



## **WE NEED EACH OTHER!**

1 Peter 4:8-11; Leviticus 19:9-18 (Becky Douglass)

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COVID has changed our perspective on many things, hasn't it? I used to jump into the car and head to the shops or a cafe or to the doctor's without thinking twice, but now I have to think about masks, and sign-ins and hand sanitising, etc. In the end, I often choose to just stay home and do what I need to do via the internet. It is also really hard to plan too far in advance at the moment as things are always changing. We've had to change the date of our church lunch three times now!

But the hardest thing has been to deal with? I think it is the disruption in relationships. Not being able to visit family members – whether they are just up the coast like my dad or on the other side of the world like our son. Not being able to be a part of a larger group – not even seeing some people for weeks at a time. I am an introvert and I like my time alone, but even I have been craving personal interaction. It is sad not being able to give someone a hug, but during lockdown, I miss just exchanging smiles with people. I miss those casual conversations which strengthen our “togetherness”. I miss the camaraderie of working together on a project and the positive boost to my morale in knowing that my contribution was needed.

This pandemic has made us realise anew that we as human beings need interaction with other human beings. God made us to live and work as a part of a community. That is why He chose to work primarily through a group of people rather than individuals – Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. When we become Christians, we enter into two relationships – our relationship with God and our relationship with other members of God's family. And these relationships become one of the key ways that we are able to endure hard times and even flourish – to have green leaves in the drought.

Last week we looked at one of the Kings of Israel who was facing a hard time. He turned to God in prayer and trusted God to take care of Him. Hezekiah gave us a good example of a prayer of faith which is able to sustain us in difficult times.

Today we are going to move forward several centuries to the time of the early Church. Within only 30 years after Jesus had ascended to heaven, the church was growing throughout the Roman Empire. But under Nero, the Christians were persecuted and those in Rome were forced to flee their homes. The Apostle Peter wrote his epistles to some of these people who had settled in modern-day Turkey. He talked to them about ways they could stand firm under trials and persecution. Towards the end of his letter, we find the passage we read today.

*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly ... (v.8)*

If they forgot everything else he told them, they must not forget this! If they are going to live well in this difficult circumstance, they must work hard at loving one another. Think of an athlete straining hard with focused concentration and maximum effort in order to win a competition. This assumes that loving one another is not always easy, but it is important! And this love will be displayed in at least three ways – grace, generosity and gifting.

## **1. Grace**

*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.  
(v.8)*

Now, we need to state right at the beginning that this does not mean that we should cover-up serious sin. The church hasn't always gotten this right and has at times not only covered-up seriously bad behaviour, but even enabled it. But that is not what Peter is talking about here. Here he is talking about those everyday, frequent annoyances that come from living and working together.

When life is going great and we are full of energy and optimism, it is easy to overlook those little annoyances. We can laugh at the minor quirks of others and even find them endearing. But when we're under pressure, when we're tired, when every step forward takes effort, even little things can become major irritations to us. When we've been pushed around and beaten up by life, the slightest bump from someone can trigger anger and frustration. Think of how a tired, hungry child reacts to the slightest disturbance! We need God's love to enable us to extend grace to others in these situations – to enable us to go beyond our natural reactions and to "*Love one another earnestly*".

And it is two-way process, isn't it? When we are feeling a bit bruised by life, we value a bit of softness from others. We need them to cut us some slack and be understanding that we are under stress and may not always say and do the best things. Their forgiveness of our tired reactions, their love for us when we are not very lovely, can be like a cold drink in the desert. We need mutual grace, which is only possible when God's love binds us together and is a "buffer" between us. Then church can be a safe place for people to live honestly and graciously.

