

Redeeming Real People from Active Struggle

Romans 12:9-21

A Review of where we've been:

There's a bit of a challenge walking in the post-Christmas malaise and letdown. The sugar rush of excitement is over and now that adrenaline has sopped up our reserve energy, the grogginess demands our attention. With a quick disclaimer to our visitors (you are being dropped into a Post Christmas message that is really a message on relationships that started 6 weeks ago), it'd be beneficial to review where we've been so that we can properly conclude today.

- **Marriage relationships** – Created by God as not only a place of enjoyment, fulfillment of a command (fill the earth), but a beautifully vivid picture of Christ's love for His Bride. Marriage is good, but is also not ultimate. It is a place to honor Christ, reveal sin, live out forgiveness, and understand our relationship with God in Christ. Sin has corrupted this design, and instead of being a place of selfless sacrifice, is now a battleground of selfish gain and stubborn pride. The only solution we have is in the power of Christ in the gospel, to reverse and redeem to course of marriage. Living out godly, imperfect, committed, resolute, and joyful marriages by pursuing Christ is and will be one of the most visible and attractive evangelistic tools we have at our disposal moving forward in an ever shifting world yielded to the Prince of the Power of the air.
- **Singleness** – No stage of life or condition we find ourselves in should define us, yet far too often we let a condition like singleness define who we are. Singleness in any form (pre-marriage, divorce, or a loss of spouse) does not define our identity since Christ already does that. Marriage, kids, or whatever else comes with that is not the ultimate cure for loneliness, anxiety, fear, or unhappiness, since marriage is not ultimate, Christ is. The goal of all believers is to secure undivided devotion to Christ, and those freed from marriage have a unique opportunity to do that. Living out godly, pure, striving for contentment, joyful single lives by pursuing Christ will be one of the most visible and attractive evangelistic tools we have at our disposal moving forward in an ever shifting world yielded to the Prince of the Power of the air (*are you catching a theme?*)
- **Sexuality** – God created sex as a good thing, a gift to be treasured, enjoyed, and celebrated as a way that married husbands and wives could experience intimacy that honored and glorified God. It is given for marriage alone, and any other expression outside of marriage is sin. Sin has broken all relationships, and has caused our sinful flesh to produce sinful desires, leading us to act on those desires, and when they cannot be satisfied, sin multiplies into unnatural areas. Our world has yielded itself to its desires, wishing everyone would join them in saying that it is good and acceptable to function outside of God's commands. This is why living out godly and pure sexual relationships (in marriage – properly without celibacy; in non-marriage – celibacy and commitment to Christ) by pursuing Christ will be one of the most visible and attractive evangelistic tools we have at our disposal moving forward in an ever shifting world yielded to the Prince of the Power of the air (*now I'm just seeing if you're paying attention*).

We looked at **Romans 1** which concluded with the fact that we have all yielded to idolatry at some level and are left condemned because of it. We knew there is a God, we knew right from wrong (Rom. 2:15-16), yet sinned willfully anyway. That is why **Romans 5 and 6** are so pivotal. We are saved by grace alone, meaning it was only God's favor in the work of Jesus on the cross that bought our salvation. We

respond by faith, and in so doing, we **die to our former life**, turning from our sinful desires, renewing our mind (Rom. 12:1-2), and living out holy and obedient lives.

This leaves us, however, in tension. The Bible is always clear on who God is, who we are, and what we supposed to do, but the execution of that plan is often difficult. How do we put these truths into practice? What role do we play in each others lives? How do we help those in the church and those outside? We must always remember that all truth plays out with real people, not hypothetical. National and international polls and data tell a story, but we are always more interested in how it plays out in our current relationships. So what does the Bible say about the practice of these truths in terms of redeeming relationships.

Principles to Practice (with everyone struggling with sin):

- **Let Love Be Our Primary Motivation** (Rom. 12:9; 2 Cor. 5:14)

Romans 12:9-10 *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.*

2 Corinthians 5:14 *For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;*

Motivation is everything. True motivation is what separates flash in the pan resolutions from life-long changes. If we are seeking **inspiration** alone to motivate us to love people (believers and unbelievers alike), we will always fall short. Loving people is a long term, hard, life long venture, not a check list that I scratch off to feel better about myself. If we are to truly love people in the way the truth demands, we must recognize a couple of important things.

