

## LIVING HUMBLE

One of our Elders, Mike Vanderwalker is working on a personal project, writing brief devotionals that connect biblical principles with insights he has gleaned as a professional counselor. Recently he wrote this: “The healing power of the church for those who were not parented well could be vital to their maturation. When a person was not loved in infancy or childhood, they don't know the power of being ‘like minded’ and ‘being one in spirit and purpose.’ When they were babies, they did not gaze into the eyes of their parents and just stare at each other in love. They were never synchronized with another human being the way a mother and child should be. They did not have the experience of having the parent (especially the mother) as an extension of themselves. They cry and mother makes them comfortable. They reach and mother gets. They may have been cared for (hopefully) but rarely, if ever, loved on.

They don't understand being treated by others without ‘selfish ambition.’ If they were not raised in a family which was child centered, then their needs were...met as long as they did not have to compete with their parent's needs. They don't have what the growth and development literature calls a ‘secure base.’

The church can become their ‘secure base.’ The church can become the ‘family’...made up of people who want good things for them and who look out for their welfare. They can, maybe for the first time, understand what it means to be unconditionally loved. They can let their guard down and be real. They don't have to perform or compete.”

Mike captures a high and holy calling of the church. We are much more than a religious institution. We're family. We express that here as part of our vision—what we want to become. We believe God has called us to *Be Family...a church home where all can find nurturing relationships*. We want to provide the ‘secure base’ Mike talked about.

Do you resonate with that? Think about how our study in Romans 12 equips us to fulfill that calling. Paul's bullet-point list impacts our determination to be family, to provide a secure base. Transforming our individual lives positively transforms the entire church:

- we use our God-given spiritual capacities in other-centered, loving service, understanding that each of us belongs to all the others in our church family. Everybody has something valuable to contribute. We're better together; we need each other.
- we love sincerely, without pretense.
- we are devoted to each other with a true warmth of family affection, going out of our way to honor each other.
- we keep our spiritual passions for Christ and his Kingdom warm and alive.
- we cultivate positive disciplines of hope and patience and we pray for each other faithfully.
- we share in each other's needs, and open our homes as places of ministry, service and blessing.
- we get a handle on our reactions and learn to respond with grace: we bless when tempted to curse; we celebrate each others' successes; we share deeply in each others' grief.

Who wouldn't want to be part of a family, a ‘secure base’ like that? What an encouraging, hopeful pattern for being church together!

But all of this can unravel if we give in to one of humankind's most basic flaws. Listen to what Paul adds next in v. 16: “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 12:16). I like how the New Living Translation renders v. 16: “Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!”

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt invisible, dismissed, insignificant,

unwanted? Tragically, as Mike Vanderwalker suggested, some of you experienced that in the family you grew up in. You may have faced it in school, or in athletics. We all know what it is to be on the receiving end of someone else's arrogance or prejudice. And we know what it is to treat others the same way.

Our world comes with a pecking order, a hierarchy of social standing that we have each internalized. We have developed a highly personalized, complex matrix of criteria by which we categorize each other, giving each other virtual labels that help us sort our relationships. We evaluate each other by education, social sophistication or awkwardness, physical attractiveness, size, body shape, income, race, style, talent, culture, age, gender. We pick up cues from how others move, how they dress, how they talk, what they talk about, what they drive, where they live. And all the time we're putting each other in slots.

For instance, who do you know in your world whose income or profession or status is so far above you that he or she feels out of your reach socially? You might exchange pleasantries with them but you would never invite them over for dinner? Who do you know who is beneath you? You avoid them because you feel a vague dis-ease around them?

Stop acting out of how the world has formed your soul, Paul urges. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Change the way you treat each other, by changing the way you think about each other.

Paul zeroes in on how we think, using the same root word three times:

- "Live in harmony with one another." The literal translation is "Think the same thing toward each other," or, "Have the same attitude toward one another."
- "Do not be proud..." Again, literally, "Don't think too highly, arrogantly."
- "Do not be conceited." Literally, "Don't be wise from yourself." In other words, don't frame up your thinking about who or what matters based on your own limited perceptions.

What does it mean to be transformed by the renewing of our minds when it comes to how we evaluate each other?

One of our core values affirms that people matter to God, so people matter to us. People matter to God not because of anything compelling about us, and in spite of the shameful records of persistent wrongs we have committed. People matter to God because it is God's nature to love, to reach out, to heal, to rescue, to restore to himself. People matter so much that God gave his only begotten Son to bear humanity's hideous guilt on a cross of shame in order to offer us forgiveness and adopt us as part of his family.

