

Introduction

- A. There are various things that people look for in a church. You probably have your own list. **But do you know the top two things that God looks for in a church?** The first is that we hold firmly to the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. The second is that we *“serve one another humbly in love.”* And there’s the rub! There’s an old verse you may have heard:

*To live above with the saints we love,
Ah, that is the purest glory.*

*To live below with the saints we know,
Ah, that is another story!*

Nothing else that churches do—not our worship or outreach or ministries to kids—are more important than those two things. Any church that loses either of those is no longer worth its salt.

- B. At the heart of who we are here at Village Church is being a home. At the heart of any home are the relationships. It isn’t enough for a church to be friendly, to have great worship, or terrific programs inside and outside the church. Before all that, we must *“serve one another humbly in love.”* That’s a phrase from **Gal. 5:13**. Turn there.

There are a lot of churchless Christians these days— professing believers who aren’t part of a church or who go to some church anonymously. That isn’t right and they will not grow properly in the Lord. At Village Church we will know and love one another. We will learn one another’s names. We will be a safe place but we don’t foster anonymity. We will serve one another and we will love each other for Jesus’ sake.

- C. Lots of times we like serving one another. Our worship leaders this morning *liked* serving you. The people who are teaching our children *like* that ministry. Those who greeted

you at the door are *glad* to do it. But there are two times when it really gets difficult to “serve one another humbly in love.” One: when I don’t feel like it and, two, when the other person is a pain. We need help!

- D. In **Galatians** Paul has emphasized to these Christians that the good news of Jesus Christ has set them free from crushing legalism. Now, beginning in **v.13**, he shows them how that will affect their life together... There it is: “serve one another humbly in love.” The Greek word behind the words *serve humbly* means to serve as a slave. We are slaves of Jesus Christ who bought us with his blood. But he has assigned us to serve one another as though we were a slave to each other. Rights are not the issue. Status has nothing to do with it. We aren’t our own bosses.
- E. But Paul tells us in **v.14-15**... Don’t you get the feeling that there is a story behind that? A pretty typical church story of upset people. You just can’t be close to people—in a church, or home, or job, or school—without rubbing each other the wrong way. And how Christians handle that is completely different than anyone else. I’ll walk you through these verses and you’ll see what I mean.

When things get tense with someone else it is natural to feel that the other person is about 90% of the problem. And that could be. People can be incredibly difficult. Like all counselors, I’ve sat with a lot of people who have told me about a difficult relationship in their lives. After I listen, I always say, *“We can’t do anything here about the other person. The only person we can deal with is you.”* And that’s what Paul does here. He explains how we must deal with ourselves when loving each other gets difficult. I always tell couples in premarital counseling, *“The challenge in your marriage is not to love each other **much** but to love each other **well**.”*

I. **IN ORDER TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER WELL WE MUST EACH WALK BY THE SPIRIT INSTEAD OF INDULGING OUR SINFUL NATURE (5:13-26)**

A. Every Christian, all the time, deals with a war within.

Vv.16-18... We cannot live the Christian life without knowing this. When Paul talks about “the flesh” he means our old sinful nature—our proud, inborn desire to do what we want. When we repent and put our faith in Jesus Christ we turn our backs on that old inner master. But as we all know, our old nature doesn’t just roll over and die. The difference now is that the Holy Spirit within us now owns us and can overrule the constant conniving of our flesh.

But here’s the thing: everything that the Holy Spirit wants us to think or feel or do is in complete conflict with what our old nature wants. They have *nothing* in common. They are *always* at war within us.

B. Look where that old nature takes us: vv.19-21... When we do what we naturally *feel* like doing—that is, if we let our *flesh* run our lives we end up with out-of-control appetites, religion that wars with God, and relationships wormy with our self-love. So what happens in the church or home where people “indulge the flesh”? That church or family begins to *dis-integrate*, to pull apart at the seams.

