

Value Driven: Putting Others First

Romans 15:1-9
February 19, 2017
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~The way we treat Jesus' Bride, the church, is the way the world will know we are Jesus' followers. For this reason, we are committed to fostering deep relationships with each other founded on grace, truth, and authenticity~

Please open your Bibles to Romans chapter 15. You will find that on page 805 if you are looking in the pew Bible.

With the exception of last week where we had Bob Reid with us, over the last six weeks we've been working through a series titled Value Driven and the new set of values that our church has adopted. You will find this document on the back of the prayer sheet in your bulletin. Along side having your Bible open to Romans 15 if you could take that paper out that would be great.

Today is the last Sunday in our series, and we will be dealing with the fifth way that our church seeks to glorify God by being conformed to the image of Christ. And that is by Putting Others First. Let me read that document for you again:

At Fort George Baptist Church we seek to glorify God by being conformed to the image of Christ. To this end we value:

Preaching God's Word with Conviction – God speaks to His people through the Bible. Because of this, we preach to present the truth of Scripture passionately without apology or thought for what people want to hear.

Participating in God's Mission – God is at work in our neighbourhoods, our city, and our world, and has intentionally placed us where we are. So, we seek to use everything He has entrusted to us to partner with Him in increasing His glory and expanding His kingdom.

Passionate Worship – We were created to “express worth” to God. Therefore, we strive to exalt the name of Christ with everything we say and sing, as well as by using every talent and resource God has put at our disposal.

Praying Wholeheartedly – Everything of eternal value must be done with God in God's way. For this reason, we give ourselves to prayer, asking Him to work within us, and in our world, that His will might be done here as it is in heaven.

Putting Others First – The way we treat Jesus' Bride, the church, is the way the world will know we are Jesus' followers. For this reason, we are committed to fostering deep relationships with each other founded on grace, truth, and authenticity.

Now Putting others first could quickly become a moralism. Just be a nice person, don't be selfish, and that's what it means to be a Christian. But that's not what we are talking about. Our values are not just a few nice things that we as a group what to focus our club on, rather the five sub-values we came up with are a summation of what the Scriptures says every church must be if it is going to be the church.

And so every God-glorifying, Jesus exalting church seeks to preach the words of scripture without apology, and participate with God in His mission and Worship God with passion and pray wholeheartedly. These aren't negotiables when it comes to following Christ. These are central to what it means to be the church, the bride of Christ.

And putting others first is in that same category. The fact is that God is glorified when we put others first just like Jesus did. And God is not glorified when we don't do this. And people who love Jesus want to glorify God. That's what it's all about. So there is a one to one connection between putting others first and glorifying God. And I'm going to work to bring that out for you from Scripture today.

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Now the text we are looking at comes near the end of the book of Romans. Paul spends the first 11 chapters laying the theology for what it looks like to follow Christ. He defines sin and describes how it separates us from God. He looks at the Abrahamic covenant and what it means to be chosen in spite of not deserving anything. He establishes the necessity of a Divine grace-offering substitute. And outlines what it means to be forgiven and transformed by God's grace.

And then in the last five chapters he switches gears to focus on what in practically means to live for Christ. And chapter 15 is well into that discussion.

Let me read the text for you. We are going to look at verses 1-9, but the central verse in this section is verse 7, so keep an eye on that one as we look at the connection between the glory of God and putting others first. Here we go:

[Read Romans 15:1-9]

Now there was a lot of diversity in the church of Rome, and this diversity was at the foundational level. So the Christians in Rome were a mix of Jews and Gentile Christ followers. Now that might not sound extreme, but these people didn't revere the same days, they didn't eat the same food, they didn't understand each other's preferences. They were different in every way. And whenever there are different kinds of people in a church conflict arises.

And into this context Paul speaks words of radical fellowship – verse 7 – “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” The ESV translation says “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Paul says **The way we treat Jesus' Bride, the church, is the way the world will know we are Jesus' followers.** And when they look at us they will bring praise to God.

