

# The Overflowing Life – Part 3

## Community: Building Relationships of Generosity

Romans 12:3-16  
February 5, 2006

It's the summer of 1971 and a mob of 12 year old boys are lounging under the apple tree in the Johnson's back yard. We are practicing the fine art of doing life together. So all summer we'll play softball, football and kick-the-can, arguing endlessly about rules and calls ("He was out!" "No, you moron, he was safe!"), but we always work it out together – without adults. Then we ride our bikes together, eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches together, and just before our parents call us in for the night, we'll lie on the grass and look for shooting stars together.

Now fast forward to last summer. A bunch of parents are standing on the soccer fields trying to plan a team party for our 12 year old boys travel team. "O, Johnny can't do it on Saturday: he has trombone practice in the morning and a Lacrosse tournament all afternoon." "O, no, Billy can't do it Monday; he has to study for his SSAT." "Scotty can't meet on Sunday because we're taking his sister to ballet camp in Maine." It took us over an hour to find a slot so our 12-year olds could hang out together.

Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated example. If you feel that you and your kids have less time to do life together, you do have less time. In his book **Bowling Alone**, author Robert Putnam at Harvard contends, "(Like a giant rip tide, over the past thirty years), we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities."

Did you notice that this passage presents a radically different way of living your life? This is Christianity 101 – and I'm afraid that many of us are failing the course. We've lost sight of or pulled back from God's generous community, the church, which the Bible calls the body of Christ on earth.

Before I explore this text, let me remind you of the background. For 11 chapters Paul has been driving home one point: The Gospel, the good news about what God has done. We were lost, we were even under God's wrath; but God in His great mercy, set in motion a daring plan to rescue us from our own mess. Through his perfect life of obedience and his death on the cross, Christ offered us the overflowing love of God. Now and for all eternity we are not people trying to earn God's acceptance; we will always be people who are stunned and awed with God's overflowing, lavish grace.

And now the New Testament tells us that those who respond to this overflowing grace of God are joined to a new community, a group of other believers in God's overflowing grace. This community is so essential to your spiritual life that God's word calls it the body of Christ. It's not just another organization; Jesus life flows through his body. So how does Jesus touch lepers, love outcasts, preach good news and feed my soul? It's through his body, called the church. In other words, connection to Christ means connection to his body on earth. What does it mean to be connected? Based on this passage, let's explore three facets of connection in God's community of generosity: (1)

The Reality of Body Life; (2) The Actions of Body Life; and (3) the Feelings of Body life.

**The Reality of Body Life.** (Read verses 3-6). Did you notice, first of all, how God’s grace doesn’t just save us and get us out of trouble; it creates and sustains our body life. In verse 3 Paul said “I speak through the grace given me” and in verse 6 he said, “Our gifts differ according to the grace given to us.” God’s generous, overflowing grace keeps us together. I hope we never weary of exploring God’s grace; it under-girds everything about our life together.

Notice also the rest of verse 3: “Think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” We know that when it comes to our salvation and our security in Christ, there is only one measure of faith. All you need is enough faith to turn from sin and trust Christ alone for new life. All you need is enough faith to come and ask. But Paul is talking here about the faith needed for an ongoing life of following and serving Christ. Now if I was God, I would make sure every one got exactly the same amount or measure of faith – which is one more reason why I’m not God. Literally translated from the Greek it goes like this: “to each as God measured a measure of faith.” In other words, in His sovereign plan our heavenly Father has measured out more faith to some and less faith to others. Many of you may have more ongoing faith than I do. Some of our children or our friends may have a larger measure of faith than we will ever have. But why wouldn’t God just keep it even? Why not just give us all a massive dose of faith so we never have to struggle at all? Apparently, God wants a community of imperfect people who will walk through life together, serving one another and leaning on one another. God gives some more and others less faith so that those with more will serve and those with less will grow. Of course Paul never implies that a measure of faith is a static quantity. So one week I might have a huge measure of faith; the next week I might need you to help me because I’m weak in faith.

