

Romans 12:9-21

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[0:00] This is what we're talking about. Before we get to Romans 12, I want to take some time to think about this question that's up on the screen.

! How do people grow in the faith? How do people grow in the faith? We tend to use the language of discipleship to summarize this process of growth.

I don't love the word discipleship. I've got to be honest because I think it means so many things. It sometimes can mean, what do you mean by this word? I think what it tends to mean is things like growing as a follower of Jesus, spiritual practices and disciplines.

That's what discipleship means. Reading a Bible, prayer, joining a discipleship group, a community group. Maybe some accountability in prayer and reading your Bible.

All those things are incredibly important. But have you considered this? What if the person sat next to you was one of the greatest assets in your spiritual growth?

[1:09] For you and you for them. What if we in our relationships were not just incidental to growth of one another, but central and critical to that process?

What if God wants to use you, yes you, to help other people grow and know him more deeply? I warn you, as we go through this and explain what I mean, you'll immediately begin to think of ways to disqualify yourself from this vision.

I'm too busy. I'm not spiritual enough. You've no idea how much I struggle. And we'll get to all those questions in a minute. But whatever objections may arise, what I'm talking about here today is for all of us.

It's for the whole church to arise. God wants to use you and your relationships for the building of his church. It's extraordinary what he wants to do.

So let me explain what I mean about the significance of relationships. Close relationships are naturally formational. In that we naturally influence and shape people we are close to.

[2:22] So a parent with a child naturally shapes and forms that person. A wife with a husband or a husband with a wife. A close friendship. You know, they're naturally formational.

We shape people's thinking through our ideas and our imagination. We shape their confidence through our love towards them. We shape people's behavior through our example.

Close relationships are inherently formational. It's just the way God made the world. You know, I think of my own life and my own story. And I think of, I've had a number of people get alongside me in my life.

But I think particularly when I was in my second year at university. And this guy just, who was working with the Navigators, just arrived in the city. He just opened up his home and invited me over.

One-on-one. I was in his home. And he was interested in me. He was genuinely interested in me. He saw me. He believed in me.

[3:27] He was absolutely transformative to my life. To experience that in relationship. Close relationships are formational. They change people.

You know, walking deeply with a few is absolutely vital to both our own and other people's spiritual growth. But it's also the key to mission, as Ian was talking about this morning.

Because it's relationships that are the bridge to the gospel. You know, our calling as Navigators is to encourage a reformation in the way we view all of our relationships, in and out of the church.

Because they are critical to growth. They are critical to the purposes of God. So Romans 12, this morning, our passage, we're called, in our relationships with one another, the body of Christ.

You know, the theology of the body of Christ is absolutely profound in Romans 12. Paul finishes his masterful treatise, Romans 1 to 11, of the gospel.

[4:36] And he starts in Romans 12 with this. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and improve what God's will is.

His good, pleasing, and perfect will. And what happens is we stop there. We're all familiar with that bit. But Paul's first application that he's about to talk about of the will of God is into relationships.

It's into relationships. The first thing you need to understand, dear Christian, Paul is saying, is who you are in relationship. Relationship to Christ.

Relationship to others in the body of Christ. Relationship to others in the world. Relationships.

Relationship to others in the world. In other words, love is the first outworking of the gospel.

[5:40] Love is the first outworking of the gospel. Verse 5. So in Christ, we, though many, form one body. Each member belongs to one another.

What an absolutely profound scripture. We belong to one another. And we draw people into that as the body of Christ.

So how do we grow? You know, with God, with the Spirit, through Bible study, yes. But vitally, also in relationship with others. God instituted life so much so that we become the body of Christ on earth.

And the body of Christ means that we are the incarnation, which means the enfleshing of Jesus on earth. It's so profound.

With his power and his purpose. And that means that we collectively, in our relationships, are the means by which the grace and power of Jesus is worked out into this world.

[6:44] That's what it means to be the body of Christ. We are it. There is no other plan B in this mission. We are this, a living body full of the Holy Spirit.

The arms and feet of God's activity in the world. And vitally, your relationships are critical to that mission. Your relationships are critical to that mission.

So spiritual growth is as much a matter of who helps you as what you do to grow. It's as much a matter of who helps you as what you do to grow.

It is people who lead us to faith. It's people who have ministered grace into my life. Challenged lies. Modelled the life with Jesus. Encouraged me deeply.

Preaching is vital. Bible study is vital. But the deepest work has also been this personal one in my life. When someone says to me and speaks a word of God into my life.

[7:48] A word of hope. A word of grace. It changes lives. It absolutely changes lives. You know, the biblical way this relational vision of growth was expressed by Jesus was through the call to love.