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Now the "bring praise to God" part isn't just some Christians phrase Paul tacks on here. These words define the kind of supernatural accepting or welcoming that we are called to do. It is a kind the world isn't capable of copying. Jesus makes the same distinction in the Sermon on the Mount where He says:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.... If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (Matthew 5:43-47)

So the kind of putting others first that Paul and Jesus are calling for is something totally other than the world understands or is capable of doing. And this passage is full of this. Paul says don't please yourself, please your neighbours and build them up. And do this in the same way Jesus did. In fact have the exact same attitude He had, as He, as God with skin on, went to the cross, taking the insults of the world upon Himself for our betterment. It's when we are accepting each other in spite of our weaknesses like that, that the world will say "Something strange is going on there, I've got to check this out."

But how do we do it? I mean just let your mind run to our context and the people sitting in this room. How do we love each other in a way that is different from how tax collectors and families of pagans love each other?

Paul says it happens when the strong, or the spiritually mature – think of who that is in our context – give up what they want for the spiritually weak and immature. When those who are wise and theologically in the right, give up their position to serve those who are wrong, that is when something supernatural is going on.

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So how can people like us die to ourselves to put each other first in such a radical way that anyone who might walk by would be so surprised they would start giving God glory?

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I'll give it to you in a nutshell, and then we will work to unpack it for the rest of our time:

The only way people will glorify God when they look at us is if God is what satisfies us.

You see if we are people who are primarily satisfied spiritually when we sing the songs we love at church – that's the moment we connect with God. Or if we are happiest when the programs at church fit our needs; or our faith is strongest when the people around us treat us with respect and dignity we deserve; then we are never going to be able to put each other first.

But if you are a person who is satisfied by God. If you recognize that He is the treasure in the field worth abundantly more than everything else in creation, and you've got this treasure, then you can let go of secondary things like your preferences because you are already satisfied in God – I can let you have it your way because I've got God. And this is what Jesus modeled for us.

Paul says: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." Friends, the reason Jesus accepted us was because His satisfaction came from bringing God glory.

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Now we need to dig into the "glory to God" part in all of this because it is absolutely central to what Paul is saying in Romans 15.

The word "glory" comes up three times in this text. In verse 6 Paul says our unity with each other is for the glory of God. In verse 7 we accept each other to bring *praise* to God. But actually the Greek for praise here is "*doxa*" which is the same word translated glory in verse 6. And then in verse 9 Paul tells the Roman Christians that Christ's work was so that "the Gentiles might glorify God." So in each case putting others before ourselves gives God glory. The increase of God's glory is the motivation behind our every action.

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Now at Fort George we talk a lot about God's glory being the most important thing we live for as a church and as individuals. And our new Values reflect this. The very first sentence in our statement reads: **At Fort George Baptist Church we seek to glorify God by being conformed to the image of Christ** – that's why we exist! But I want to dig into this again because while it is true, it is not self-evident in the world we live in. In fact this idea seems totally contrary to what most people think God is all about.

So let me paint the problem that this idea gives us:¹ People in our world don't feel loved when you tell them that you love them in order that God will be glorified.

So if I tell you "the ultimate reason I accept you is because I value glorifying God more than anything else. And so I welcome you into our church and our family and our home because I want you to value God too. Then you say "Hey! I don't really feel loved. That's all about God and not about me. Aren't you supposed to love me for me?"

We feel loved when someone makes us central in their life. And if someone loves us because of someone else that feels cheap.

But verse 7 reads: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." So Paul says God's praise, or the increase of God's glory was the reason Jesus accepted us. Really? Did Jesus die for our forgiveness for God or for us?

¹ Problem and solution adapted from John Piper "Welcome One Another for the Glory of God" <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/welcome-one-another-for-the-glory-of-god> (Accessed Feb 17, 2017)

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The answer to this question is of ultimate importance. If we can figure out the motivation Jesus had for everything He did, then when we imitate Him God's glory will come down in our lives and in our church. And this is what we want. We want to be a people who revels in and participates with the increase of God's glory. So let's look quickly through Scripture to see whether God's glory really is the one thing He is most concerned with.