I’ve concluded that God knows what He’s doing. There is a plan at work: God is creating not just isolated individuals who trust in Jesus; God is bringing to life a living organism with different parts – with diverse gifts and even diverse measures of faith – that works together to be Jesus for each other and for the world. That’s the point of verses 4-5. In another passage Paul will make this more explicit when he says that we “are the body of Christ and each of you is a member of it” (see 2 Corinthians 12:27). Now how does membership work according to the Bible? When we think of membership we usually think of nearly-identical people who join an organization– like the Country Club, or AAA or Costco – that provides benefits (like free samples on Saturday or roadside towing) and keeps non-members out. That’s almost diametrically opposed to biblical membership in a church: wildly diverse people who come to faith in Jesus join an organism and they get membership responsibilities, namely you get to lay down your life to love, invite and include non-members.

This body analogy is simple but it has powerful, revolutionary implications. Just start thinking about your own body. For instance, if your ear decides, “I don’t like this body because of \_\_\_\_\_; I will detach myself by not coming or not giving or not serving.”

This isn't just a personal decision that affects my personal walk with Jesus. This affects the entire body. If the foot starts to criticize the nose, it isn't just spouting his personal opinions; the foot is wounding the entire body. If the hand says, "This body is sick with a fever; I'm leaving this body," the hand has missed a wonderful opportunity to bring a cup of cold water to a feverish, ill body. It's like taking your hand and slapping yourself in the face because you don't like your face. You're hurting yourself; you're wounding the entire body. That is the reality of God's generous community.

Of course this reality will lead to **the actions of an overflowing, generous community**. In verses 6-8 Paul gives us a short but rich overview of using our spiritual gifts. Notice the key words in these verses. The Greek word for gifts is "charismata" from the Greek word for grace – charis. These are grace-gifts, gifts that come from and then display the incredible grace of God. In other words, God's grace flows down to me and then through these gifts it sprays up and out like a glistening fountain.

Notice that Paul calls them graces. Graces are graceful. Someone has described these grace gifts this way: "Something graceful is a delight to watch, and this is true about a spiritual gift. A gift is an ability God has given you because he wants you to function along this line. It enables you to do this thing so naturally, smoothly and beautifully that others will take note and ask you to do it and enjoy watching you do it ... (And) it is (also) something that you delight in doing" (Marva Dawn). Does that describe anything in your life?

The English translations always want to add extra pronouns to the first phrase in verse 6. The original Greek is more cryptic: "But having these grace-gifts..." In other words, every follower of Jesus should be able to say, "At my new birth in Christ I received some wonderful gifts from God. I have them. I have gifts." They are like an immense, powerful, beautiful package just waiting to be unwrapped. And once they are unwrapped and put into use, they will bless and benefit the entire body of Christ. But, sadly, many Christians say, "I might fail or I'm too busy or I'm a notch above most people here or I've been hurt in the past" and they never unwrap their gifts. They sit on the shelf.

Then Paul will list seven of these grace gifts. This isn't an exhaustive list – just examples of the "grace-gifted life" in God's overflowing community.

- ❖ Prophesying refers to the ability to speak God's truth – even when it might offend - right into a specific situation.
- ❖ Serving is simply meeting needs with practical hands-on involvement
- ❖ Teaching involves making God's word come alive with children, youth, adults in formal or informal settings with large or small groups.
- ❖ Depending on the biblical context, the grace-gift of encouraging means coming along side others to comfort them or to give them a swift kick in the fanny (that's called exhortation).
- ❖ Contributing to the needs of others means just that – you have a special grace-gift to give your money away (which often but not always implies that you may have a special gift for making money too)

- ❖ Leadership means that you have a grace-gift to bring people or teams or an organization from Point A to Point B.
- ❖ Showing mercy means that you notice and soothe the wounded places in a broken heart.

We need all of these gifts – and more gifts. The body is a beautiful thing when its members are unwrapping and using the gifts that God has given them. So may God unleash a river, a lavish and overflowing river, of his grace-gifts in our church family! There is always room to use these gifts, to be the body of Christ. For instance, as I was working on this sermon at Kai-Li Restaurant, the woman discovered I was a pastor and asked me, “Do you know someone who can teach me English? They can even use the Bible if they want.” We need the grace-gift of serving. We need the grace-gifts of serving in our church nursery as well. My wife has discovered a huge, gaping wound on Long Island and even in our country – military families who have lost loved ones in Iraq or Afghanistan. How I pray that God will unleash people in our congregation with gifts of showing mercy to these families. So many people around us are discouraged and afraid. How I pray that God will unleash people with the grace-gift of encouragement. How I pray that God will unleash those with a grace-gift for giving to the needs of the saints.

