

ROMANS 12:15 OFFERING OUR “WITHNESS”

As the story goes, the mouse looked through the crack in the wall, and saw the farmer and his wife open a package. Inside was a mousetrap.

The mouse ran into the farmyard and cried, “There is a mousetrap in the house!”

The chicken clucked and scratched and said, “I can tell this is a grave concern for you, but it is of no consequence to me.”

The pig belched and snorted and said, “I am very sorry to hear that, but I cannot do anything about it. I will pray for you.”

The cow chewed and stared and said, “I feel for you, but it means nothing to me.”

That night, the mousetrap made its first catch. But it was not the mouse. It was a snake.

The farmer’s wife rushed to the trap, and the snake bit her. The farmer rushed her to the hospital, and she came home with a fever.

How do you treat a fever? You eat chicken soup. So the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard and killed the chicken.

But the wife was still ill, so friends came to sit with her. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig.

The wife soon died, and the farmer had to feed all the mourners, so he had the cow slaughtered.

In the end, only the mouse remained, and he was sad to see his friends die, all because they did not think his problem, was their problem.

What about you and me? How much are we like the chicken, the pig, and the cow? What joys and sorrows surround us, but we do not believe they are for us to bother about?

What joy or sorrow is in your husband or wife? What joy or sorrow is in your children? What joy or sorrow is in the person who is sitting a few seats from you right now? What joy or sorrow is in the co-worker or neighbor that you see so often, but know so little?

In Romans 12, Paul is answering the question, “If the gospel is true, how should we live?” We have discovered that our lives are an offering to Jesus, in response to his mercy to us. We offer our gifts, our love, our honor, our passion, and our blessing. We do this with everyone, but especially with the other believers in our lives.

We also offer, what I would like to call, our “withness.” Not our “witness” - although that’s a good thing to offer - but our “withness.”

Paul writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” The most important word in this verse is not “rejoice” or “mourn.” It is “with.” As Paul calls God’s people to offer themselves to the Lord and to one another, he urges them to reject the heart habits of the animals in that story, and to be with each other in seasons of joy and sorrow.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” Let’s learn of this offering by using the same questions we asked last week: Why? How?

“WITHNESS”? WHY? Why do we live “with” each other in these times of joy and sorrow?

We might do this, for wrong reasons. So let’s spend a minute seeing that we are to be with others NOT BECAUSE OF our pride, or our need.

All through the book of Romans, Paul has been chipping away at our pride. God’s wrath is upon us for the real evil in our hearts and lives, and God’s love in Jesus Christ is all that keeps us from that wrath. We do not boast in our good works to get us to God, and we do not boast in our good works now.

But even in Jesus Christ, we are prone to do this. We want to be able to say, “I am loving. I am compassionate. I am caring. I am the kind of person who would not be like those animals. I know how joy and sorrow touches us all, and I will show how good I am, by rejoicing and mourning with people.”

No. “Withness” is a valuable virtue, but if it is an occasion for pride, we may be doing right with our “withness,” but our reason is wrong.

Another wrong reason is our need.

What do I mean by that? Sometimes we need to be needed. This is an especially dangerous trap for people (like pastors) who “minister” to people. I may not realize I am doing this, but I can be the kind of person who must be needed by others. If they do not need me, somehow I am discouraged, or I even believe I am a failure. I create a situation where people are depending on me, instead of depending on the Lord. That’s not good, and that’s not why we should be offering our “withness” to people.

What is happening with both pride and need? Ultimately, my “withness” is about me. It’s about making me feel good about me. But “withness” must not be about me. It should be about you. I am offering myself to you. It is for you. It is because I love you, that I am with you in joy and sorrow.

Yet it’s not really about just you and me, is it? That leads us to the right “why” for our “withness”.

We offer our “withness” not because of pride or because of need, BUT BECAUSE OF Jesus.

At the start of his gospel, John describes and delights in the profound truths and glorious results of the event we call the “incarnation.”

He writes of One he calls the Word: Jesus. He was with the Father at the creation, and the creation came to be, through him.

But he did not just stand apart from creation. He came to be a part of the creation.

John declares, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

The Son of God, who possesses eternal glory and infinite honor, was willing to come to be with us, even while we were still his enemies, in our sin. In his perfect glory and spotless righteousness, he could have stayed apart from us, but he chose to be with us, and indeed to become one of us, so that we could one day be with him, forever.

That is just a taste of the glory of the incarnation, but it is enough to show us why we offer our "withness" to each other. Like everything else we offer, our "withness" is radically Christ-centered. We rejoice with those who rejoice, and we mourn with those who mourn, because that is exactly what our Savior did for us.