The first text I want to bring you to is Psalm 106. The Psalmist sings:

We have sinned, even as our ancestors did;
we have done wrong and acted wickedly....
Yet He saved them for His name's sake,
to make His mighty power known. (Psalm 106:6;8)

Notice the shift here from Israel's depravity and sin, through God's salvation. But notice that salvation isn't the end. The reason God saved Israel was for His name's sake; so that His mighty power would be known.

Now this doesn't jive with the way we think about God. Most Christians think "I can make God the center of my life, because I know I'm the most important thing in His life. After all God died to save me from sin, so He must love me very much."

And God does love us, but we aren't at the center of His affection, we aren't God's god, He is. And we see this all over Scripture. So in Isaiah 43 God tells His people:

I, even I, am He who blots out
your transgressions, for My own sake,
and remembers your sins no more. (Isaiah 43:25)

What this means is that the primary reason God forgives us has nothing to do with us at all – it is about Him. Now this sounds selfish to our ears, but in fact this is the most beautiful and loving truth in the world. It is because God loves His glory first that David can ask forgiveness like he does in Psalm 25. He says:

For the sake of Your name, LORD,
forgive my iniquity, though it is great. (Psalm 25:11)

Do you see how beautiful this is?... Have you ever found yourself in a spot where you've sinned? Maybe you've fallen into the same old hole you've been in a thousand times before. In fact "fallen into sin" is the wrong word, you ran there willingly. You sinned deliberately. Have you been there? And in this moment you feel dirty and guilty and depressed at your own depravity. You know you need forgiveness, but you also know you deserve anything but forgiveness from God. Have you been there?

David had. But he knows that the reason God forgives him is not because he is great, it is because God is great. And so David prays "forgive me for Your glory."

Brothers and sisters, when you need forgiveness pray this way. Pray “Father, make your glorious grace great by forgiving someone who doesn’t deserve it.”

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Now this isn’t just an Old Testament thing; Jesus is all about the glory of God and the New Testament is just full of it. So in Ephesians 1 we read:

For He [God] chose us in Him [Jesus] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace. (Ephesians 1:4-6a)

So our adoption into God’s family, which God accomplished through Christ, was for the praise of His glorious grace – He did this so that we would say “wow God, You look great! Your grace is glorious!”

And in Philippians 2 Paul again ties together how we treat each other in the church with why Jesus left heaven to come to earth and die for us. He says:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage;

rather, He made Himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place
and gave Him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus left heaven and came to earth, and lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father even to the point of emptying Himself of all the rights of His divinity in order to take the form of a servant, and die for His own creation. And when this happened God elevated Him, and gave Him the glory He was worthy of. But the reason behind it all was the glory of God the Father.

Friends, this is the good news of the Gospel. Our salvation isn't dependent on us, it's dependent on God. God forgives us because when He changes someone from a slave of sin, stuck in the snares of temptation and defeat, into a son or daughter of righteousness, bearing the image of Christ – He gets glory. We look at the miracle of transformation in people who have met Jesus and say “wow, only God could do this kind of thing.”

I'll give you one more text: In John 17 Jesus prays His High Priestly prayer. This is where Jesus prays specifically for His disciples and every Christ-follower down throughout the ages. Jesus spends an entire chapter in John praying for you. But at the beginning of the prayer He sets the context for how everything He prays for us is to be understood. It says:

Jesus... looked toward heaven and prayed:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You. For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him. Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began.” (John 17:1-5)

These five verses are an excerpt of a conversation between Jesus and the Father about us, but even though He is praying for us the basis of His prayer has nothing to do with us at all – it's all about the most important thing in the universe – the glory of God.