C. But look where walking by the Spirit takes us: vv.22-23... When we use our Christian freedom to follow Jesus—to walk by the Spirit—these qualities emerge from our lives like fruit from a branch. **These are qualities that develop inwardly but that inevitably enable us to love well.** This is what Jesus is like, and step by step the Holy Spirit is helping us become like Jesus *inwardly* so that *outwardly* we can “*serve one another humbly in love.*”

D. So here’s the crucial thing. What do I need to do in order to love well in my relationships? Buckle down and be good? Be nice instead of nasty? Well, yes, but don’t start there. **Don’t start with the rules. Vv.24-26** tell us what to do:

1. Remember that the flesh—our sinful nature—with its self-centered drives and desires belongs on the cross. When someone ticks you off your old nature is going to start shouting orders: *Don't let her get away with it. Tell him where he can get off. Or maybe for you it's, Go hide! Do something that feels good for a couple hours. Play the victim; that'll show her!* Christians take stock of those responses that rise up like banshees from our old nature and we crucify them. We embed them in Jesus, you might say, whose death on the cross killed the power of those inward demands.
2. The second thing we do is in **v.25... Illus.:** I watched a special on D-Day the other night. When the American soldiers were threading their way up those terrible cliffs at Normandy under the fire of the enemy the ground all around them was mined. So the soldiers ascended in single file and the guy in front put down a broad white tape for everyone else to follow. Some men, who in the panic of the moment stepped off that tape, were killed by the mines. That is very close to the idea here. When you and I walk through temptation—when we must deal with difficult people, for example—walk in the footsteps of the Holy Spirit. We pray, *“Lord, how do I go through this because I’m in real danger from my old nature?”* The Spirit will guide you: *“Remember this verse,”* he may whisper. Or *“Ask your small group to pray.”* Or *“Be still and wait for Jesus’ peace.”* He will show you how to walk through the minefield of spiritual danger.
3. **V.26...** Again, even though someone else may be in the wrong we are responsible for ourselves. Our sinful responses always arise from our conceit—putting ourselves above others, and our conceit always leads us to either go after the other person or to desperately fight for what they refuse us—most often, respect.

Illus.: A Christian brother and I had a conflict not long ago. He surprised me with his unwillingness to do what seemed to be obviously a good thing. I challenged him and he left our group angry. Then he wrote an email saying he wouldn't be back. Ticked me off! I spun a whole web of responses. But I also knew that God wasn't pleased with what happened, even if I hadn't done anything wrong. I just didn't know what to do about it. I saw how bad things were rising up in me—self-righteousness and impatience and a lurking willingness to just wash my hands of the whole mess. I prayed a great deal about it. I didn't know what to do. Even though I didn't feel I'd done a wrong thing I sensed that there was a *right* thing left to do and I wasn't sure of what it was. I prayed and other brothers prayed. Some time passed. I knew I had to do something to reach out, so I sat down and wrote a letter.

To be a holy church we must deal with our own sinful nature and be sure to walk in the Spirit. But we must also deal with one another's behavior. The hardest part of *serving one another humbly in love*—even harder than dealing with our own hearts—is handling someone else's sin properly. And that's the point next:

II. WE MUST DEAL WITH EACH OTHER'S FAILINGS IN A UNIQUELY CHRISTIAN WAY (6:1-10)

A. To begin with, we are each expected to take the initiative to help our brothers and sisters when they are caught in sin. V.1a... Sin snares us all from time to time, and if we do not address it—if it starts to spread and sour our relationships and the Lord's reputation—fellow believers need to help. Who in particular? *"You who live by the Spirit."* **In other words we can't do this unless the Holy Spirit walks us through it.** But any believer who is in step with the Spirit—who takes cues from the Lord and his Word—can do this. This isn't just for Elders or counselors or pastors. This is what happens in all healthy Christian relationships from time to time.

Note that the goal isn't to tell them off—to whip 'em into shape, to give them a piece of your mind. The goal is to restore them to their own walk with the Lord. The real issue isn't what they've done to you but that they are "*caught in a sin*" that threatens their walk with Jesus.

The text says to do it *gently*; literally, *in a spirit of meekness*. Put them first; take on smallness so that they might be restored. If the other person, already in trouble, gets a whiff of pride from you—of conceit—things will only get worse. Humble yourself. Embrace the sense of inadequacy you feel and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in how *you* can help them get back on their feet with Jesus.