## **2. Generosity**

*Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. (v.9)*

The dictionary defines hospitality as "receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way". We tend to think of hospitality as having people over for a meal, or welcoming newcomers to church. I think it also covers such ideas as charity and benevolence. The word "hospital" was originally applied to an institution run by a religious order which helped needy and suffering people. Here is where the idea of generosity comes in. In showing hospitality to each other, Paul is calling us to be open-handed with what we have – whether that is a meal, or money, or our time, or a listening ear. And we need show hospitality willingly and warmly so that the receiver knows we are happy to share.

An example of God-directed generosity is the instructions in the first few verses we read from Leviticus.

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.  
(Leviticus 19:9,10)*

Basically, this is telling people that when they harvest their crops, they are to leave some in the field for the poorer people to gather for themselves. The story of Ruth gives us a glimpse of how this worked out. Ruth would follow behind the harvesters and pick up the bits they dropped. This became a major food supply for her and Naomi. We also see in the story of Ruth that gleaners like her were not despised, but treated well and made welcome among the harvesters. I think Boaz's welcoming attitude towards Ruth was as important to her as the grain she gleaned.

So, how can we show generosity and hospitality to one another as we face at least another week of lockdown on top of any other issues we might be facing? First of all, can I encourage you to keep in touch with each other? Just a short call or brief email can make someone's day. And be praying for each other. Pam and Norm do a great job of putting together the Prayer Updates each week. I find it very helpful to pray through this a couple of times each week.

We also need to remember our ministry partners. All of them are dealing with difficult, uncertain things at the moment. Again, the Prayer Updates are helpful in knowing the latest information that can guide our prayers. We also need to be sure to keep up our financial support of them and even look for ways to give a little more – our generosity will be a tremendous practical encouragement to them. To share one example, Caleb has been struggling to stay in touch with the people in his church during their lockdown because they don't have the access to the internet that we have. We were able to send some extra money to him recently so that their church could host a radio program to connect with their church members and the wider community during their lockdown. They are so appreciative of this help.

Finally, we need to be keeping our eyes open for opportunities for us to extend this generous hospitality to others within our community. We are obviously not supposed to be out in the community any more than necessary. But even a greeting across the road to a neighbour, can be encouraging to them. When do we have to go out, realising that everyone is under extra pressure, we can give grace to others and make a point of saying thank you and praising people for their assistance. Let's be people that others like being around!

### **3. Gifting**

*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (v.10,11)*

God designed the body of Christ to be interdependent. Not one of us has everything within ourselves that we need to live as Christians. God has made all different kinds of people and given them a variety of gifts and abilities. I love the two examples that Paul gives because they show the importance of this variety. When we think of "essential workers" in the church we easily think of the upfront people – those who preach and lead. But Paul also emphasises those who work behind the scenes – the servers. Paul puts these two groups on equal footing – both are essential and both are reliant on God to do their work. I really believe that those who make our morning tea are just as important as those who lead the Grace Groups – they just have different skills and abilities. Hospitality and Biblical insight are both needed. Both should point us to God. Both strengthen us to face difficulties. We'd be less of a church without either of these.

I also want to say that extending grace to each other and being generously hospitable will look different for people with different gifting. Some of us are naturally great at getting on the phone and chatting away. Others of us may prefer to write a note to someone. God has given some of us money to share generously and others He has gifted with practical skills

which may be needed. Some are naturally good at organising and others are particularly sensitive to people who need a hug and a listening ear.

### **Conclusion**

As I was reading the Leviticus passage, I was impressed by the deep practicality of God's instructions to His people, the Israelites. They were living in a hostile land, surrounded by people who would like nothing more than to eliminate them from the earth. God knew that they would need to support each other – to make sure that they treated each other well – or else they would not survive. But as they worked together honestly and lovingly, they would be able to withstand opposition and be a witness to the character of God to those watching.

The same is true of us as well. It is an incredible blessing to be part of a local family of believers. As we love one another earnestly, we will benefit from each other's grace, generosity and gifting. And the impact of all this will be a blessing for us, helping us through whatever might happen, be a powerful witness to a fragmented, watching world, and ultimately bring glory to God.

How can we earnestly love one another this week?