And this is the foundation that Paul builds his argument on in Romans 15. He says “Bear with the failings of the weak and... please [your] neighbours for their good. And Encourage one another. And do all this having the same attitude of mind towards each other that Christ Jesus had.

And the mindset Jesus had was to accept you and die to forgive you and save you into new life in His kingdom, all for the glory of God. And that's the way we are called to accept and welcome each other.

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So look at the person beside you. Look at your spouse, or parent, or kids. Look out across the room at your brothers and sisters. Think of the person who has hurt you. If there are any selfishness that you see. If there is any brokenness in relationship. The problem isn't primarily one between you and that person, it is really about you and Jesus. You need Jesus' mindset.

Paul says "Accept (or welcome) one another, then, just as Christ accepted (or welcomed) you, in order to bring praise to God."

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Now as with each of our values there are aspects of this one that our church excels at, and there are aspects where it challenges us to move forward.

So at the end of January we had our annual deacon's retreat. And one of the things we talked about was the friendliness of our church. And this is something I was familiar with, as you probably are as well. I've been at Fort George for six years now, and during that time one of the things I've heard over and over again is that our church is a friendly church – you've heard this too. And this has really encouraged me. I think we work hard to make newcomers feel welcome, and they do.

So for example Alexis and his late wife Gisela started attending here roughly 5 years ago. They had attended a couple other churches in the city prior to coming here but never felt at home. But when they entered our doors things were different. People welcomed and accepted them warmly. Very quickly they were invited into almost every aspects of church life here from Care Groups to music to leadership. And as a result they felt loved. Later when Gisela passed away the community surrounded Alexis. And then when Sandy entered the picture she was also welcomed and embraced. This is a Fort George friendliness success story.

But as deacons we also noticed a trend, and that is that there are certain kinds of people who feel the friendliness of our church while others do not. And here is where the challenge lies. If you are someone who is a lot like us – if you are 70 years old and have a German or immigrant background – then we are a welcoming and accepting church. But if you are different from us there is a high likelihood that you will not experience our church as friendly. And you will probably not come back.

So here is a chart that depicts the demographics of our church. To make this I just went through the new directory that is almost finished and guessed at your ages, so please don't ask me where I put you on the chart. But assuming my guesses were close to accurate there are a couple things to notice. The first is that there are roughly 120 adults who attend here, and 50% of us are 70 years old or above. This is true whether you are a newcomer here, or whether you've been here for 50 years.

Now the first thing this means is that we are pretty good at welcoming people who are like us, and not very good at welcoming those who are different. And so Jesus' words have to strike us close to home:

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?... If you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? (Matthew 5:46-47)

While it is comfortable and very humanly natural, we cannot continue to be a church like this and say that we value putting others first.

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The second thing this raises is the immanent problem of church mortality. The deacons feel that we are at the beginning of probably a 5-year window where we can change things at Fort George, or else this church will close its doors somewhere around 10 years from now. Without trying to over dramatize this 50% of the people who attend here are going to be dead by that time.

So what we need as a church is the mindset of Christ. If we are going to survive beyond our deaths we need a supernatural vision that sees beyond our own preferences, and out to what God is doing in the community of Prince George. And this is what the deacons are wrestling through right now.

And it's a big wrestle because naturally this is hopeless, it's impossible – people don't die to themselves to put others first. But there is hope because we aren't a natural church. God has worked in this body in supernatural ways at lots of times in our history, and He can do it again. And when He does it He is going to get the glory because no clever tricks or cunning leaders can get sinful people like us to put each other first for the glory of God, only the Spirit of God can do this.

So brothers and sisters, pursue the mindset of Christ Jesus. Let Him work in you; let Him transform your natural tendencies, because there is nothing more exciting than being part of what God is doing in the world. And this is something He wants to invite Fort George into again. But He will not force us to participate with Him. If we choose to welcome well only our own people, if we only love those who love us, He will leave us to ourselves and move on. Our participation in the increase of the glory of God depends on our willingness to put others first in the same way Jesus welcomed us.