- **Love must be genuine** – this is separated from a selfish love. Genuine love seeks the *best* of the other, not what feeds our desires. We seek what's best even if it costs, wounds, or is hard, and it may not even give us rosy feelings right away. So much of our service can be self-love instead of genuine love.
- **Love must be brotherly** – Family love is significant. It's the love we just experienced at Christmas. It transcends so many things (job, condition, stage of life, personality, etc.). Brotherly love is committed no matter what. It means that no matter what happens between myself and my brother, we will still have a relationship.
- **Christ's love must control** – Christ's love dictates the terms. We no longer love apart from the gospel, since everything must ultimately come back to that. It also informs us of how our motivation grows. As our love and affection for Christ grow out of a deeper understanding of the gospel, our motivation to love people will grow. A growing love for God will directly affect our growing love for people, which means the opposite is also true. A minimal love for people signals a low and diminishing love for God.

- **Give Time its Appropriate Place** (Rom. 12:12)

Romans 12:12 *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

*"My Christian life unfolded as I was just living my life, my normal life. In the normal course of life questions emerged that exceeded my secular feminist worldview. Those questions sat quietly in the crevices of my mind until I met a most unlikely friend: a Christian pastor. Had a pastor name Ken Smith not shared the gospel with me for **years and years, over and over again**, not in some used car salesman way, but in an organic, spontaneous, and compassionate way, those questions might still be lodged in*

*the crevices of my mind and I might never have met the most unlikely of friends, **Jesus Christ Himself...**Ken Smith spent **time** with me ---and **not just spare time**. He spent **pricey time** ---**real time**.¹*

Love for people expresses itself by giving them our most precious commodity: time. Do not underestimate this powerful tool and resource at our disposal. We spend the most time with those we love the most (at least we try to). Time with people allows us to:

- **Listen and ask questions** – This is the best way to bridge relationships and communicate care, concern, and love. This has been a key to understanding how to better counsel, in asking more questions and making less statements.
- **Gather all the information before making conclusions** – Is this person a believer or unbeliever? Confused or stubborn? Struggling with desires or actions? What are the real needs vs. felt needs? Have past experiences colored present views?
- **Identifying with the struggle** – We may not have ever experienced or struggled with the stated sin or struggle presented, but we can identify with the struggle of sin. Time allows us to relate without compromise, to build friendship so as to bring a true message from a trusted source. When we give the message without the extension of friendship we often are a resounding gong and noisy symbol, and though our message is good, it is not presented in a way to be easily accepted.
- **Do Not Let Fear Control** (Matt. 10:28; 2 Tim. 1:7)

Matthew 10:28 And **do not fear those who kill the body** but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

2 Timothy 1:7 for God gave us a spirit not of fear but **of power and love and self-control**.

Fear moves us away from the people we are here to love. Fear is a great motivator, but in the wrong direction. Fear allows us to make excuses (I don't have enough time), to focus on the wrong things (legislation over people), and sequesters rather than engages. By nature, loving people means we will interact with those **different than us**, different in economics, culture, ethnicity, and even experiences of sin. Fear will keep us comfortable, will minimize risk, and leave us away from those that Christ said He came to seek and save. How do we overcome fear?

- **Fear God properly** – Just like love, when we think rightly about whom to fear, the proper perspective becomes crystallized. When I fear God, I grow in my trust in His Word and the power He provides to obey.
- **Exercise what God gave us** – It is interesting that Paul told Timothy that we are given **power** (we like that), **love**, and **self control** (didn't expect that). The power is the ability to live out obediently what He's called us to do, love gives us the motivation, but *self control* is also needed. Left to myself, I will default to comfort and ease. Self-control means I can make proactive decisions when it comes to people, and allows me to cut through all the excuses I would normally make. Self-control comes by walking by the Spirit, so It is imperative that we yield ourselves to the Spirits lead so He will guide and empower.

