

# Living In Community: a 'To Do' List

Romans 12:9-21  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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When you were growing up, was living together in your family always easy? Well, if things always went smoothly in your home, then at least your teenage years were certainly different than mine. What about as an adult? Perhaps you've had a family of your own, or a partner, or even a roommate. Have things always gone well?

The definition of 'family' can be broadened, of course, to include our church family, for instance. **As people of faith, do you suppose we have it any easier when it comes to living together in community?**

When we look closely at the Apostle Paul's letters to the various churches he founded, then we can see that it wasn't particularly easy for them either. That's where today's Epistle Lesson comes in, for it has much to say about living in community.

**Paul lays out a long list of guidelines for ordinary, everyday life – a 'to do' list of helpful and necessary admonitions for living together lovingly and peaceably in community.** While these exhortations can be applied to any family or community, Paul has written them expressly for life together as a community of faith – the church. I find this list *extremely* helpful in guiding any congregation in right and mutual ways of living in community.

One of the reasons I have included this passage as a bulletin insert is so you can take it home, and maybe even put it on your refrigerator, as I plan to do on our church refrigerator. I encourage you to refer to it often, especially during times of relationship difficulties. For just like in biblical times **it's not so much a matter of if families and communities of faith will have occasional altercations, but rather what to do when situations flare up. Paying attention to, and intentionally implementing these exhortations may, in fact, minimize much contentiousness in the first place.**

As we look at this list, two major themes emerge: first, the ways that Christians are to manifest genuine love (vv. 10-13), and second, the obligations that one has towards strangers and one's enemies (vv. 14-20). This list, by the way, flows from Paul's earlier statement in Chapter 12, which we looked at last Sunday, that we should not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing (changing) of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (v. 2).

**Paul's 'to do' list for living in community begins with the phrase, "Let your love be genuine"** (v. 9). Not surprisingly, love stands at the head of the list, and is

central to the rest of the entire passage, for it provides the context for Paul's other exhortations.

Paul is saying: **let your love for others be sincere – without pretense, without play-acting, without hypocrisy, without ulterior motives.** By the way, the Greek for from which we get 'hypocrite' originally just meant 'actor.' Since an actor was someone who was pretending to be something he or she wasn't, the word evolved to it's current meaning today.

One of the ways we love one another, Paul states, is with **mutual affection.** And the word affection, in this context, means **true and honest caring for the well-being of one another.**

He then adds that we are to rejoice with others who are rejoicing, and weep with those who weep. And we can only do that when we build meaningful relationships with each other.

With true community, then, comes responsibility toward one another. Therefore, Paul also tell us to outdo one another in showing honor.

Next, Paul tells us: "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" (vv. 11-12). There's an entire sermon in each one of these. And there are several other exhortations in this passage like: blessing those who curse us, associating with the lowly, being humble, and overcoming evil with good.

But I want to focus on just one more in particular, because I think the well-being and even growth of any congregation depends on it. The second half of Romans 12:13 commands us to: "**Extend hospitality to strangers.**" **And I would add that we need to be conscious to extend hospitality to one another, in addition to strangers.**

William Tyndale, who translated the New Testament into English way back in 1525 (nearly 100 years before the King James Version), used a magnificent word with rich imagery for this passage. His translation of this simple verse states that the Christian should have a *harborous* disposition. In other words, **what a protective and nurturing harbor does for a boat, we should do for strangers and one another.** Sounds like the very definition of a 'welcoming' congregation doesn't it?!

So let me ask you, **if you were to rate the hospitality of this congregation on a scale of 1-10 what rating would you give it? Have you ever thought about how your (and our) hospitality affects our evangelism and church growth efforts?**

Hospitality is a reaching out beyond ourselves, even our comfort zone. It's a way of saying, "Everyone counts!" Renowned author on Christian spirituality, **Henri Nouwen**, writes:

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. . .

Hospitality creates a friendly and safe space where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

We can apply all this here at College Hill in so many different ways. One of the best opportunities currently before us is in our **Hispanic Ministry efforts**. As most of you have read in the church newsletter that was mailed out this week, **the Session - after much open and honest discussion and discernment – unanimously voted to begin a Spanish-language service of worship. This is an historic step in furthering our ministry of inclusiveness.**

That service will begin next Sunday, September 7, on Rally Day, after the official Commissioning during our service of worship of Iris Carrera and Richardo Chavez to lead that ministry. Then our Spanish-speaking members will be “sent forth” as part of this congregation to continue to worship. The service will meet at this same 11:00 a.m. hour, either in the Memorial Parlor or on the third floor. And yes, we will continue to learn a lot about living together in community.

**Hospitality then, along with genuine love, caring for the well-being of others, living in a spirit of hope, patience, humility and prayer, and overcoming evil with good, are among the most crucial items on any congregation’s ‘to do’ list in order to live in harmony and peace.**

So, may God bless all our efforts as we seek diligently to live in community.

Amen.