

## ROMANS 12:16 OFFERING OUR HUMILITY

This story is told by Douglas Gresham, the stepson of C.S. Lewis.

One day Lewis and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien were walking along a street, and a man approached Lewis and asked if he could spare a few coins.

Lewis dug into his pocket, pulled out all his change, and handed it to the man. Tolkien said, "You shouldn't have given that fellow all that money; he'll just spend it on drink."

Lewis said, "Well, if I had kept it, I would have only spent it on drink."

Now...how do you react to that story? You may focus on what concerned Tolkien. You should never give a beggar money like that. He did probably use it for drink.

But think more with me. Think differently with me. While Tolkien surely had a point, think about Lewis' words in response to Tolkien. "Well, if I had kept it, I would have only spent it on drink."

At a distance of decades, with only a few details before me, I cannot fully sort through what Lewis meant, or why he said it.

But his words force me to examine my heart, and they are a starting point for all of us to make such a search.

What do I mean? It is our nature as human beings, in a world where we are not at peace with God or each other, to think we are better than other people. It may be a beggar on the street, a brother in the church, or many other kinds of people. My heart wants to put me above you, and your heart wants to put you above me.

But Lewis' words direct us differently. Maybe his words are less about drinking and beggars, and more about our hearts. In his simple words, he is demonstrating a genuine humility. You see that beggar? You know how he is abusing a good gift of God? So do I. I am no better than he.

In Romans 12, Paul's inspired words are answering this question: "If the gospel is true, how do we live?"

We have learned that our lives are an offering to Jesus, who offered himself for us, by his mercy.

In these words, we discover another offering: the offering of humility. This is the offering that we see in these words of C.S. Lewis.

In this section, Paul seems to be thinking first of how we relate to each other in the church. But his words touch how we think and live before every sort of person - even the beggar on the street.

Let's search our hearts and lives, by pondering our offering of humility, in our thinking and our living.

As we have learned again and again in Romans 12, living starts with thinking, so offering humility begins  
IN THINKING.

Our habit...your habit...my habit...is often THINKING MUCH OF ME.

Paul writes, "Live in harmony with each other. Do not be proud...Do not be conceited."

The word here for pride refers to being "high-minded". I think highly of myself.

It's the image of a mountain or a high wall. I am "on my mountain", or I am on top of my "wall", and I am looking down on you, for you are "below" me.

The word here for conceit refers to being "big-minded." I think my mind is "bigger" than yours. In other words, I think I am wiser than you.

It's the image of something huge. I am "big" on me, and I think "little" of you, because you are "smaller" than me.

I am higher. I am bigger. I am thinking much of me.

Am I? Are you? As I have pondered Paul's words, I have been reminded of two kinds of pride and conceit - two ways I "think much of me."

One is religious. I am better than you, because I am more religious.

Maybe I am a Christian, and you are not. Or maybe I am a really good Christian, and you are not such a good Christian.

I go to church. I give to the church. I do nice things in the community. I worship Jesus, instead of following one of those strange religions out there.

I am really serious about my faith. I am really learning more and more. I am doing a lot more than...you.

I am higher than you. I am bigger than you. Religious pride and conceit.

Yet another form of this pride and conceit is social pride. I am better than you, because I am more prosperous.

I have a job. I have a steady job. I have a respectable job. I drive cars with all their hubcaps. I keep my lawn nice. I keep my children in cool clothes. I am a taxpayer. I am a good citizen. I am part of the producing middle class, which is the backbone of American prosperity!

And I am higher than you...I am bigger than you...you whom I see along the street in the city of Richmond, when I dare venture west of about East 15th Street. This is social pride and conceit.

This is "thinking much of me". Don't stretch now, and look around, and wonder if the pastor is talking to the person down the row from you. I am talking to me, and I am talking to you. How much are we "thinking

much of me”?

Then, as Paul writes of our thinking, he writes of the opposite of thinking much of me. He writes of **THINKING WELL OF YOU.**

“Live in harmony with one another.” What does that mean? The phrase here literally means to “be of the same mind toward one another.” The mind you have toward me, is the mind I have toward you.

But what does that mean? Quite simply, Paul is saying that in this body, we must be thinking well of each other. You think well of me, and I think well of you, and there is harmony between us.

Your background does not matter. Your status does not matter. If you are in Jesus Christ, I am well-thinking towards you, and you are well-thinking towards me.

Why? Because we are who we are, not because of our religious goodness, or because of our social greatness, but because of the good and great grace of Jesus Christ. All that we are, and all that we ever hope to be, are from him, and through him, and for him.