Jesus feasted at weddings, and he wept at graves. Jesus enjoyed good food, and he laid his hands upon the sick. Jesus gave his touch, and he gave his comfort, and he ultimately gave himself, for people like us, so that people like us, could be called the children of God again.

That is why we offer our "withness."

The story is told of a man who was good in the eyes of the world, but did not believe the story of Jesus Christ. When Christmas Eve came, he decided to be honest with his family, and he said he would stay home, while they went to worship.

It began to snow. He sat down to read the newspaper, but he jumped at the sound of a thud. Then he heard more thuds, and he figured someone was throwing snowballs at his front windows.

But it was not snowballs. It was birds, hitting his window, as they looked for shelter in the storm.

The man went out to his barn, and he tried to urge the birds to go into the barn, where they would be safe. He tried putting out food. He tried shooing them. He tried catching them. Nothing worked.

He thought, "If only I could be a bird. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn.

"But I would have to be one of them so they could see, hear, and understand."

As the story goes, the church bells then began to ring, and the man understood what the Savior had done for us.

Do you know what Jesus Christ has done for you? If so, then you will be moved to offer the same "withness" to others - as they rejoice, and as they mourn, and even as they struggle for their very lives.

We want Jesus to be with us. We pray for Jesus to be with others. Yet Jesus is often with others, through us. As he was with us, he is with them, in our "withness."

It's the gospel again. It's the simple story again. God has been with us in Jesus, so we are with others, for the sake of Jesus.

"Withness"? Why? Because of Jesus.

"WITHNESS"? HOW? How do we do this? How do we rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn?

Like so much in the Christian life, it's a process of "putting off" old heart and life habits, and "putting on" new heart and life habits.

What should we be PUTTING OFF? What must we be rid of, in order to offer our "withness" to others?

I offer these to you in the form of words we may rarely say, but words that could describe the attitudes of our hearts.

We have to put off an attitude that says, "My world is me and mine."

This is a self-centeredness, in which my passions are focused on my needs, my wants, and my priorities. If you could see in my heart, you would see this: I don't care much for others, except when they help me get what I want. My world is about me and mine.

But "withness" involves loss. Jesus lost the privileges of glory, and if I am to follow his "withness" I will lose time, energy, and maybe more. God will take care of my needs, but I may not get all my wants or fulfill all my priorities.

Here is a question for us, in a culture of "My world is me and mine." Will you ask God to make room for other people in your heart and life?

We also have to put off an attitude that says, "That should be mine, not yours."

This is a self-interest, in which I cannot rejoice with those who rejoice, because I want, what they have.

Maybe I cannot rejoice with you, because you have more money, and I wish I had more money.

Maybe I cannot rejoice with you, because you get more attention, and I want that attention.

Maybe I cannot rejoice with you, because I want to be married, but I am not, and you now are.

"Withness" involves loss, and "withness" involves death. If I will be with you, I will have to put to death those desires. I will have to embrace a joy that is "other-centered". I think not of what I lack, but I rejoice with you, as you rejoice in what God has given you.

Here is a question for us, in a world of "That should be mine, not yours". Will you ask God to give you

contentment?

Then there is one more attitude that we must put off, if we are to offer our “withness”: “I am afraid of you.”

This is a self-protection, in which I do not involve myself with you, because I am afraid of the emotions that I must face.

This is especially true with the pain of mourning. Maybe I will not be with you, because I cannot open myself to the pain of entering into your pain.

“Withness” involves loss, and it involves death, and it involves risk. When you go to be with someone, you are taking a risk. You are risking that you will have to deal with strong emotions. You are risking that you will be drained by those emotions. You are risking your strength, and your joy, and your peace, and your safety, by entering into a world of even frightening emotion.

Here is a question for us, in a world of “I am afraid of you.” Will you ask God to give you the courage to overcome your fear, and be with others?

Men, I must speak especially to you. In general, you know how we are. Women show emotion, and we either point and laugh, or we run and hide. In our culture, we have confused masculinity with coolness of emotion. So often, we simply do not want to confront our emotions, or the emotions of the people in our lives. So we keep ourselves at a distance, and we never genuinely offer any “withness” to others.

“Withness” is not just for women. It is for all of us. Maybe as men, we will offer our “withness” in different ways, but we must ask God for his grace, that we may put off these attitudes that choke off our “withness.”

Yet “withness” is not just about putting off. It is about PUTTING ON.

What is “putting on”, all about?

This “putting on” starts with a life of offering your heart.

In the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul is struggling. The wonder of the Bible is that it is so honest, and you read there of Paul’s problems as he tries to lead the Corinthians in the ways of the Lord.

In chapter 6, Paul writes, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange - I speak as to my children - open wide your hearts also.”

