

Do We Know What We've Got?

Romans 13:8-14 & Matthew 18:15-20

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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Pastor Tom Thews

Romans 13:8-14 (NIV)

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Matthew 18:15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

Do We Know What We've Got?

Our lesson from Matthew's Gospel for today reminds me of the story of a pastor in a drought-stricken part of Alabama last summer who implored his people to pray for rain. In fact, he asked each member of the church to join in a prayer vigil that would continue day and night until God granted their request.

Never had there been a greater sense of urgency in that church than was revealed over the next few days. At any hour, one might pass that small rural church and find the lights on and someone at the altar praying.

Finally late Wednesday evening some dark clouds began to roll in. Soon rain began falling in torrents. For four straight days it rained without ceasing. The creeks began overflowing their banks. It became necessary to evacuate people from their homes. Still the water kept rising. The entire community was now under water.

As rescue workers made their way in a boat through the perilous floodwater evacuating the last reluctant stragglers, one of the boats passed that little country church, now almost completely submerged. There sat the pastor on the roof of the church with a look of grand satisfaction on his face. He could be heard saying to himself as he surveyed the flood waters around him, "Not bad for a small church like ours. Not bad."

Jesus said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." That is a stunning endorsement of corporate prayer. It is important that we pray, but it is even more important that we pray together. We are a community. Better yet, we are a family. This saying of Jesus is part of a larger passage that emphasizes the importance of love among believers.

Bruce Larson tells about a conversation that a missionary in India, Ruth Seabury, had one time with a Hindu social worker. At one point, the social worker asked Ruth, "Do you think that most Christians know what they've got?"

Perplexed by the question, she asked what he had in mind. He said, "Every religion has a god. Every religion has an altar. Every religion has worshipers. Every religion believes in sacrifice. But only Christians have a Savior and only Christians have a congregation."

That's a good question for us to ask ourselves, "Do we know what we've got?" Of course, we are grateful we have a Savior. However, it is impossible to overstate the importance of the congregation as well. We are not simply an assembly of individuals. We are the Body of Christ. Jesus has called us into a sacred community. He has called us to be, not only His hands and feet and mouth here upon the earth until He returns, but His own family.

WE SEE IN THIS PASSAGE, FIRST OF ALL, THAT IN THE FAMILY OF CHRIST WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ONE ANOTHRE.

"If your brother or sister sins," says Jesus, "go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."

This is a tough teaching of our Lord. It is one that is often overlooked because many of us shy away from confrontation of any kind. "Live and let live" is our creed. And yet, confronting a fellow believer who is involved in a sin of any kind can be the most loving thing, the most Christ-like thing, we can do.

In this passage Christ is calling us as a community to hold one another accountable for our behavior. Now please understand, Christ is not calling us to pass judgment on one another, but to care enough about one another to intervene if we see a friend is about to make a serious mistake.

A well-known Christian author tells of praying for a friend whom she knew had become involved in an extra-marital affair. One Sunday she happened to be sitting behind her friend in church. During the prelude, she leaned forward and put her hands lovingly on her friend's shoulders and whispered, "Be careful that you don't throw away something very beautiful. I'm praying for you."

The friend involved in the affair began weeping softly and almost immediately broke off this illicit relationship. Years later the Christian author attended a high school graduation. One of the young people graduating was the son of the woman who had been having the affair. This woman came up to the author and gave her a big hug. "You were so right," she said with gratitude. "If you had not spoken those words to me that day, I would have thrown away nearly everything that was important to me. Thank you so much."

Can you see what a loving act that was? Can you see the tragedies this act possibly prevented?

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault," said Jesus, "just between the two of you." Don't make a big deal of it. Do it in a loving manner. Keep the conversation between the two of you forever confidential. In other words, don't go gossiping to someone else about what took place. But true friends do not let friends ruin their lives.

What an important passage of scripture. And yet, quite honestly, this would be very difficult for most of us to do. It requires a great deal of love. It also requires a great deal of courage.

"Too often," says author Chuck Colson, "we confuse love with permissiveness. It is not love to fail to dissuade another believer from sin any more than it is love to fail to take a drink away from an alcoholic or matches away from a baby."

SUCH LOVE AND CONCERN HAVE CAUSED SOME CHRISTIAN GROUPS TO GIVE A HIGH PRIORITY TO THE NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CHURCH'S FELLOWSHIP.

Colson points out that the eighteenth century spiritual giant John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, was so concerned with building accountability that he devised a series of questions for his followers to ask each other every week. These were questions like:

How is it with your soul? Are you consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that you are better than you really are? In other words, are you a hypocrite?

Are you honest in all your acts and words, or do you exaggerate? Do you confidentially pass on to another what was told to you in confidence? Can you be trusted? Are you a slave to dress, friends, work or habits? Do you disobey God in anything? Do you insist upon doing something about which your conscience is uneasy? Is there anyone whom you fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward, or disregard? If so, what are you doing about it? Do you grumble or complain constantly?

