



LOVE 203

WE ARE FAMILY

As we learn to live with each other in community as the Acts 2 church did, we eventually have to get beyond ideas like acceptance and transparency and start to think about tougher subjects like trust, unity, growth, discipline, and peace. Fortunately, Jesus and his apostles did not leave us in the dark about making this happen.

Whenever you put two or more broken human beings together for any length of time, you get friction. Anyone who tries to paint a different picture of Christian life, one that implies that Christians don't experience that sort of friction, is perpetuating a dangerous lie.

♥ How might that false impression lead to tragedy? Share an example, if you have one.



Fortunately, the first followers of The Way documented the ways they dealt with that friction. Those early communities were just as counter-cultural then as they are today. How can we re-frame community to involve God and his broken image bearers together?

For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. ~ Matthew 18:20

ACCOUNTABILITY

In addition to being real with people, we need others to encourage us and keep us progressing in life. This concept can be called holding each other **accountable**.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.
~ James 5:16

♥ What does this passage tell us to do? Why?

The Recovery Movement, so successful in helping addicts find healing, rigorously practices this principle. Recovery groups usually require people to take a complete, fearless moral inventory, and then tell at least one other person everything they find. They have discovered that when we let someone else in on our shameful secrets allowing them to love us and pray for us, we can begin being honest with ourselves and God about those secrets. Allowing brothers and sisters to hold us accountable brings healing. It may take time to develop that level of trust, but pushing through that fear is the road to finding a deeper love that heals.

♥ What scares you about trusting another person with your struggles, sins, and dark secrets?

♥ What would be the benefits of that kind of relationship?


RESTORATION

As we seek authentic relationships and hold one another accountable, we will eventually have the opportunity to help another person grow in a very specific way around a very specific problem or challenge. This process may involve **restoration**.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ~ Galatians 6:1-2

Let's break down this idea of restoration:

STEP ONE: If a fellow Christ-follower is caught in sin, we should restore him gently (v. 1a).

 Have you ever known of someone in the church being "restored" in a way that was not gentle? What was the result?


The term "restore" used here is the same term used for setting a broken bone. When we have a broken bone, someone has to "diagnose" it as a break, "set" it, meaning straightening it and putting it back in the right place (this can be very painful), then "splint" it, providing external support with a splint, a sling, a cast, crutches, etc., enabling proper healing.

Anyone who has broken a finger or toe knows that even a small broken bone causes pain and changes in routine. In our Christian family, sin causes a similar effect. People caught in sin need to be noticed (diagnose), lovingly corrected (set), and given external support (splint) while they mend.

When we discover that a specific person's behaviors are contrary to specific commands in Scripture, we are obligated as his brother or sister to help him mend the break they have made with both God and their Christian family. This may be very painful, just like setting a bone, but it is not optional. What would you do if you saw someone you loved doing something terribly dangerous or endangering their family members? You would intervene. Their sin has the same effect (the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life ~ Romans 6:23a). Our natural human tendency is to ignore them ("It's none of my business."), look down on them ("I would never do that."), or to gossip ("Did you hear about her?"). But that is not the way of love. Because,


like you, these brothers and sister in Christ bear the Imago Dei, the Bible tells us we should restore them.

STEP TWO: As we're doing this, we should watch ourselves, being on the lookout for temptation (v. 1b).


 What temptations could we face while restoring someone else?


STEP THREE: All of us, together, should carry one another's burdens (troubles and problems) (v. 2).

It's remarkable how carrying the burdens of others is part of the law of Christ. In fact, it says this is the way you "fulfill" his law! So often, churches develop an attitude where sinners aren't welcome. That's very different from what's commanded here. That attitude couldn't be further from the actual purpose of Christ's church!

 How do you think it has come to this point? Why is the church better known for its condemnation of sin than its love of sinners?

REFLECTION

 What are your burdens? Do you have any hidden burdens that you haven't told others about but need help to carry? What would it mean to share these burdens with a friend and get out from under their weight?