The Holy Spirit gives us a divine finesse that both convicts and graces our brother or sister. He gives us an amazing touch and timing; the Spirit helps us see just how to bring Scripture to bear in this hard thing. But be careful.

- B. In fact, that's the point of the next verses: **vv.1b-5... In helping a fellow believer, humbly keep guard over your own heart.** The particular temptation we face (v.1) is to let our conceit get the better of us. To play elder brother. To lay down the law. To be holier-than-thou.

V.2 is a great general principle: "*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*" In this context there is a specific burden in mind: the dead weight that a brother or sister's sin is putting on them and the church. We cannot ignore it. We must carry it by dealing with it, as uncomfortable as that can be. Jesus searched for us when we were lost so that is his law for us now with our fellow believers.

The huge temptation, of course, is to compare ourselves (conscientious Christians that we are) with this prodigal. Don't let that happen. Instead, take stock of the progress God has given you. If you see a strength, a virtue, that your brother or sister does not have, be glad for what

- God has done. Growing in that way was your ‘backpack’ to carry and you carried it well. That’s good and we’re glad!
- C. **V.6** says, “*Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor.*” Given the context, “*the one who receives instruction in the word*” is the fellow believer you’ve gone to and “*their instructor*” in the word is you. When we go to someone we are only as strong as what we can show them from Scripture. The outcome of this kind of process is not one-upmanship, but two richer believers. Two who “*share all good things.*”
- D. There are a lot of Christians who do not love their fellow believers enough to do this. And there are way too many of us much more inclined to retaliate than restore. So the Bible warns us in **vv.7-8...** Never think you can circumvent God’s immutable law of sowing and reaping in your relationships. If we don’t do what God commands the bad seed of *our* sin (not just the other guy’s) will destroy us and our church, little by little. But when we do these things—walking in the Spirit and restoring our fellow believers who sin—eternal life takes root in us here and now and forever.
- E. The rigor of maintaining godly relationships is tiring. It takes something out of you. Humility is draining. It takes a lot of energy for me to get small enough to be meek. So Paul concludes in **vv.9-10...** “*Doing good*” is relational, especially in this context. There is a harvest in our church and in heaven, but we cannot give up on it. And what if the other person never really responds very well to the Lord? Well, one thing is certain: **you will be more like Christ because you always reap what you sow.** Illus.: I’m reading an excellent little book entitled *Spiritual Direction* by Gordon T. Smith. He writes,
- I remember vividly while in a direction conversation expressing frustration with some colleagues—looking, I*

admit, for some sympathy! But my director's response was simple and clear: "Well, Gordon, it is sometimes helpful to remember that 'difficult people are the faculty of the soul.'" [p.46] In other words, sometimes difficult people are our soul's most important teachers.

Conclusion

Illus.: So I wrote a long and thoughtful letter to the Christian brother who had walked away. I went to my phone to get his address and I pushed *Talk* by accident. *No!!* I couldn't just hang up because he'd see it was my call. *Shoot!!* And I knew right then that the Holy Spirit had taken over things. It was awkward. *"Hi. This is Lee. Uh, I think we should probably talk."* When we finally sat down, you'll never guess what I found out. He thought *I* had been in the wrong! And as he explained, I saw his point. And he saw mine. We each apologized and meant it. We were both restored and our group was reunited.

I wrote to tell our group the good news and my friend wrote also. This is what he said:

Indeed. I think it is safe to say we both gained in understanding which so often leads to moving towards one another in relationship rather than apart. The curse of our human particularism is that we each view the same experience with very different sets of eyes which are back-loaded with our own experiences, convictions, fears and poor comprehension. And so we come away with decidedly different interpretations. Are we wrong or are we just seeing things so differently?

But the goodness of the gospel enables us to have footing to move towards rather than ultimately apart. Thank you Lee.

It is not always easy to "serve one another humbly in love." But when we do, there is no home so safe, so strong, or so close to heaven itself. Let's be that kind of church.