Expressed and worked out through the command to make disciples. Matthew 28, 18 to 20. Known as the Great Commission. It is a statement of go.

Draw people to Jesus. Draw people. And as soon as we read a statement like that, I would say about, I would reckon about 70% of people in here are immediately thinking, that's for the specialists.

I'm not sure this is me. What I'm trying to say is, it's for everyone. It's for absolutely everyone. You know, we tend to put the Great Commission into the evangelism box.

I think this is a real problem, actually. That we think it's just about mission. But it's also about the growth amongst Christians. It's the whole thing.

[8:59] Mission and growth as Christians. It's a call to reframe all of our relationships. With those who aren't Christians and those who are, with a purpose and desire to see everyone flourish in Jesus.

To receive his life. To live in his life. It's an active call. It's really important to think about how Jesus lived out this disciple-making call in his own life.

I think he lived it out in three broad spaces of disciple-making on the screen. The first one is, he had compassion for all.

He had compassion for all. He had compassion for the crowds. They're kind of concentric circles that go outwards and in. He preached. He healed. He blessed. He was available to the Father's purposes to all.

He had compassion for all. But he also influenced many. This was Jesus' social space, as it were. In his sphere of influence was the band of followers that were around him.

[10:05] He lived and went around with him in his ministry. This included those who provided for his ministry. This included the 12 disciples. This included this band of many women. Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, who actually provided financially for his work.

Other men and women. There were at least 72 in this band because he sent them out. He was talking about social space, as it were, that he influenced many.

But he also, interestingly, he walked deeply with a few. He focused on individuals in the midst of that. So Peter, James, and John in particular seemed to get singled out in the scriptures as attentions of his focus in his ministry.

So this is how Jesus handled his relationships and so fulfilled his commission from the Father. And I think it should be the same model for us. I think it should be the same model for us.

Let's think about these three concentric circles for our own life. Compassion for all. You know, the crowds. We live amongst them. We live amongst them. We want to be available to what God wants to do as we go about life.

[11:17] And you just have these incidental contacts. We want to be available to God in that space. You don't know the crowds by definition. You don't know names.

I think sometimes I think of a church as big as this is a little bit like a crowd, actually. It's very big. You know, and kind of how do we... But it is so important.

And of course, you have people you know within this group. There are a lot of people you don't know. But not as great for being deeply known. So then you've got to go further in.

So what does this look like in our life? You've got a social space. You've got a wider group of people you influence in your life. So these are people you legitimately say you know in life.

That you know these people. They would be your friends, not your Facebook friends. Your community group at church. Work colleagues you regularly chat to. Neighbors.

[12:20] Family. Extended family. Close friends from the past. You have a social group which is unique to you. You share life to some degree with these people.

But you don't necessarily go deep, deep with them. But then spiritual transformation is critically dependent on walking deeply with a few.

It's so important. The closer you are to people, the bigger the formation influence. As I said, that's how God made the world. How do you walk deeply with a few?

That's what we're looking at this morning. And our conviction, my conviction is that without this walking deeply with a few, we miss some of the most profound means of transformation that God wants to bring into and through our lives.

You know, the calling to make disciples is to be intentional about this formation influence that we naturally have in close relationships. It's just to be intentional about that natural formational influence that we will have through close relationships.

[13:33] You know, in the church we have lots of different words, ways we can express this relational vision of walking deeply with a few. So some of the words are on the screen here. So things like pastoral ministry, which is the language actually of being a shepherd of the sheep.

And practically in our church life, that tends to mean helping the hurting. Because if you don't help the hurting, you're not even doing the basics of love. That's what it tends to mean in our church life. Although I think the vision of pastoring and shepherding is obviously bigger than that. But that tends to be what it means. Counseling. Where a trained person helps individuals address emotional, psychological, or relational issues.

Incredibly important. Spiritual direction, which is from the Catholic tradition, which is getting increasingly popular. Where a trained person helps you discern God's word in your life.

Helps you discern God's presence in your life. Coaching. Where an accredited coach walks with someone to help them discover where they want to grow in life. And helping them and walking with them to achieve these goals.

[14:43] That's what a coach does. Then mentoring. Mentoring. Mentoring is language from the business world. Where we usually have a more experienced or skilled person getting alongside a less experienced and skilled junior person.

To help them grow and develop in a context. These are all vital to the church. A vital contribution. Which can help inform our getting alongside people.

But here is the thing I want to say really clearly. Because qualifications and experience are vital to pretty much all of these things on the screen. It ends up having the subtle effect of disqualifying

others from relationally getting alongside others.

