

# COMMUNITY

## 3

### BUILDING COMMUNITY

#### Part 1

#### Romans 12

By Beth Crawford

*“Though entered individually, salvation is seldom if ever thought of simply as a one-on-one relationship with God. While such a relationship is included, to be sure, ‘to be saved’ means especially to be joined to the people of God.”*

Gordon D. Fee

*“Acceptance is among the most important ingredients to building a life-giving environment in which people can spiritually grow and change. But what exactly is acceptance? Acceptance literally means “to take to one’s self.” In other words, to accept someone is to receive them into relationship—both the good and the bad parts—without condemnation.”*

Rich Nathan

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## AIM OF THE STUDY

- To gain biblical insight into what makes community life strong and to motivate group members to put that into practice.

## KEY VERSES

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

Romans 12:4–5

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

Romans 12:10

## PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**” and “**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

## OPENERS

If awards were given out for hosting home groups, our host and hostess would take first place. This couple greets members and guests alike with smiles from ear to ear, and sends folks off after the meetings with hugs and warm wishes. You immediately feel at home as they show genuine interest in you and your life story. They prepare an abundance of food and drink each week, showing concern for all kinds of dieters. As we gather in their kitchen, we may find flowers and cards to celebrate birthdays or

the changing seasons. In the winter, the kitchen's wood burning stove glows while the living room's fireplace beckons us to begin our more formal meeting. They are quick to show empathy and encouragement, while occasionally exhorting a fellow struggler. They give advice gently and humbly, and eagerly work with couples that are engaged or in need of counseling. Anonymously, they have contributed generously to people in financial need. When facing trials of their own, they accept our prayers and thank us for gracing their home with worship, Scripture study, and friendship. They continually provide a wonderful picture and experience of Christian love for our group and many first-time visitors.

When we talk about "Christian community," we mean the following:

Christian community is people united by a common calling from God; a common salvation in union with Jesus Christ; a common experience of the indwelling, transforming, and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit; and a common mission to advance God's Kingdom. These people live out their lives together, mutually supporting each other in love and depending upon the Holy Spirit (Nathan and Crawford).

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

***This is background information for leaders. You may decide whether to share any of this with your group members or not.***

### **Romans**

Jews were living in Rome two centuries before Jesus was born. Some Roman Jews were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost when Peter preached to the crowds and 3,000 people were saved. Roman Jews converted to Christianity may have begun the Roman Christian church. Years later, when Paul traveled to Corinth in Greece, he met a couple named Aquila and Priscilla who had fled Rome because the emperor had expelled Jews from the city in the A.D. 40's to 50's (Bruce, pp. 13–20) There is no mention of their conversion, so they may have become Christians in Rome before meeting Paul. He worked alongside them in Corinth and Ephesus, and they probably returned to Rome after the emperor's death (Patten and Patten, p. 973). They are the first people mentioned in Paul's greetings at the end of Romans (16:3).

Paul dictated the letter to the Romans in early A.D. 57 anticipating a visit to the capital city. He knew house churches were thriving in Rome, so he planned to stop and fellowship there before heading to Spain to spread the gospel. Spain was the oldest Roman stronghold in the western part of the empire, so it would have been a strategic place to establish a new witness. Paul may have felt apprehensive about going to Jerusalem prior to Rome, since Jews from Jerusalem would likely persecute him for preaching the message of Christ (Acts 20:22–23). One of his purposes in writing such a clear argument of the gospel in this letter might have been to entrust the missionary vision to the Roman believers in case he never reached Spain (Bruce,

pp. 14–15). Chapters 1–11 explain God’s plan of salvation while Chapters 12–15 talk about how to live the new life of the gospel. Chapter 16 contains at least seventeen personal comments to people now living in Rome, who were at some time Paul’s co-workers in the gospel.