God paid the same costly price for each of us. Renewing our minds and attitudes toward each other begins by taking our own place at the foot of Jesus' cross. It begins by recovering something of the slack-jawed wonder Charles Wesley expressed when he wrote: "Amazing love! How can it be that you, my God, should die for me."

The cross demolishes our entire matrix of social discrimination. It calls us to truth-based humility. Not pious self-abasement. We simply live into the reality of grace, embracing our common worth as God's kids solely because of what Jesus has done for us.

This is how we can have the same attitude toward each other. This is how we can take the true estimate of ourselves and one another. We are all loved people, holy temples: cherished by the same Father, rescued by the same Savior, indwelt by the same Holy Spirit.

So we note the words: "...be willing to associate with people of low position."

We hold a common misconception that the church of the first Century was composed mostly of slaves and outcasts, those marginalized in the culture. The reality is that the church represented a cross-section of society. There were slaves, and slave owners; laborers and employers. Lydia was a prosperous businesswoman. Erastus was the director of public works in Corinth. Paul preached in synagogues and public squares where he frequently attracted an

educated, sophisticated audience.

The congregation in Rome had the wealthy and powerful mixed in with the impoverished and insignificant. They had social stratification just like us. There was always someone others could look down on.

Don't do that Paul says. Let your renewed minds transform your relationships.

By the way, the phrase "...be willing to associate with people of low position," may be translated differently. It can just as easily mean, "...be willing to share in menial tasks." In other words, no one is above doing anything that needs doing.

In their culture, that could mean that a slave owner might wash a slave's feet. If they shared a common meal, all might join in cleaning up the dishes.

So we have to ask ourselves, are there any tasks in our church family we feel are beneath us? Jobs we shouldn't have to do? There may be some we are incapable of doing, but nothing we are unwilling to do in order to serve one another in love.

The primary significance, however, remains in the arena of relationships. When it comes to meeting needs and doing life together, no one is beneath us. Get your thinking straight. Don't be arrogant. In the words of the New Living Translation: "Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people."

We need to offer a caveat here. Even Jesus had close friends, people who were his intimates in ways other were not. Out of the crowds who followed him, he picked 70 to send on a special ministry assignment. Of the 70, 12 were his close companions, his disciples. Within the 12, three had special access to Jesus, Peter, James and John. And of the three, John was called the disciple Jesus loved. He was his best friend.

Putting on true humility does demand that we invite everyone into our immediate, inner circle of close friends. We simply can't handle that. It's not realistic. It does mean, however, that we don't exclude anyone from the family. We care for each other, and drink coffee with each other, and listen to each other's stories. We're not too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people.

Who are those "ordinary people?" Who gets left out sometimes?

Pastor Gordon McDonald says that as we move through life's stages, we come to church with different questions in our hearts. The elderly, he said, come wondering: "Why do I feel ignored by a large part of the congregation? Does anyone care who I once was? Will I be missed?"

Is it possible that our church family needs to find ways to challenge the assumptions of our youth-obsessed culture, and learn to enjoy the company of our older members? What would it take to reach across generational lines to enjoy the pleasure of each other's company.

We're quick to think in institutional terms, to say, for instance, that we ought to reorganize our Sunday School classes so that they become multi-generational. What if we started instead with ourselves? How might you reach across generational lines?

It's easy for our young people—teenagers—to become invisible to us. They have their own room, their own staff, and their own meeting time. Sometimes they avoid eye contact with adults, preferring the safety of their own peer group. But might some of the disconnect they feel with the larger church family come from a lack of acknowledgment by that family? What would it mean for us to enjoy the company of our teens?

We had a large extended family visit us once. After the service they planted themselves at the back of the lobby with fixed glares that dared anyone to approach them. The next week we got a letter flaming us for being such an unfriendly church.

Overall, I think our church family does an terrific job extending a welcome to those who visit. But we have to acknowledge that our guests can be intimidating, especially if we are

private people. We're not sure how to approach them or even if we want to. And we so enjoy the people we know and love here. What does it mean for us to step outside our comfort zone enough to enjoy our guests? Or is that someone else's responsibility?

"Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!"

I have to admit, God's Spirit pokes me with this verse more than most of the others in chapter 12. I'd read the chapter and God would take out his highlighter on these words. "Don't be proud, Leo. Don't be conceited."

It deflates my native arrogance—that false pride that puffs me up at the expense of others. It calls me to get outside myself, to be intentional about initiating conversations and staying in conversations I want to get out of.

So I wonder how it speaks to you. What is God saying to us that we need to pay attention to? If we're genuinely intent on being family, a secure base for people who have never been *familied*, we've got to come back to the foot of the cross, repent of our pride, and ask God for the grace to discover his great heart that delights in all his children.