 Examine your life and consider your relationships with others. Are there people you feel authentic around? Are there people who hold you accountable? Write the names of some people who either help you in this way, or that you think *could*.


because some people will remain hard-hearted, but God expects us to do all we can.

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. ~ Matthew 18:15-17.

This passage explains what Jesus says we can do when we confront conflict. List the steps outlined here:

1. Go privately right away and _____ (v. 15)
2. If he listens, you've _____ (v. 15)
2. If he won't listen, _____ (v. 16)
3. If he still won't listen, tell the _____ leaders so they can try to restore him. (v. 17)
4. If he still won't listen, it's a good indication that he is hard-hearted toward God, so treat him as if he is not a Christ-follower (this does not imply treating him unkindly, but just to not expect anything more than we would from someone who doesn't believe).

 In your experience, what are the results of unresolved conflict?

 Have you ever engaged someone in the pattern outlined in Matthew chapter 18? Or has anyone come to you in this manner? Did it help? Why or why not?

These kinds of mending relationships are absolutely critical to our spiritual walk. At WCC, we encourage you to meet regularly with one or two people for this kind of support. We are calling this "Spiritual Running Partners." You can work together with your running partner(s) using many different materials, but there is a great resource available from Gateway Church in Austin, TX, that we are recommending. You can find it at this link:

<http://www.soulrevolution.net/tools/RPGuide.pdf>




Check it out and see if you can see the benefit of a relationship like this. If so, pray for your next-step in finding or becoming more intentional with a running partner.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

Most people struggle with resolving conflict. We'd rather stay angry than confront; we'd rather talk to others about problems than go to the person we have the problem with; we'd rather stuff our emotions and pretend everything's fine than deal with the mess of resolving conflict. But, that's not God's way; that's not the way of love.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ~ Romans 12:18

Living with unresolved conflict is the opposite of living at peace. Growing Christ followers must commit to doing all they can to live at peace and resolve conflicts quickly with all people (both those inside and outside the church). Complete resolution is not always possible


 Are you willing to love people around you by resolving conflict in the manner of Christ?


Can you imagine what it would be like to "live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18)? Even if every conflict wasn't completely resolved, what would it be like knowing you've done all you can? What would this mean to you?


UNITY

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one. Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." ~ John 17:20-20

This is part of Jesus' prayer the night before he was taken to the cross. It might even be said this was a dying man's last request. He prays for many things relating to the world and the mission he is entrusting to his followers. In this passage, Jesus transitions from praying for his disciples into praying for all of us (those who will believe).

 What level of unity does Jesus pray for? What did Jesus believe would be the results of this unity?

 Write the name of someone with whom you're not currently living in unity.

 What practical steps could you take to pursue the kind of unity Jesus prayed for in this relationship?

Prayerfully read the following questions and make notes about your thoughts, plans, or outstanding questions. Before God, see if you can decide and commit to going this way with others here at WCC—loving others and living as family.

1. Do you have someone to meet with regularly, talk to, listen to, pray with, and encourage? If not, are you committed to starting such a relationship?
2. What are your thoughts on conflict? As far as it's up to you, will you seek to live at peace with everyone? Do you need to reconcile any broken relationships?
3. Be honest—do you have any relationships that aren't God-honoring? What's your next step in this area?
4. Sum it up: write your biggest question about loving people and living in harmony with others. Also write a note to God about your commitment.

SO FAR:

Human relationships always have F _____ .

We are to be A _____ to one another.

To restore, we must N _____ (diagnose),

C _____ (set), and S _____ (splint).

We must R _____ our C _____ .

LOVE

LOVE GOD. LOVE OTHERS.

We've taken a look at the Biblical picture of what it looks like to love the people around you and live as family. Being loved by God has power to grow our ability to love others. We long to develop lasting connections with other people—God's love makes it possible; It won't be easy, but loving others is rich and rewarding!

Before we move on and learn what Jesus wants us to do to GROW in our faith, consider how this idea - that we must love God and love others - impacts you and your life and your relationships by prayerfully considering the following passage, often called "The Love Chapter":

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

~ 1 Corinthians 13