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Romans 12**

### **1. Let’s read verses 1–2, 3–8, 9–13, and 14–21.**

**Having explained what God has done to save us (Romans, Ch. 1–11), what does Paul now urge us to do (12:1)?**

Paul urges the believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God. This isn’t an option or mere suggestion. Anyone saved by faith in Christ now belongs to Him. As we trust Him to save us, we also embrace His death and resurrection. Jesus said we couldn’t follow Him unless there was a denying of—and dying to—self. Thus, we belong to God and are His to use as He sees fit. This language would remind many Jewish Christians of the temple rituals of sacrificing animals that God had commanded them to follow on a regular basis. Unlike the sacrifices of the Old Covenant where animals were actually physically killed, however, Paul calls the yielding of our lives to God our “...spiritual act of worship.” Some translations use the word *reasonable* instead of *spiritual*, but both terms imply the same thing: this is not worship of God through the taking of a life but worship through willingly giving our lives to God (Bruce, p. 213). By offering ourselves, we communicate to God that He is Lord and we are ready at any moment to obey.

### **2. What does a living sacrifice, as opposed to a dead one, look like?**

Instead of giving up part of one’s livestock or crops, which were killed or harvested before they were brought to the sacrificial altar, Christians are expected to yield every facet of their lives to God. Dunn points out that having to listen to God’s Word and Spirit direct us in everyday relationships and situations is much harder than following specific rules like the Old Testament laws (p. 717). Being dead might seem preferable to some of us when we have to give up doing things our own way or rely on the Spirit rather than our assertive, strong-willed selves!

**\*What is difficult for you to yield to God?**

### **3. What should we do instead of trying to fit in with worldly values (v. 2)?**

Paul says we should live a new life since we have been raised with Christ to a new way of kingdom living. The word he uses for “be transformed” is the same verb used in the accounts of Jesus’ transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–2; Mark 9:2) and also when Paul wrote about Christians “...being transformed...” into the likeness of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3: 18, cited in Bruce, p. 214). Thus, the change that Paul expects to take place in our lives is the purposeful

work of God described in Romans 8:29: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

#### **4. What is key to not conforming to our culture’s ungodly influences?**

Paul says we need to renew our minds, which is our inner being that influences our decisions and actions (Dunn, p. 714). It may seem that Paul is only referring to an intellectual change such as being convinced of the truth of the gospel. But even Old Testament Jews knew that obedience to God’s ways was implied when they were taught God’s laws, and Jesus said, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17, cited in Bruce, p. 212). Dunn states that being yielded to God and being eager to do His will is key to understanding His will. And relying on the transforming Spirit of God who lives in us is necessary to both **comprehend** what God’s will is and to have the power to **carry** out His will (pp. 717–718). In Ephesians 4:23, Paul writes that we were taught “to be made new in the attitude of your minds...” as part of the new life we now have in Christ. To think true thoughts about what Jesus has accomplished for us in the cross and what His Spirit enables us to do now that we are free from slavery to sin (Romans 6:5–14) should enable us to respond as Jesus would to life’s situations and temptations. We no longer have to give in to sin; we can obey God’s will. We can even obey Him by testifying to the goodness of His will, the acceptable and pleasing nature of doing what He wants since it leads to life, whereas following our own desires only led us to death (Romans 6:16).

**\*What do you feed your mind daily? How do you think that impacts your surrender or obedience to God’s will?**

#### **5. How does it help to test and verify God’s will with the Bible and with other believers (v. 2b)?**

Since this letter is addressed to a community of believers, Dunn believes that Paul’s commands were to be followed in a group setting, not something individuals were to practice alone (p. 715). The “testing” and “proving” of God’s will could more easily be seen when Christians study God’s Word together, pray for each other and the direction of the group, and then attempt to serve side by side in the work of God’s kingdom. Certainly Paul lived this pattern out when he engaged in missionary journeys. He usually had a team traveling, praying, and working alongside him as he preached the gospel throughout the lands along the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 13:2–5; 16:1–6; 20:1–6). Don’t forget, Jesus also sent His disciples out two by two (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1).

## **6. How does Paul describe God's will?**

God's will is what He expects from us: loyal trust and loving obedience. The term "good" indicates the virtues most humans recognize—love, kindness, generosity, etc. When Paul uses "pleasing" or "acceptable," he means that which is acceptable to God, not necessarily to us. And the biblical idea of "perfect" includes not just moral perfection but a completeness or fulfillment of something (Dunn, p. 715). In Ephesians 5:10, Paul urges believers to no longer live like those in darkness but as ones now alive and shining with the light/life/truth of Christ: "...and find out what pleases the Lord." If we have surrendered ourselves to God as His living sacrifices, then we should be focused on doing His will, not just each of us individually but as a community of believers, corporately. Of course, that does not imply that fulfilling God's will for the group will violate God's will for the individual, since God does not lie and is always true to Himself.