¹ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, "The secret thoughts of an unlikely convert: an English professors journey into Christian faith, p. 1,67. This book is a personal testimony of a professor whose goal was to advance radical leftist ideologies, who was a practicing lesbian, and whom God saved through the transforming work of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- **Navigate Shifting Definitions Biblically** (Rom. 1:32)

Romans 1:32 Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Acceptance vs Approval – We “accept” everyone as image bearers who God loves and gives common grace to (Matthew 5:45). Often when people want to be accepted, what they are really longing for is “approval”. Approving something gives validity to the choice, action, or course chosen. There is a monumental difference between the two. We accept sinful people, but we cannot approve of sinful choices. When we blur this line, we no longer can give a clear message or meaning to the gospel.

Judge vs Judgmental – We are called to “judge” those within the church, but not those outside (see 1 Corinthians 5). We call those who claim to be part of God’s family to act accordingly. We DO NOT expect unbelievers to act, feel, think, care, or worship like a repentant believer, and if we hold someone to that standard, we are in the wrong. However, it is also true that we have a *measure of truth* called Scripture, by which we distinguish right vs wrong, good vs. evil, and what pleases the Lord. To stand on that is NOT judgmental. Being judgmental comes when we hold someone to a standard outside of Scripture, look down on someone for their struggle, or treat an unbeliever as if they were a believer.

Love vs “Love” – We’ve covered this a bit, but the word “love” gets thrown out by everyone, and it means something different. We must define love by God, for God is love. That means He is the standard and definition. It is not love to approve of someone’s sin that will only lead to misery, hopelessness, and judgment. It is not loving to stay silent. It is not loving to care more for our reputation than being hated for giving the good news.

- **Do Not Outsmart (or deceive) Yourself** (Rom. 15:14)

Romans 15:14 I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and **able to instruct one another**.

“I can’t counsel that person, I don’t know them well enough.” “I can’t share the gospel with them, I know them too well.”

“I am not trained as a counselor.” “I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“I don’t know enough.”

“My life isn’t where it needs to be so I have no grounds.”

“I have never experienced _____ so I can’t help them with it.”

I’m not sure if you’ve ever given these excuses, but I’ve heard them all. Our ability to counsel, disciple, and mentor does not come from our ability, but from the empowering of God through His Spirit in the gospel of His Son. Do you believe that? God has designed the church to equip *EVERY BELIEVER* with the ability to love people, speaking the truth in love. So often we think that the pastors and elders should be the ones doing it, and that is true, but not ultimate.

I cut my finger while heading over to my office yesterday. It bled a bit on the way over, and as I parked my car across from the hospital it struck me: I don’t need to go to the ER for this, I simply need to put some pressure on it (even I know that), and let my body do what it was designed to do (coagulate or something like that). How would they view me if I went to the ER with a cut that didn’t even need a bandaid? There are obviously some things that we cannot work out and need a doctor, but most things we can figure out with the minimal understanding we have. It is the same thing in the church. Pastors have training and experience to handle certain situations, but most call for the Biblical understanding of everyday Christians. Don’t outsmart yourself. Love people and see what God will do. Most counseling

I've done have not been with things I've personally experienced, yet I'm amazed that the solutions the Bible offers apply to all people.

- **Be Prepared to Become the Target** (Rom. 12:14)

Romans 12:14 Bless those **who persecute you**; bless and do not curse them.

Remember, that when Jesus spoke truth, it got under the sinful skin of people, to the point that He became the target of their wrath. Nothing has changed. When people get angry with you, begin to hate you, and leave you, it may not mean you did anything wrong (unless you did). This may mean that you have done things rightly, but the truth is too convicting and the tension is too great. Be prepared that when you DO become the target, it should not be a surprise and it absolutely matters how you answer back.

- **Be Filled with Both Grace & Truth** (John 1:14)

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

As much as we grow in truth, we should grow in the same measure of grace. A proper focus on the truth should allow us to know which battles to fight, where and when we don't need to, and gives us longsuffering with people. Being filled with grace means we hate our own sin but are patient with others. We are not easily offended and are able to navigate difficult cultural waters because we see them from an eternal perspective.