Open wide your hearts. Live a life of offering your heart. Because my heart is open to you, I will be there with you, and I will walk (or maybe leap) through this season of life with you. I will not hold back. I will not retreat into a life of self-centeredness, self-interest, or self-protection. I give my heart to you, that I may be with you.

What does this look like, in the moments of our life together? (I’m now thinking especially of being with those who mourn.)

* It looks like, less of the mouth, and more of the ear.

We have a tendency to be problem-solvers. We say, “Just do this. Just do that. If you would do this, that will happen.”

“Just...get over it. Go do something to take your mind off of it.”

“Just...do something to pamper yourself. You’ll feel better.

“Just...follow this three-step process. You’ll be okay.”

There is a time and a place for solving problems, but “withness” is less about your brilliance, and more about your listening. I sometime think that “problem-solving” is a way, maybe an unconscious way, to distance yourself from that person, and to avoid really being with that person.

Just sit with the one who mourns. Just sit. Just be there.

Let there be silence, or let there be talking. Either one is okay.

Let there be laughter, or let there be weeping. Both may be there.

Say less, and listen more.

Which leads to...

* Less of the mouth, and more of the hand.

What happens to you when you get nervous or uncomfortable? Many of us start talking a lot. You’re a bit uncomfortable with silence, so you have to fill the silence with words.

But people do not always need a lot of words, nor do they benefit from a lot of words. They do far better with your hand of embrace, than with your avalanche of words.

With mourning, they know and you know that you cannot make it better. You cannot fix it. You cannot change it. So your call is not to load lots of words onto them, but to load lots of care into them.

In a Sunday School class on counseling earlier this year, I offered a little phrase to keep in mind, when you enter a situation with someone in need. You simply want to say, “I’m here, and I hear.”

Less of the mouth and more of the ear: “I hear.”

Less of the mouth and more of the hands: “I’m here.”

That is a life of offering your heart. That is “withness.”

Put on a life of offering your heart, and a life of offering your Savior.

Right at the start of 2 Corinthians, Paul writes, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the

Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received.”

What comfort have we received? What is the source of all comfort, joy and peace, and every spiritual blessing? It is Jesus.

Apart from Jesus, there is no comfort. There is hopelessness, or there is wishful thinking. But in Jesus, in the Savior who took our sins upon himself, so that we could be taken to the very throne of God, there is comfort.

So with that comfort within me, what do I have to offer, as I offer my “withness”? I have Jesus.

In the end, it is not about me. It is not about my “withness.” It is all about Jesus, and his “withness”. When I offer myself to you, I am offering him to you. I speak of him. I lead you to him. I want you to know that HE is with you.

In the end, it is not about the other person. It is about much more than making that person feel better, or feel loved, or feel less lonely. It is about God’s work of bringing people back to a right and real relationship with himself. That is what I want. That is what I pray for. That is what I seek as I am with you. That will happen, only as I offer my Savior.

I offer my heart, but as I offer my heart, I offer my Savior. I want this person to see Jesus in me, and through me.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those mourn.” Be with them, with your heart, and with your Savior, in joy and in sorrow.

Joy and sorrow are two realities, so I close by offering you two stories.

The first is about joy.

If you know your college basketball history, you remember one of the greatest upsets in NCAA finals history. One year back in the early ‘80s, North Carolina State stunned Houston on a last second shot.

North Carolina State’s coach was Jim Valvano. The shot went in, the buzzer sounded, pandemonium prevailed on the court, and Jim Valvano went running onto the court, looking for someone to hug. He couldn’t find anyone! With all the chaos, he had to hunt around to find someone from his team, to rejoice with him.

Who needs someone to rejoice with them? With whom can you rejoice?

The second story is about sorrow.

I have sometimes mentioned the writings of an author named Jonathan Kozol. He once wrote of educators caring for young people in New York City. One of those educators, is named Katrice. Kozol relates some of her stories about her children, then he writes,

“Sometimes when she tells me narratives like these, Katrice’s eyes begin to fill with tears. She often holds a crumpled piece of tissue in her hand...”

“The children love Katrice. They trust her judgment and her goodness and her common sense. ‘Their worries should be my worries,’ she says of the ones who have the greatest troubles in their homes.”

Then Kozol writes, “It seems an ordinary thing to say; but living your life as if this actually were so is not as common as it ought to be for most of us.”

In the church, it should be common. As believers, it should be common for us to strive to live out those words, “Their worries should be my worries.”

Not because of our pride, or because our need, but because of Jesus. Because of Jesus, we put off attitudes that keep us at a distance, and we strive to put on a life of offering our hearts, and our Savior.

We find someone who needs to find someone to rejoice with them. We make the worries of others, our worries. We offer our “withness.”