## **7. Let's look more closely at verses 3–8. How does Paul picture the church, the Christian community (vv. 4–5)?**

Paul describes us as "the body of Christ." He also uses this image in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 1:23; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 15–16; 5:23; and Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15. This word picture emphasizes Christ as the head, who supplies the life and direction to the rest of the members. Paul also stresses that as each of us is joined by faith to Christ in our salvation, we are joined to one another, too. He notes that we don't all have the same function, just as not all body parts have the same jobs in the body (1 Corinthians 12:14–21)

## **8. What does Paul mention first that should characterize our relationships in the body of Christ (v. 3)?**

Paul begins with humility, not thinking too highly of ourselves. We need to recognize that whatever faith, gifting, calling, or ministry we have, every good thing has come from God (James 1:17). We have no room to boast since even the faith we use to believe and receive our Savior is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8b; John 6:44 cited by Bromiley; and John 4:63–65). We also need humility to accept the important role others play in the life of the community, rather than proudly focusing on our function or service. Dunn points out that since the gospel is for both Jews and Gentiles, the Jewish church members must avoid pride in their ancestry. During the Old Covenant, Jews were God's chosen people and had considered Gentiles 'outsiders' with no hope of relationship with God. When Jesus established the New Covenant, He changed all that. (p. 732). Nevertheless, how easy it would be for the Jewish believers to look on Gentile outsiders as second-class Christians! This can happen today as well, though the categories in our church might be along other lines: highly educated vs. less-well educated, rich vs. poor, white vs. any

other ethnic group, native born vs. international, long time members vs. newcomers, etc.

**9. What is key to understanding how the Body of Christ works (vv. 4–7)?**

Since we are all joined to Christ, we are therefore joined to each other. Dunn sees this as the new identity Christians take on. We are no longer defined by ethnicity or other social categories (p. 733). Each one of us has received a certain measure of faith—a gift, not something we have earned. Also, we all have been given a spiritual gift (or giftings) to use in service to Christ and His body. Since these are gifts from God, entrusted to each person as He sees fit, we should avoid feeling proud about our giftings as if they were spiritual merit badges based on our own effort. Paul also talks about mutuality and interdependence among the church members instead of some being overly dependent on others (Dunn, p. 733). So each person, filled and gifted by God's Spirit, is serving and contributing to the overall health and balance of the group.

However, we do not all look alike or function in the community in the same way. So, we live with a tension between what we have in **common** and how we **differ**. Our commonalities include—life in Christ through faith in Him, and the need for God's living Spirit to gift and work through us, while we differ in the variety of gifts and services given by God. Without the spiritual reality of what God has done in Christ and what He has given each of us through His Spirit, we would not be the church. We would probably be just another group of people drawn together by some mutual attraction or need (Bonhoeffer, pp. 31–39).

**\*How are you serving the Body of Christ, both in and outside our small group?**

**10. Let's re-read verses 9–13. What is crucial to how we relate to one another in Christian community (v. 9)?**

Paul begins this section with love as our aim. Paul first says it should be sincere, not fake (Wessel, p. 1725). Nygren believes all the other verses describe what true love looks like (cited in Dunn, p. 739). Certainly Paul writes about love as an active expression of concern for others, not superficial emotion or empty words. The apostle John defined love as God's sacrificial action on our behalf (1 John 1:8–10).

**11. What attitudes and actions does Paul say should characterize Christian love, especially between believers (vv. 9–13)?**

If your group members list off the **verbs/actions**, they will see how Christian love is much more than the world's idea of being attracted to someone. The greatest distinction is that we are able to love like God because we have been saved by His love and have received Jesus' life through the gift of His Spirit. As

we yield ourselves to God as living sacrifices (v. 1), He will fill us with the sacrificial love of His Son (John 10:18). Then, His Spirit will direct us how to love others with His generous and costly love. Dunn points out that instead of sacrificing animals in their worship to God, Jews and pagans alike would be focused on the “...much more demanding work of human relationships in an everyday world” since they now belonged to “...a different kind of community, marked by self-giving...” (p. 717). Jesus told His disciples the night before He died, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35).