Third, notice the **feelings behind this generous community**. Verses 9-16 string together a number of qualities – actions, attitudes and feelings that should be a part of normal Christian community. Let me focus on a few of these feelings.

First of all, notice verses 9-11. Hate is a feeling word. We don’t hate the person, but when we see something ravaging that person’s life – say, an addiction or sexual promiscuity or idolatry or greed – we hate the sin and we yearn for our brother or sister to be fully alive in Christ. Intense feeling is part of God’s generous community. If you hate the sin in my life while at the same time loving me, your feelings are alive towards me. Verse 11 begins by saying, “Never be lacking in zeal” which means work hard and work well; be efficient. But then the second phrase says, literally, “be boiling in the spirit” or “keep the fires of the spirit boiling.” Again, this fervency or intensity involves passion or feeling. As someone has said about this verse, “Be as pragmatic as a businessman. And be as passionate as a poet – or a lover. Don’t say, ‘I’m practical, not passionate. Aim to be more passionate.’” In other words, be both.

But for many of us the idea of the intense feelings of God’s overflowing community may surprise us. Look again at verse 10. Paul chose two intense feeling words. “Devoted” to one another was a word that was used for tender affection between family members. Then the word for brotherly love is the word “Philadelphia” or love of the brothers and sisters. They are both rich, homey words – especially when families actually like each other a lot. They are strong feeling words. This kind of feeling of devotion and love should mark the Christian community.

This kind of feeling looks like this: On February 19, 1945 American marines began an assault on the island of Iwo Jima. The marines fought 43 months in the Pacific in World

War II but in this one month campaign they incurred 1/3 of their total losses. They took the island but in the process lost 6,800 American soldiers. The second battalion sent 1,688 young men (18-20 year old boys); 1,511 died and 91 were injured. How did they do it? What kept them going? The most common answer given by the soldiers was this: those are my buddies and they need me. James Bradley, the author of **Flags of Our Fathers**, commented, “These boys would fight to death for one another. And that motive made them invincible.”

I would venture to say that most of you do not have those kind of friendships in the church, especially most of the men. I’m not picking on the guys (I am one of you!), but we’ve bought one of the big lies of our culture: women need friends, women can make time for friends, but guys either don’t need friends or we can’t waste our time on friends. Let everything within you say, “That’s a lie! That kills the soul.” No, God’s word says, “be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”

It’s not enough to say, “I can’t stand her or I resent him or I’m better than them, but I still believe in Christian love.” No, feel it in your bones. How? Here’s the key: go back to verses 1 and 2. It’s not easy, but it’s the only way to experience the overflow of God’s redeemed community.

**Conclusion.** We’ve been discussing body life, the life we live in God’s overflowing community called the church. How do we bring all of this down to earth and make it real? How do we experience the reality of our membership and that we truly belong to one another? How do we know and exercise our spiritual gifts? Where do we give and receive this kind of devoted love and fervency of spirit? Well, it will remain pie-in-the-sky unless we have a web of small, committed clusters of people who walk through life together. That’s why we believe so strongly in small groups at TVC. Most of what the New Testament describes as “body life” does not happen on Sunday mornings. And most of it does not flow from the pastor directly to you.

It’s in small groups that you truly experience what it means to be members of one another. It’s in small groups that you explore and discover your gifts. It’s in small groups that we truly live like brothers and sisters in a great, epic battle who must encourage and be devoted to one another.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this message, this is a counter-cultural lifestyle. It cuts against the grain of profound changes in our culture over the past thirty years. Many of you might be saying, “I can’t do this. I don’t have time. We’re too busy: dance lessons, travel soccer, college prep, making a mortgage payment, etc. This just isn’t for me. But I will show up on Sunday mornings and go to church.” To which the Bible says, (do you remember Romans 12:2 from last week), “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind.” Or “be a new and different person in all that you do and think.”