I am one with Jesus Christ. That exalts me to a wonderful place, but it also humbles me before other people. If I am in Jesus, I am no higher or no bigger than anyone else. Whatever blessings I possess, whatever goodness I may demonstrate, is purely by his grace. So I offer humility.

I remember trying to communicate this, not so long ago, to a nonbelieving friend. He is so repulsed by self-righteous, smug, arrogant, “I-am-so-much-better-than-you” Christians. I am, too - and sometimes it’s me.

We went back and forth about this for a bit, and then I just blurted out the gospel to him. I said, “That should not be! If we understand our faith in Jesus, we should be the most humble people around! We have to know that we are not as we are, because of anything in us, but utterly because of what God has done for us!”

I don’t think he quite got it, maybe partly because what I said, has so little to do with what he sees, in some of the Christians around him.

If I am offering my humility, I am thinking well of you. If you are one with Jesus and me, I think well of you because of our common bond in Jesus. Even if you are not in Jesus, I will still think well of you, because I know we are both the same, apart from God’s grace in Jesus.

I say this, but do I really believe this? You hear this, but do you really believe this? What must happen in our thinking, so that we will be less “thinking much of me”, and more “thinking well of you”?

I believe we need a fuller understanding of some basic truths.

We need a fuller understanding of creation.

We are all made in the image of God. I am, you are, and so is the person you like least.

Yes, the image is marred. It can be hard to see in some people. But it is still there. Even if it is hard to see, we all still reflect God’s image.

As well, the truth of creation reminds me that all I have, is from God. He is the giver of all gifts. Apart from his generosity, I am nothing, and I have nothing.

If I understand this...if I know we all “start out the same”, in the image of God, and if I know all I have is a gift from God, I will stop thinking so much of me, and I will start thinking well of you.

We also need a fuller understanding of redemption.

If I am a child of God, saved from his righteous wrath and saved to life forever with him, I am saved purely by the grace of Jesus Christ. I may be respectable in my sin, or I may be riotous in my sin, but I am saved from this only because Jesus has chosen to live, die, and rise again for me.

I say this. We sing this. But I forget this. Or I still may think that God saved me, because he saw something better in me. No. Never.

If I understand this...if I know all are saved only by God’s grace, I will stop thinking so much of me, and I will start thinking well of you.

We also need a fuller understanding of sanctification.

If I am in Jesus Christ, and if you are in Jesus Christ, we are both able to become more like Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit. That journey may look different for me than for you, but we are on the same road.

I reject the discouragement that says, “That’s just the way that person is. He’ll never change.” I realize that God can change each one of us, and I am disbelieving in his glory and goodness, when I think he cannot do that.

If I understand this...if I know God can truly grow all of my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, I will stop thinking much of me, and I will start thinking well of you.

Where is your pride? Where is your conceit? It melts away, before the thinking-changing truths of creation, redemption and sanctification.

Offering our humility begins with our thinking, but we see it most clearly, **IN LIVING.** Thoughts of humility, will lead to a life of humility.

Where is the “living” in this verse? Paul writes, “...be willing to associate with people of low position.”

What does this mean? There is a bit of a mystery here.

This phrase could refer to being with people, which is the idea you get when you read most English

translations. Paul is then saying, “You need to associate with people who are not ‘high’ in their position in this world.”

This phrase could also refer to doing a work. Paul then is saying, “You need to be willing to give yourself to humble tasks.”

On balance, I think the first choice is better. Paul is writing about how people relate to people, and the rest of the New Testament reveals how the early Christians struggled with “favoritism” -- honoring people of “high” social position, and ignoring and even abusing people of “low” social position.

Yet there is room for both thoughts here. Certainly, if I am willing to associate with people of low position, I will give myself to humble tasks!

It was a challenge for the church yesterday, and it is a challenge for the church today. How do different kinds of people live in love, in the church, and as the church, in the world?

Paul’s words call us to open arms, and open hands.

In living together in the church, as different people, we must offer our humility, as we offer OPEN ARMS.

The apostle James writes:

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

This is the question of how we respond to people who do not fit the “profile” of our congregation.

Maybe someone is not quite middle class, or nothing close to middle class.

Maybe someone is not in professional work, but in factory or service work.

Maybe someone is not well-educated, but little-educated.

Maybe someone is not white, but is black or Hispanic.

Maybe some of these someones do not want to be here. But maybe some of them do, and maybe some of them are.

How do we receive them? The gospel compels us to humbly welcome them, in the name of Jesus Christ. We freely welcome all who want to worship the Lord Jesus Christ in spirit and in truth.