It's incredibly valuable. But be careful. The alongside of vision of walking deeply with a few is for everyone. We need all these contributions. Please don't hear me saying anything wrong about them.

But we need the whole church doing this. Walking deeply with a few. You are qualified. Because you have the Holy Spirit in your heart.

[15:54] You are in Christ. You are qualified. Walking deeply with a few. But we have a problem.

And a challenge in this. Let me tell you a true story. Of a friend of mine. Called Tony. He is a Christian guy. He loves Jesus.

And he goes to play golf with Bill. His mate who was recently divorced. And he gets back home.

And Tony's wife asks. How was Bill?

You know after everything that has happened. And he goes to play golf with Bill. How was he? And Tony says. I don't know. We never talked about it. And Tony's wife gets exasperated.

And says. You know. What do you mean? You didn't find out how he was doing. After such a devastating life event. That he's gone through. Tony says. Well. It just never came up. Tony's wife says.

[16:54] You spent four hours. With the guy. Pacing fairway. You know. Whatever they're called. On the golf course. Pacing the golf course. And Tony says.

Yes. I did. But I did find out. That he had a new seven iron. Just like. Honestly.

You just kind of hear that story. And part of me wants to kind of snap that seven iron. And think.

What is going on for Christian men sometimes in this? In fact. I was kind of thinking.

Maybe you could go full on Moses. And kind of grind up the seven iron. And force the guy to drink it anyhow. But that's a. It's probably a bit. It's probably a bit extreme. The full of Moses approach to this. It is interesting.

I don't want to just talk about men. But it's really interesting. One in seven men. Don't have a single friend. They say. One in seven. I describe that as an absolute cultural disaster.

[17:53] One in seven. One in seven. And I think this vision of being the body of Christ. Of walking deeply. Of being intimately connected with a few. You know.

I think. I do have a concern. That. That sometimes. We're just a little bit self-contained. As the church. You know. Actually. You know. We stay self-contained within a little nuclear family.

And. And. That's pretty much it. I would say that a vision of being self-contained. Is barely. Biblical. Biblical. It is barely biblical. I know.

Life is hard. But I think we have to look out. We have to look out in love. You know. We tended to make. Many of our relationships.

So. This worldly. That we've forgotten that God is around at all. Like Tony. You know. It's like we have these very horizontal views of relationships. You know.

[18:49] We. We go through life. Functional relationships. Getting stuff done. Meeting that person. Doing that thing. But somehow forget that as Christians. God is always in the picture.

In your relationships. He is always in the picture. You know. As a Christian. We say this. You've never had an ordinary. Unspiritual friendship.

It's impossible as a Christian. To say you've had an ordinary. Unspiritual friendship. God is always in the picture. His purposes are always at work. The question is whether you recognize that.

And participate. In that reality. You are very often the means of God's activity in this world. In that relationship. But will you participate?

Will you engage with this? God is the agent of change. God is the agent of change in this world.

God is the agent of change in this world. But you get to participate. You get to participate. You get to play the game.

[19:51] You get to work with what he is doing. In your friends lives. This is the vision we're talking about. What does this look like? I intentionally spend time walking deeply with a few guys.

Intentionality is important. I'm not just passive or vague. You know. If God is in the picture. I'm intentional. I pray for these guys. I go for early morning walks. Coffees.

Chat on the phone. You know. Me and Ian have met up. For years now. And I have to say. Like. You know. It's been really unbelievable.

Walking with him. And being mates with him. And this whole thing of. You know. Who's getting alongside who. I don't care. All I know is that. This guy's handling of suffering.

Has been. I mean. Honestly. If I. Am 10% of how he has been. When I face serious suffering in my life. I'll be overjoyed. It's been unbelievable. It's shaped my faith.

[20 : 51] It's challenged me. It's moved me. It's. It's expanding my sense of who God is. Through walking deeply with one another. You know.

When. When we meet up. And when I meet up with guys. We talk about life and faith. It might mean. Studying the book together. Looking at a Bible passage. But it's primarily about the connection.

Of lives before God. The connection of lives before God. It's less about having all the theological answers. To the questions. The person is asking.

And more together. Searching for God. Digging into the word. Looking for the ways. That God is already revealing himself. In this person's life. What is God up to?

How is God revealing his love. In the midst of this. Sticky situation. You know. We're often living life. At such a pace. That we don't even notice. How God is speaking.

[21 : 49] Or leading us. We don't even notice. You know. For me. This has been. A real journey. You might look at me. And think. You know. Okay. You know.

This is your profession. This is what you do for a job. But what I've learned over the years. Is. Is to keep it really simple. In fact. I often only ask.