Is Christ real to you?

Each week the believers would ask these questions of each other. Obviously, some found this rigorous system of inquiry too demanding and left. Today, the very idea of such a procedure would horrify most churchgoers. Yet as I was becoming a pastor in The United Methodist Church, every month when my peer group of other pastor want-to-bees got together, we were required to answer these questions one to another. So the first thing I would want us get from this passage is we have a responsibility for one another.

THE SECOND THING WE NEED TO SEE IS THE POWER OF A PRAYING CHURCH.

Jesus says, “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”

What an amazing statement. I will be the first to admit that I do not fully understand what Christ is saying to us with these words, but I do know there is much power when Christian people work together, pray together, laugh together and shed tears together. That has always been the strength of the Christian movement.

A Roman historian named Lucian, writing in the first century, describes a man called Peregrinus who was in prison and seems to have claimed to be a Christian, though he was probably a bit of a fraud. Nevertheless, the Christians in his community visited him in jail regularly.

“They show,” Lucian writes, “incredible speed whenever such public action is taken, for their [leader] (Jesus) persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another.”

Does it matter if modern day Christians look out for one another? Recent studies indicate that only one person in five in America today has a real friend. Only one in five!

If I considered myself to be a spiritual peddler, I would say, “What a market!” What an opportunity! We have what the world desperately needs and cannot supply. We have a Savior and we have Christian love and fellowship. We may not be articulate theologians, but we can be a friend to one another and to the world outside.

That is our task. That is the ministry to which Christ has called us — to be a caring community. To reach out arms of sympathy and support to those who are in distress. To rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep.

Kahlil Gibran once remarked that we can forget those with whom we have laughed, but we can never forget those with whom we have cried. Millions of persons who have been through trying times and have felt the support of one or two other brothers or sisters in Christ will testify to the power of that support.

Many of us are familiar with Chuck Colson's role as hatchet man for Richard Nixon in the days before Watergate. A few of us have perhaps read Colson's moving book, *Born Again*. In it he tells of those days of pain and humiliation.

On the evening before Colson pleaded guilty to charges of obstructing justice, three men joined him at home until well into the night: ex-Senator Harold Hughes; former Texas congressman Graham Purcell; and lay worker, Douglas Coe. They were not there to give Colson legal or professional support. They were there to pray with him and to give him the moral and spiritual strength to do what he knew was right.

Their prayers did not prevent Colson's incarceration, but those prayers did enable him to come through his prison ordeal a wiser and better man and to touch many lives in a positive manner along the way. Incidentally, because of Chuck Colson, today there is a prison ministry that has touched prisoner's lives all over this country.

What a grand opportunity Christ has given us. We are responsible for one another. There is much power in a church that is united in prayer and service to one another. There is, of course, a reason for that.

THE BODY OF CHRIST IS MUCH MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS INDIVIDUAL PARTS

“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” That is the crowning conclusion to this passage.

The whole meaning of Christian faith is contained in the word, relationship — a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. As Frederick Buechner has written: “Faith is not so much believing this thing or that about God as it is hearing a voice which says, ‘Come unto Me.’ We hear the voice and then we start to go without really knowing what to believe either about the voice or about ourselves. And yet we go. Faith at this point is standing in the darkness, and a hand is there, and we take it.”

To expand on Buechner's analogy, we take the hand of God, and then we reach out in the darkness and we take hold of the hand of a neighbor. That is who we are and what we are about.

Pastor David Utley tells about a Christian man who knew his time was near. So he sent word to his family to come home so he could see them all one last time. Even though his children had already had families of their own, they all set out on the trips back home. After they had been home awhile visiting, the father called all of them into his room for he had been bedfast for weeks.

When they entered and formed a line around his bed so he could see all, he then told them to go outside and bring back a nice-size stick. Now this sounded strange, but seeing the shape their father was in, they each went out in the yard and brought back a big stick. After everyone got their stick they all gathered around the old man. He then told them to start breaking the sticks one by one. After everyone broke their stick he then told them to go back outside and get another stick.

Now this had seemed very odd to his children, but they did what they were told because, after all, their father was about to be with the Lord. After they got a stick and gathered around his bed, he told them this time to pass the sticks around in one stack and bring them to him. When they had done this he pulled out some fishing line and told them to tie the bundle tightly at each end. Then he told his children to try and break the sticks.

One by one they all tried to break the bundle of sticks, but could not do it. The father responded by saying, “I just want you to know if you stick together it will be harder to break you.”

What is true of a family is true of a church as well. The closer we are to Christ and the closer we are to each other, the greater impact we will have on our world.

A rural pastor sits on top of his partially submerged church and says proudly, “Not bad for a small church like ours.” Do we know what we have? We have what the world desperately needs — a Savior and a congregation. “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love . . .”

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