

“COMMIT TO COMMUNITY”

“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” 1 Thessalonians 5: 14

We are going to be talking about building one another up and encouraging one another in our relationships – and I think we ALL need that (I know I do). And we hear these words from God’s Word – the Bible: **“warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”**

It is hard to be patient with everyone. Because the fact is, we don’t always like each other. There are some people who don’t like me. And I don’t like some people. The same is true in families – we don’t always like each other. But liking each other is beside the point. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. And we’re going to be together for eternity, so we’d better learn to get along and **love** one another!

God made us for relationships. – relationships with Him and with each other. At the beginning of time, God created Adam and put him in the perfect environment, without any sin or fault. But even then, **“The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”** Genesis 2:18 It’s the same today. We are created for relationships. It’s not good for us to be alone. We Need each other.

God tells us that we are to “love one another,” “encourage one another,” “exhort one another,” and “forgive one another.” People who trust Jesus and the forgiveness He won and offers for free – we are to be so changed from the inside out, that we are to be interconnected to one another. That’s why we are called “The Body of Christ.” A body is *very* interconnected. You hurt one part, and the WHOLE body is hurt with it. – we are made for relationships.

And we know we are made for relationships because we are hurt most deeply in relationships. (Isn’t that true?!) But the opposite is also true – we are healed most completely in relationships. Relationships mean everything to us. Life-giving, loving, encouraging relationships – especially those between believers who love with God’s love – they mean everything to us!

Playing relationship games.

Because we can get hurt so deeply in relationships, we have a certain level of fear inside of us. Any of us here ever have some fear of getting hurt in a relationship? Anybody here ever get hurt when somebody left you, or belittled you, or abused you, or manipulated you? – it hurts! So, we tend to be apprehensive and fearful about jumping into a relationship. Now, take this nervousness and fear, and add to that hurt and anger – and you get people who WILL NOT open themselves up to a relationship where they might get hurt. The only way to not get hurt in a relationship is to not be open and loving, but instead to play relationship games.

Pleasing others.

One of the games we play in relationships is pleasing people. We change our behavior to suit *them*. If a powerful person has an opinion, we go along with their opinion, even if we don't believe it. If a lot of people have an opinion, we feel the pressure to go with that opinion, even if we know that it is wrong. That happens often in today's world. And we please others when a hurting person has a need, we jump to meet their need, just to please them. Everything we do is designed to make other people appreciate us.

But the problems is you end up reacting to what you think *other people* want from you – and you're never happy, and you're never honest about just being you.

Proving ourselves.

Others of us here are driven to prove themselves. They are more than competitive – they see every conversation as a win-lose battle, and they are determined to win. They use intimidation, knowledge, or something else to bring power into the relationship. They are afraid that if they are just open and loving, that they might get hurt, so they use power to protect themselves. They have a hard exterior. But inside there is a terrible fear that they will meet someone who is more intimidating, more knowledgeable, or more powerful.

Hiding from others.

Others don't try to please to win approval. They don't have the aggression to intimidate. So they just check out. They hide. If there is conflict, they just give in – "I don't care," "Whatever!" "It's not that big a deal." Or they take off – leave the room, break off communication, use the silent treatment.

We play these games, because inside we are broken and sinful. Because our ability to love others the way we should is broken, it shows up in playing games.

Pleasers gravitate to needy people they can fix and powerful people who will tell them what to do. They become victims of abuse. Provokers gather weaker people who are easily intimidated by their power. Hiders only hang out with people who don't make any demands on them.

Is this a picture of how God designed a family to work? Is this how God wants His family of Christ-followers to operate? No! Not at all!

The Key to Healthy Relationships: Authenticity.

The key to healthy relationships isn't controlling people, and it isn't trying to be perfect or demanding perfection from others. The key to healthy relationships is authenticity. We don't have to be sinless, or perfectly loving. Nobody expects that (at least no reasonable person expects that). But people expect us to be genuine, honest, and sincere.

The goal in your relationships isn't to play the game so well that you win approval, dominate people, or avoid any possible chance of conflict. The goal is to love and be loved; to develop strong relationships based on earned trust; to care for people with a love that is not-possessive, that is, it doesn't have to control.

God's love and forgiveness doesn't just work in our hearts. God's love and forgiveness works BETWEEN us. In the Bible, God guided Paul to describe the hatred and distrust between Jewish people and non-Jews (or Gentiles). He said that both groups of people find forgiveness and get right with God by God's GIFT alone. It doesn't matter whether a person was a goody-goody-two-shoes,

or a real bad-boy – a Jew or a Gentile back in Paul’s time – BOTH need forgiveness, and both GET forgiveness only by what Jesus has done for them in His living perfectly, dying to pay for all sins, and rising again. *NOBODY earns or deserves* to be on God’s good side. We only get on God’s good side as a free gift to us – by God’s grace.

SO, that means that it doesn’t matter what your past has been. No one can say they are better than another, or so bad they are unwelcome by another. We are ALL sinners and we ALL find forgiveness in the cross of Jesus. This means that because of Jesus there is nothing that divides us!

God’s love and forgiveness works BETWEEN us.

Paul put it this way: **“For He [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two [groups, Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross”** Ephesians 2: 14-16 God’s love and forgiveness works BETWEEN us – restores and builds relationships.

I once knew a guy who retired from IBM early so he could spend his days in his pole barn wood shop. He makes beautiful wood furniture – all ALONE! No one around. Sometimes it seems like that would be the life! -- to do something useful and not have to deal with other people. Sometimes it seems like – if only we didn’t have to deal with other people, life would be so much better.