- **Be Gentle & Watchful** (Gal. 5:1-2)

Galatians 6:1-2 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Graciousness demands that we think about our approach to people. Grace means we are firm in the truth but gentle in how we seek to restore. Gentleness comes from a mindset that understands our own propensity to sin and our constant need for grace.

- **Keep the Gospel as the Means & End** (Rom. 1:16)

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the **gospel**, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone **who believes**, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

This also means we are not in relationships for relationships sake, we are in them to manifest the gospel. NEVER let the gospel become a token phrase, a catchy theme, or a marketable brand. The gospel is the power by which people change and the goal of our conversation. Without the gospel, we help people live longer in their sin, feel better before judgment, and distract people from the gaping hole in their life (like giving a lollipop to someone with a gunshot wound). The gospel is the center of every relationship, whether with a believer or unbeliever, and IT is what produces change.

This helps remind us that WE do not ultimately change people, but ONLY God does through the work of Jesus. When we get this out of order, we take far too much credit when people do change, and take on far too much responsibility when they do not.

- **Make it Personal, Not an Issue** (Rom. 12:15)

Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

This is especially true in the shifting sands of evangelicalism today. We must not see areas of theology like abortion and homosexuality as issues to fight for devoid of personal interaction. We fight for clarity so we can love properly. I want to read a rather lengthy quote from a book called “Washed and waiting” by a man named Wesley Hill, a believer and teacher at a Christian college. He struggles with same sex attraction, though he strives not to act on it. He grew up in a Christian home, did not make a conscious choice in whom he was attracted to, knows its against God’s design, so lives in this tension. Here is what he said about all of what we just said:

“British theologian John Webster speaks of “the church facing the resistance of the gospel,” meaning that if the gospel brings comfort, it also necessarily brings affliction. The gospel resists the fallen inclinations of Christian believers. When we engage with God in Christ and take seriously the commands for purity that flow from the gospel, we always find our sinful dreams and desires challenged and confronted. When we homosexual Christians bring our sexuality before God, we begin or continue a long, costly process of having it transformed. For God’s perspective, our homoerotic inclinations are like ‘the craving for salt of a person who is dying of thirst’...yet when God begins to try to change the craving and give us the living water that will ultimately quench our thirst, we scream in pain, protesting that we were made for salt. The change hurts.

Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Asked one gay Christian in a letter to a friend.

“Certainly not,” he concluded. “But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning, and not merely a place to be comforted and indulged.” Engaging with

God and entering the transformative life of the church does not mean we get kind of a “free pass”, an unconditional love that leaves us where we are. Instead, we get a fiercely demanding love, a divine love that will never let us escape from its purifying, renovating, and ultimately healing grip.

And that means that our pain --- the pain of having our deeply ingrained inclinations and desires blocked and confronted by God’s demand for purity in the gospel --- far from being a sign of our *failure* to live the life God wants, may actually be the mark of our *faithfulness*. We groan in frustration *because* of our fidelity to the gospel’s call. And though we may miss out in the short run on lives of personal fulfillment and sexual satisfaction, in the long run the cruelest thing that God could do would be to leave us alone with our desires, to spare us the affliction of His refining care.

Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be,” writes historian Andrew Walls. In light of this, is it any surprise that we homosexual Christians must experience such transformation along with the rest of the community of faith?²

No matter the issue, these principles are true. This is a safe environment for sinners, but not a comfortable one. You can deal honestly and openly with your sin, but if you want to stay in it, it will be infinitely uneasy. We struggle with desires that we did not choose, but we must struggle with them properly. We must love each other that openly admits sin yet honestly evaluates it.

Questions to Wrestle With:

- **What does it mean that the church is a place for *broken people*? Doesn’t that mean we should not judge someone else?**
- **If God is loving, shouldn’t we accept everyone?**
- **What about other sins (gluttony, divorce, etc). By calling out one sin are we saying one sin is worse than another?**
- **What do we do when our government legislates something the Bible opposes?**
- **What about SSA (same sex attraction)? What does it mean? Is it sinful? Can there be change? How do we help?**

² Wesley Hill, “Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality.” P. 67-68.