One question. I get paid the really big books. For this one. How are you? How are you? You know. The gift we can give each other. Of listening well. And living authentically. Is immense. You know. The church is. Is a hot pot. Of. Of.

Thinking that we need to give. The right answers to things. It's why we so often. Just answer fine. All the time. When someone asks us. Because fine. Is easier to say. Than try and express.

[22 : 43] Some of the complexity. That pretty much. All of us are living through. At this moment. You know. How are you?

And then give that person. Space. Let that person. Occupy that space. When you ask that question. Ask questions. Be interested. Give people attention.

It's so simple. And yet. It is one of the most profound. Expressions of love. That you will ever experience. You know. God isn't afraid.

Of complexity. In our lives. And he wants us to learn. To see him. In the midst of it. You know. For our complexities. To be shaped. By something more beautiful. Than just getting through.

To be shaped by love. And God's active. Presence. You know. When we use the phrase. Making disciples. It sounds so grandiose. And intimidating.

[23 : 38] As I said earlier. But it's actually. Very ordinary. You know. It starts in the relationships. Where you already are. In your workplace. In your local church. This church. You're bringing.

Some intentionality. Into those relationships. You lead a community group. Don't you lead a community. Why don't you go for coffee. With someone. From that community group. You're just part of a community group.

Go for coffee. With a person. You know. You do kids work. Why don't you just get alongside. One of those young mums. Or young dads.

Why don't you just encourage them. And find out. How life is. For them. You know. Most Christians. Feel profoundly. Unseen. You know.

We worship the God. Who sees us. He sees us. And yet. Our experience. To fellow Christians. Is having no one. Who sees us.

[24 : 36] Who listens. Or takes. Time to draw us out. And that is a huge problem. It's a huge problem. What we're trying to do. In these next few years. Is. Is call the UK church.

To see others. You know. If you're sitting there. Waiting for someone. To truly see you. Then you may be waiting. A long time. And we're calling a generation.

To be the difference. For the next generation. To be that person. For others. To take that initiative. To be the difference. For the next generation. And let me tell you.

If you get alongside someone. For the purpose of their growth. They will grow. And sure as heck. You will also grow. I can absolutely. Guarantee it.

You will grow. As you get alongside. Others. So. Romans 12. It's beautiful.

[25 : 31] And I want to just. Fire through some of the implications. Of this. Because I think it gives us. An incredible picture. Of what we're talking about. As we finish this morning. It shows us. So many of the characteristics.

Of the kind of love. You need as an alongsider. And it starts off. Verse 1 to 12. As I said. When view of God's mercy. Lay down your bodies. Is worship for me. How? Through love.

Through love. Then verse 3. By the grace. Given me. I say to every one of you. Do not think of yourself. More highly than you ought. But rather think of yourself.

With sober judgment. In accordance with the faith. God has distributed. To each of you. You know. Paul is setting a vision of love. In the body of Christ.

And beyond here. And the first implication. Of the gospel. Here. In verse 3. Is humility. And so why is humility.

[26 : 27] So important. To this vision of love. And making disciples. Why? Because pride. Puts you. At the center of the world.

But humility. Puts God. And others. At the center. Of your world. This is the love of the gospel. A love for others. A life laid down for your friends.

So give love as you've received it. You know. Humility is to put. Other people first. Rather than self. And when you are with people. You.

And you have this space between you. Who fills it? You. Your cleverness. Or do you allow that person to speak. To reveal. This humility is vital.

To the healthy functioning. Of the body of Christ. You know. Verses 6 to 8. Use your gift. To serve others. As I've already said this morning. Use your gifts. You've been given things.

[27 : 23] To contribute. But then it goes on. In verse 9. But everyone has the gift of love. Everyone has the gift. Of love.

So verse 9. Love has to be. Sincere. In other words. What Paul is talking about. In that word. Is. Is. Love has to be.

Mustn't be fake. There's no fakeness in this love. Religious fake. Or any other kind of fake. Love has to be true faced.

As it were. No masks. The real you. Meeting the real other person. Before God. So important. To be real.

And I think one of the things. I try and do. Humility. And being honest. And real. I just think. Once you start doing that. You build trust.

[28 : 18] Between two people. That's absolutely. Life changing. That's what happens. You're building trust. Humility. And honesty. And authenticity. Then verses 9.

Verse 9b. Biblical love has a moral character to it. Hate what is evil. Cling. To what is good. So as you love. Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good.

Very simple. There is a moral character to your love. In Jesus. There has to be. So Paul repeats this moral character. Biblical love. In later passages.

In Romans 12. When he talks in verses 14 to 21. About blessing those who persecute you. Life is hard. Relationships are hard.