Specifically, Paul mentions the following attitudes and actions:

- Having a sincere, non-hypocritical love;
- Hating evil while discerning and holding on to what’s good;
- Showing others the warmth and acceptance of a loving family;
- Leading the way in respecting or honoring others above yourself;
- Bubbling over with the Spirit but channeling that into willing service as directed by Christ, rather than making unbridled emotions the goal;
- Being joyful as we confidently trust God;
- Having patience while suffering;
- Being faithful to keep praying;
- Contributing to those lacking daily necessities or ones with financial needs, and
- Being willing to be hospitable (Dunn, pp. 739–744).

All of these should be translated into actions towards our fellow brothers and sisters. Even if we naturally have a cheery personality or a willingness to be “nice,” we cannot live out sacrificial love on our own. **Christian love depends on our abiding in relationship with God so that His Spirit can cultivate many facets of love in us** (Galatians 5:22–23). Our love should reflect the warmth and acceptance we receive from our loving Heavenly Father. As we express His love to others, we will help create a family atmosphere. This is another way to describe the unconditional love of Christians. We have been made God’s children (Romans 8:14–17) and Christ’s brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:10–11, 17). Therefore, we can offer an alternative family to those who are physically or emotionally distant from their own. At Vineyard Columbus, we specifically try to implement this in our small groups. When a person in a home group moves, other members help with the loading, unloading, and house cleaning, and often contribute meals. When a woman has a new baby, her women’s care group might host a shower, help with chores, and also bring meals. When someone is seriously ill, individuals in the group might not only pray for but also visit and serve that person’s practical needs. If a group member dies or loses an immediate family member, the small group may offer the relatives financial, practical and spiritual support including meals, house or yard work, companionship, and prayers.

**\*Which of these commands in verses 9–13 do you think our group members do well?**

**\*Which of these commands is most challenging to you (vv. 9–13)? Why?**

**12. What should Christian love look like to those outside the Church (vv. 14–16)?**

In these verses, Paul seems to begin speaking about relationships with those outside the church, but some of his exhortations would apply within as well. Perhaps we should take this section as not only applying to how we interact with unbelievers, but also how our relationships with other Christians could demonstrate Christ's love to those not yet joined to Him. Christ's love expressed visibly among Christians is meant to be a powerful witness to the world of His reality, and many of us came to know Christ by being welcomed into such a community of faithful ones.

Paul uses the word “bless” twice to emphasize that we do not retaliate against those who persecute us for following Christ. To “bless” is to ask God to show His favor to someone while to “curse” is to ask Him to withhold or remove His favor (Dunn, p. 744). Dunn also states that Paul's words bring to mind God's promise to Abraham when He called Abram to follow and worship Him: “I will make you into a great nation and I will **bless** you; I will make your name great, and you will be a **blessing**. I will **bless** those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be **blessed** through you” (Genesis 12:2–3, cited in Dunn, p. 744). Therefore, if we are God's people, then we must live as an expression of God's wish to **bless** all nations through His followers. Likewise, Jesus taught us, “...Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **bless** those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28, cited in Dunn, p. 745). He certainly demonstrated this hanging on the cross while being insulted and mocked (Matthew 27: 39–44).

Also, Paul calls the church to **empathize** with others in a whole range of emotions—from rejoicing to weeping. True love that is outward-focused does not get stuck on one's own feelings but enters into the experiences of others based on the unity we have with those in the church. This should be a sign to the outside world that we do not live the Christian life alone but rather as a unified people. Perhaps the apostle also wanted the Roman believers to empathize with fellow citizens and thus build bridges for the gospel of hope.

In verse 16, Paul also urges us to live in **harmony**, which “literally means ‘to think the same thing.’” While this doesn't mean everyone must think alike, Dunn believes the early church would try to make decisions by listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit and operating in consensus as much as possible (p. 746). Imagine the reputation of churches today if they were known not for infighting and separation but for consensus and community!

