romans 12:10

Jackson, MI  
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## ME SECOND!

This morning we are focusing our attention on one verse with two simple commands: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love," and "Honor one another above yourselves." These are simple to read, yet so very difficult to live out.

Why? Well, I think it has to do with the fact that both of these instructions deal with an age-old struggle at their root: self-centeredness versus other-centeredness. Christ calls us to a life focused outside of ourselves. Jesus himself said that at the heart of the law there were two commandments, the greatest being for us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. The second is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Even a cursory reading of this morning's two commands reveals that they are similar, again asking us to look outside ourselves. But to do these things-to focus on God and others-means that someone other than me needs to come first in my life. And most of the time, that cuts against the grain of what the world-and my own heart, for that matter-tells me to do.

If you want proof that the message of self-centeredness is alive and well, you need look no further than me. In fact, I am really glad that you are all here this morning because I have a vital announcement to make: I am the most important person in the whole wide world. Yes, I know that some of you were wondering about that-you didn't know for sure-but I am here to confirm it for you. I am the most important person in the whole wide world, and I found this out in second grade, and I want you all to know it. Just watch: [Introduction to The Most Important Person film series. The theme song includes the lyrics: "The most important person in the whole wide world is you and you hardly even know you/ The most important person in the whole wide world is you, come on we'll show you...]

You didn't believe me, did you? The rest of the second graders and I would watch short vignettes from this film series regularly. And, while it's easy to laugh about something so dated and plain old silly, let's remember that this message has stuck with me for well over 20 years. And it's a dangerous message, isn't it, because it tells me that it's all about me. And it's out of the mindset-or perhaps a better description might be "heart condition"-that the world teaches us we should operate.

So, when we come to something like the first instruction here this morning, that we should be devoted to one another in brotherly love, it strikes us as a bit odd. When Paul wrote that, he was evoking the idea of family-that we, as followers of Christ, are family. Our shared faith, our shared experience of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus uniquely unites us and should have an impact on how we interact with one another.

But when we view this instruction through the lens of self-centeredness, it doesn't make much sense. Sure, Paul, this idea about family is nice, but... Isn't family really more of a romantic idea than a reality? Family is something that used to happen, especially in television re-runs of Little House on the Prairie, The Waltons and even The Cosby Show.

And love? Well, love is something we either give to those who do things for us, or use to get

people to do things for us. Plus, it's nothing more than a fleeting emotion, or like the 80s song told us, "a plain, old-fashioned notion." The world teaches us to love until we don't feel like it anymore, or until someone else comes along that strikes our fancy more than what we currently have.

And devotion? That's just for Star Wars diehards, video game devotees and Hannah Montana fans who line up days before the ticket or the product is available... We are told that the minute we don't like our particular situation, we should trade in our spouse, our kids or our parents-sometimes even our church-the way we might a car. We stick with something as long as it's useful for us, and then we discard it.

Well friends, no matter what the world says, here's the truth: If you are a follower of Jesus, you are called to be devoted to a loving, family relationship with everyone else who is a follower, especially here in the local church, because you are an adopted child of God. Again and again the Bible confirms our status as members of God's family:

John 1:12 "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."

Romans 8:16 "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

1 John 3:1 "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

And since we are all part of God's family, we are called to love each other like a family should. That means that we are to do all of the things we like about loving one another-enjoying our time together and helping one another-along with the things we maybe don't like as much, like hurting together or calling each other to account. We have been adopted into God's family, which means we no longer have to follow the world's assertions that we remain isolated, alone and unconnected. We can and should look different.

Which brings us to the second half of this verse. If you think the world has something different to offer when it comes to loving each other like family, you can imagine how different it's going to be when it comes to honoring one another above ourselves, especially when we understand the nuances of this instruction.

First of all, if we think about it, the world does a lot of honoring. There are all kinds of award shows and programs. But why, typically, does the world honor somebody else? Doesn't it focus honor on outward things and things that someone did? You were the best actress this year. You gave a million dollars to this cause. You are judged the best looking. You quarterbacked your team to victory. You sang better than anyone else. You preached the best message we've ever heard.

Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't celebrate outward things-though there are probably some much more deserving of celebration than others-but the interesting thing is that the way this word honor would have been used when it was written, it had much more to do with inward things. The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament reports that this word becomes associated with "inner worth as distinct from outward esteem." Some of that is rooted in the teaching of Aristotle who taught that "there there is no honor without virtue; only on the basis of virtue should outward honor be shown." According to this verse then, it's not so much the deed but the heart attitude from which that deed came which should be honored. As much as we're told it

doesn't, character counts.