But you are to be of a renewed mind. Shaped by the gospel. Live in a different way. In light of the gospel. Love has to have a moral character to it.

[29 : 15] Shaped by the gospel. Then verse 10. Be devoted to one another. In love. The language here. In being devoted. Is the language. Of family like love.

Is the language. Within that family. That's so committed. For one another. You are a unit. And we are meant to be devoted. In that kind of family like way. Outside of the family.

Loyal. Devoted. Close. Family type love. So who is in your family? Is an interesting question. Who's in your family? Who are you going to walk deeply with?

In this vision. You know. When I talked about. Jesus is disciple making space. Aces earlier. And the importance. Of walking deeply with a few. We are talking about.

This kind of family like love. The walking deeply with a few. Remember. Jesus didn't love.

Everyone. The same. He was limited in capacity.

[30 : 15] This is incredibly important. Jesus was limited. In capacity. To love. So we had to focus. And you have to focus. You have to focus.

Your love. And you have to focus. Are you just going to vaguely. Be nice to everyone. Or are you going to say. I'm going to walk deeply. With that person. Walking deeply. With a few.

You may be busy. We're all very busy. We are the busy generation. As it were. But I would say. What about this? What about one hour a week? One hour a week.

If you're a guy. You probably spend about. Ten hours on YouTube. So you can surely. Get one hour back. Somehow. From that. You know. We can spare one hour. What would that do? Who could he get alongside?

Who could he encourage? What could God do with that? In your life. And through your life. You know. Verses 10b. Honor one another.

[31:12] Above yourselves. Again. That vision of humility. Again. So crucial. To genuine love. Honor one another. Above yourself. Then verse 11.

Never be lacking in zeal. Keep your spiritual fervor. Serve in the Lord. In other words. When you get alongside others. Let Jesus be the center. Let him be the reason and the goal.

To keep you going when it's hard. Love is costly. It is to pay a price to love. There is a cost to love. You know.

If you're struggling. Talk about it. Ask for help. Let their faith help you. But let Jesus be the center. Of your intention and purpose.

And your love. Verse 12. Be joyful in hope. Patient in affliction. Faithful in prayer. For other people. For yourself. For other people. We bring hope to others.

[32:11] We bring hope to others. We suffer with them. We pray for them. And let me finish with this. Verse 13. Today. Share with the Lord's people.

Who are in need. Practice. Hospitality. You know. This is a profound posture of love. In verse 13. You know.

We think hospitality. Is just sharing a meal. And it is. That. But it is yet so much more. It is a posture of openness.

Openness. In your life. That is what hospitality is. A posture of openness. In your life. Opening your home. Opening your life.

A posture of availability. You know. When I think of this verse. I also think. Of 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 8. Where the apostle Paul.

[33:08] Is speaking as a disciple maker. With the Thessalonians. And he just says this. We loved you so much. That we were delighted to share with you. Not only in the gospel of God.

But our lives. As well. Not only the gospel of God. But our lives. We shared with you our lives. You saw everything. A posture of hospitality.

And openness. You know this. What we're talking about. In this vision. Is so. Like it's so ordinary. Nobody is going to give you an applause.

As you walk into church. Next Sunday. For having spent some time. With someone. In a coffee shop. You're not going to get any acknowledgement. But by heck. If everyone in this church.

Did this. Then I think the impact. Would be unbelievable. In the movement of the gospel. In the growth of the people of God. I think it would be unbelievable.

[34:06] Don't just leave it. To the specialist few. To the equipped few. This is for everyone. I actually think this would bring revival. In an unbelievable way.

If the church rose up to its full purpose. In this. When God's people make themselves available to God. In everyday relationships. In simple ways.

Of giving that person time and love. Then everything changes. Everything changes. You know you maybe. Still feel daunted by this question.

But you can. You can really get alongside someone else. But if God is in the picture. In your relationships. Then one thing. We can definitely say. Is that God. Is the primary agent of change.

In your friends lives. Not you. He's God. And he is the one with all power. In heaven on earth. It says in Matthew 28. And he's inviting you. To participate with.

[35:03] Him. In what he is doing. Jesus made no mistake. Where he has placed you in this world. You are uniquely positioned. In this world.

For impact. In relation. In you know. In relational worlds. That are unique to you. I don't live where you live. The only commonality is our church. This is part of this relational world.

Your workplace. Your family. Your history of friends. He's made no mistake. And he's asking you. If you'll make yourself available.

For his purposes. Let's pray. Father in this quiet this morning.

Would you bring to mind our friends. Lord those who are Christians. Those who are none. Lord will you open our imaginations.

[37 :08] We ask this. We ask this. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. wür.