This is hard! We all have hearts of favoritism. But in Jesus Christ, we offer open arms to people. We resist the temptation to simply be with people who are like us. We humbly offer ourselves to anyone who comes to be among us.

As one writer says, we do not separate ourselves from people; we enter into relationships and we maintain those relationships with people. We should do this as individuals, and we should do this as a body.

Do we? Do you? Do I? I ask you, and me, and us, two questions about the openness of our arms:

\* Will you freely welcome anyone who enters this place?

Imagine the poor person, dressed not nearly as well as you.

Imagine the rough person, who is not as middle-class polite as you.

Imagine the unique person, with piercings in all sorts of places.

Imagine the Mexican, who may or may not be here legally.

Will you freely welcome anyone who enters this place? “Be willing to associate with people of low position.”

\* Will you fully embrace another believer, as a believer?

When we go to purchase something, we want it to be a finished product. Unless we are going to Goodwill or a garage sale, where we know stuff comes with scuffs and dents, we want finished products.

When we enter into this place, we tend to want finished products.

We might shy away from the person who is socially inept.

We might stay away from the person whose spiritual and emotional struggles are painfully clear for all to see.

We might run away from the person who will ask from us, more than we want to give.

But if this person is a believer in Jesus Christ, we must respond to them with a full embrace. We open our arms to them, even, and maybe especially, if they are not “just like us.”

No, no one can fully embrace everyone. Yet as individuals, do we ever do this? And as a church, does this reflect the culture we are trying to create?

“Be willing to associate with people of low position.”

We do this, by the grace of God, and because of the grace of God. We do this because Jesus Christ has welcomed us with open arms.

Yet our living together goes even deeper than this. In our living, offering our humility also includes OPEN HANDS.

In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of the day when he will come in glory, and sit on his heavenly throne. The nations will gather before him, and some will be welcomed into eternal life, while others will be sentenced to eternal

death.

What is the difference? What is the defining characteristic of the ones who are welcomed into life?

They feed the hungry. They give drink to the thirsty. They invite in strangers. They give clothes. They visit the sick and the imprisoned. As they do this for people, says Jesus, they are doing this for him.

What is Jesus saying? This is what his people do! We offer mercy. In the rest of the Bible, we get the idea that this mercy is first for believers, but it is not only for believers. Jesus is declaring that his people will humbly offer help to the people of "low position" around them, whoever and wherever they are. Yes, in the church. But also in the world.

That is what we do. That is what we are. The apostle James wrote, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

I once heard Pastor Mo Leverett of Desire Street Ministries say that in American Christianity, we are big on the second half of that verse. We know we do not want to be polluted by the world. But what about the first half of the verse? What about the call to look after people in need?

We cannot avoid this issue, in Richmond, Indiana. I know, and you know, that we are in a community with many poor people. I also know, and you may know, that helping the poor is no simple task. It is frustrating and sometimes infuriating.

But as God looks at Christ Presbyterian Church in this community of so many poor, what does he see? Closed fists? Or open hands?

Yes, we have tried. Yes, it has not always gone according to plan. But what should be our response? I believe we have to find ways to keep trying, because if Jesus and James meant what they said, we have no other option. We must associate with people of low position.

Through my almost seven years here, I have grown in my conviction that with our place in this place, this is best done by partnering with churches and individuals who are also trying to live out the words of Matthew and James.

That is why we have encouraged your participation in the Community Food Pantry - in leadership, administration, and the hoisting of boxes.

That is why we have sometimes helped at Circle U, sometimes as pastors, and sometimes as a church.

That is why we serve a monthly meal at Rock Solid Ministries, and why we have sought to help that ministry in other ways.

That is why we ought to walk until our feet bleed, if it will mean more support for ministries like Birthright.

That is why our deacons keep finding ways to say "yes", when they are asked for help.

That is why I dream of a counseling center here, where hurting people of every social class can come and be fed, face-to-face, by God's Word.

We must be wise about this. We must not presume that somehow we will solve all the problems in our community. But because Jesus is driving out our religious and social pride and conceit, we will offer help with open hands.

Let me state this even more strongly...maybe too strongly. We ask God to bless this congregation. We are not even always sure what this "blessing" should look like. But we want it!

Yet how can we expect God to bless us, unless we care for others with open hands? And what blessings might God pour out for us, as we faithfully open our hands to people of "low position"?

Closed fists, or open hands? If we get it wrong, may we get it wrong by having hands that are too open, because we are associating with people of low position - in the church, and in the world.

May we think well of others, so that we may live lives of offering our humility, with open arms, and open hands.

"Well," said C.S. Lewis to J.R.R. Tolkein, "if I had kept it, I would have only spent it on drink."

How do you react?