But, God didn’t create some of us to live and work alone, and the rest of us to be in community with others. ALL of us are part of His family of Christ followers, called the Church. People who have experienced Jesus, know there is no division that keeps us apart. God’s love and forgiveness works BETWEEN us. God draws us TOGETHER. We need each other. All of us are essential for the family of God to function properly. We are citizens of the same kingdom; members of the same household; parts of the same building. Paul said it this way: **“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and**

members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” Ephesians 2: 19-22 We are different from one another – with different abilities and roles. But we are UNITED to one another, ONE family, where God lives in the middle of us.

In the family of God, we are called to: See, you may get to choose your friends, but we can't pick our family members, or the members in our family of God. God does that for us. We don't have to agree on everything, and we don't even have to like each other. But God does call us to ...

Love each other as Jesus loves us. 1 John 4:11

Forgive each other as Jesus forgives us. Colossians 3:13

Accept each other as Jesus has accepted us. Romans 15:7

Take a look at the people around you today. What do you see? You'll see people who are a lot like you. But you'll also find people who you'd never choose as friends. We have different backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, roles, and passions. But we all belong to Jesus Christ. We are citizens of His kingdom; Members of His family; and interconnected in His building. The same is true in families too.

Love is strong and powerful. Loving people isn't something that's weak and mushy. It isn't just for people who are too wimpy to make it on their own. Loving people is the STRONG thing to do. Loving will require everything you've got.

That's how Jesus loves us. He wasn't some wimp. It took incredible strength and power to love you so much that He went to the cross. It took incredible strength and power to give up His life to pay for your sins. And that's the kind of love He commands for you to love others. His love is so strong and powerful, it changes you to love others the way He loves you. Jesus said: **“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 brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”** Matthew 5: 46-47

That's a wimpy kind of love that only loves in order to get something back for yourself. It's a wimpy love that only loves people who love you and who you get along with.

Jesus' command is this: **“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be [children] of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”** Matthew 5: 44-45
That takes strength! And that strength only comes from Jesus' love, alive and working in you.

The motivation and the measure of your love for others is this: Jesus said **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”** John 13:34 How does Jesus love us? Completely, sacrificially, tenaciously, graciously, and joyfully. His love will never fail you. And that, Jesus says, is how you are to love others.

So, **What does love look like** in real life?

- **Encouraging others.** Real love means moving TOWARD people who hurt, instead of living for our own convenience. It means wrapping your arms around people who struggle, instead of rejecting them.

- **Listening to others.** Real love means asking questions and listening, instead of talking too much.

Real love means • **Accepting others.** What's sad is often people believe that folks at church are the least understanding. There's an impression that church people can be very judgmental. Jesus used His hardest words on hypocrites who were judging of others.

We all need a safe place to share our deepest needs. The family of God is to be that place. God knows every stinkin' sin about you and me, yet He forgives us and accepts us. We need to extend that acceptance to others.

Trust and Risk: Wise people move towards others with open hearts and open eyes. For 12 years I meet with a group of men every Friday morning. Now, we meet when we can. We share our needs and hopes with each other. But I have to tell you – being vulnerable scares me. Deep in my gut, I'm afraid that if they know

who I really am, they'll lose respect for me. There's always a risk in relationships.

Trusting others involves taking a risk. Some of us trust too much and too soon. We even trust untrustworthy people. In families where there is an addict, the addict lies over and over, but the family member keeps believing "This time he'll come through. This time will be different." But it's not. Some people trust too quickly, and take foolish risks.

On the other extreme are people who are too guarded and they never trust. Maybe they've been hurt in the past, and they don't want to risk getting hurt again.

Like Goldilocks and the three bears, some trust too much, some trust too little, but some trust just right. Wise people move towards others with open hearts and open eyes.

In the Bible, God *a/ways* commands us to love one another. But there are no commands to "trust one another." Love is given unconditionally. Trust must be earned.

It's like the teenager who is supposed to be home at 11 o'clock, but he comes in at 1 am. Next weekend he expects to go out again, but you say, "Tonight you have to be in at 10:30 or you'll be grounded for a week."

Your teenager responds, "What's the matter? Don't you trust me?" You can say, "No, I don't. You didn't keep your promise last weekend. Now you have to earn my trust again." But all through it, you still love him.

When trust is earned, then you can risk opening up more of yourself, and the relationship grows deeper. This is what we desire to see growing in our small Bible study groups. We want to see trust and authenticity grow.

Messages of Grace for relationships: All of our relationships are to be based on God's grace. He loves us, so we share His love with one another. There are WORDS we say that communicate grace.

"I love you." This message tells a person about their value or worth to you. Too often we don't say these words enough. Remember, it is while we were still messed up and sinful that Jesus

loved us. And we can still love others, even when we don't like what they do.

"I'm proud of you." These words speak to a person's character. When someone tells you they are proud of what you have done, that builds your confidence.

The third message is about gifts, abilities, and accomplishments. ***You're good at I can see you doing*** Saying this message helps others – especially kids – see the future for their lives. It gives them courage to take the next step in their lives and careers.

We are made for relationships. We are hurt most deeply in relationships. And we are healed most completely in relationships. They mean everything to us. They don't always go well, though. So, we confess our relationship sins to God, asking His forgiveness of our sins and others' sins. Then we can leave the past behind with Jesus on His cross. And with the power of God the Holy Spirit we ask that He work in us to love one another in a new way. AMEN.