Now, if that's not radical enough in the face of what the world might have us believe, listen to what this verse says about how we are to honor one another. Now, the world does do some lavish honoring, doesn't it? But in general, there is a reluctance to honor because of that whole self-centeredness issue we talked about earlier. The thought goes something like this: "Yeah, I could honor you, but why would I do that when I can honor myself? After all, I am the most important person in the whole wide world..." The world's conventional wisdom tells us that we will be better off if we stick to holding ourselves up and honoring ourselves. And our commercials certainly feed that mindset. I can remember a car commercial encouraging me to spend an exorbitant amount on a luxury vehicle, saying, "Do it for you!"

But there's a long Greek word in this verse that does not necessarily come through in the translation that turns the world's advice on its ear. The word has the connotation of preferring others above ourselves, but it also has the sense that this should be done exceedingly and eagerly, with the attached idea that it should be done in a manner that leads others to do it. When you mix this highly nuanced word with the rest of what Paul says here you get something that is as powerful as it is shocking. Here's the Walkowski paraphrase: "Take the lead in putting yourselves second."

I don't know if that sounds familiar to you or not, but it should. If we just look at Romans 12 we find that essential message repeated two other times, in verse 3 and in verse 16. Philippians 2:3 also captures this message: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." As members of God's family, we have the capability and the responsibility seek out the good in others and put it on display.

The net effect of these two instructions is like yelling out, "Me second!" Problem is, I can't remember ever saying anything like that. I remember growing up yelling, "Me first!" when a particular opportunity presented itself, whether it was a game or a dessert or something else that I wanted. I yelled that because I was selfish, and to a certain extent I still am today; but I also yelled it because I was afraid. I was afraid that nothing would be left over for me. I was afraid that the opportunity would pass me by. I was afraid that I would be left out. My self-centeredness today is rooted in those same fears.

The good news is that I don't have to be afraid anymore and neither do you. When we accepted Christ as Savior and Lord, we were made a part of God's family. We will never be left out again. God promises to never leave or forsake us, he promises to care for us, he promises to love us and fill us and fulfill us. So now we don't have to focus on ourselves anymore. We are free to be a family and to love one another as a family should. We are free to honor others above ourselves. We are free to say, "Me second!"

One of the questions we have been pondering here at Bethel as we have gone through Romans 12 is, "What would our church look like if we lived this passage out on a consistent basis?" I think the answer in relation to Romans 12:10 is that Bethel already has a good grasp of these things. Let me give you a couple of examples.

First, I was in one of the Adult Bible Fellowships-our adult Sunday school classes-a couple of weeks ago when some very difficult life things came up for prayer. I was touched not only that

people within the group felt like the group was family enough to share these hard things with one another, but how others were moved by the requests. When the praying stopped, the tissue-sharing began. Sharing each other's joys and heartaches is an important part of being family and taking the focus off from ourselves.

Also recently, I was talking with a group of men about some deeper-than-surface things. During the conversation, I was moved when one of the guys shared some things he was wrestling with and then asked the other guys there to hold him accountable. Being a family means having each other's back, and giving each other permission to help keep us on our walk and actually holding one another accountable in love moves us away from a dangerous self-centeredness.

Finally, I thought it would only be fitting if we could share in an opportunity to honor someone above ourselves. As you all know, I've only been here a short time and I am still getting to know all of you, but even in that short time I have been struck by just how many remarkable people call Bethel their church home. In fact, as I thought about how I was going to do this, a number of people came to mind... But let's start with one person, and then you all can feel free to follow the example.

Paul Laymon, could you come to the front? Now, I know that many of you know Paul and know just how active he is here at church. It would be easy to stand up here and give you the laundry list of every way that Paul serves, and how he somehow balances a job and college coursework through it all. But remembering the focus of our verse today, I want to tell you-and Paul-what I see in his heart. Whenever I talk to Paul, I am impacted by his incredible passion to serve. Paul regularly asks me in what ways he can be serving the various ministries I oversee, and he even apologizes when he can't be there to help. Paul loves to help, and I greatly appreciate the help he has already been to me.

But Paul runs even deeper than that because he doesn't serve just to occupy his time, or because it makes him feel good-although I'm sure it does-or because he's making a difference-although I'm sure that's a factor too. I sense in Paul that he desires that Jesus be known, that his efforts would not only help another, but that they would glorify God and point others to his Savior. Paul, I admire that in you, and I know it's something we can all say we want to mirror in our own lives. I honor you today, Paul, for the godly character you exhibit on a regular basis.

Friends, Jesus has made us free to say "Me second!" So let's be devoted to one another in brotherly love, and honor one another above ourselves, and see how God uses that to impact each other and our community.