Paul again reminds us to be **humble** and to put that into practice by being willing to associate with people of low status—or by being “willing to do menial work” (NIV alternate translation). From New Testament passages, we can tell that many in the early church were neither wealthy nor had a high social rank. Jews who embraced Christ were most likely thrown out of their synagogues, separated from their families, and probably lost their jobs (Hughes, p. 284). Priests who followed Christ were now without an occupation and land to live on since the Levites traditionally to depend on the Lord and the temple offerings for their livelihood (Deuteronomy 18:1–5). The first delegation of work in the Jerusalem church was to care for the poor, and Paul saw this poverty in A.D. 37 and again around A.D. 46 when he brought the first donation from Antioch (Hughes, p. 284). James writes to many who were oppressed by the wealthy landowners in first-century Palestine (Moo, p. 92). Moo also suggests that those who had little in the way of worldly riches often found the gospel with its promise of heavenly reward very attractive (p. 92). Paul reminds the believers in Corinth that “not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26). Later he points out that God chose the “lowly” and “despised” things—again implying that most of those belonging to Christ had little in the way of worldly wealth (Fee, pp.80–81).

However, Paul does say “not many” indicating that some in the church were educated and had financial resources. Some scholars point out that the early Church was composed of a **diverse** population— Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3: 28; proposed by Judge and Thiessen, cited in Fee, p. 81). Thus, Christian community calls for unity across a broad spectrum rather than segregation by various races or social backgrounds. And Christian love sees all believing men, women, children and youth as part of the same family (Galatians 3:26–27). Lastly, Paul again reminds the church to **not** have a **conceited** or proud mindset. The Greek indicates that he meant groups of Christians, not individuals, and Dunn thinks Paul is again reminding the Jews not to be proud of their historical status as God’s chosen ones nor the Gentiles to be arrogant in thinking of how God had welcomed them when many Jews rejected their long-awaited Messiah (p. 747).

### 13. What theme runs through verses 17–21?

Paul mentions the idea of **revenge** or avenging wrongs five times. Instead of seeking to right any wrongs committed against us, God has told us, “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’” (Deuteronomy 32:35a). Jesus taught us to offer the other cheek if someone strikes us, to give more than expected when someone sues us for our very clothes, and to walk twice the distance when forced to walk a mile (Matthew 5: 39–41). Because the Lord promises to judge everyone and dispense His justice for those denied it, we can resist the temptation to get even with others. Instead, Paul reminds us to show kindness toward our enemies, to do what’s right in the public’s eyes [so that the Lord’s Name is not dishonored], and to overcome evil acts with good,

rather than returning evil for the evil done to us. Paul is not naïve, and realizes that living at peace with each other requires both parties to agree. So, he advises the Christians to try for peace on their part without compromising the gospel on the one hand and not escaping from the real world on the other (Dunn, p. 748).

Note that scholars do not agree on what the meaning of “heaping burning coals on” someone’s head. Some believe this saying (Proverbs 25:21–22) means our kind acts will bring a sense of shame on a person who has wronged us, and thereby bring them to repentance. Others see it as a kind of subtle revenge. Overall, it seems that this proverb once referred to something good since the emphasis is on God’s wrath and vengeance, not ours, and on our only doing acts of good, not evil (Dunn, pp. 750–751).

**\*When are you most tempted to get even with someone? How can our group help you resist that?**

## **APPLICATION**

**\*Why is being surrendered to God crucial to healthy community? How does each person’s obedience or lack of impact our group, our church (i.e., Christian community)? What would our group look like if we all were more fully yielded to the Lord?**

**\*Why is *trusting* God to transform us into the image of Christ and to live His life through us necessary for Christian community?**

Be sure to emphasize that Jesus is at work in us by His Holy Spirit. God’s goal to conform us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) is God’s work, not our self-effort (Philippians 2:12–13). We began our life in Christ by faith in what Jesus has done on the cross, and we continue to grow in Him (Galatians 3:2–3) by relying on His righteousness—His loving obedience to the Father and perfect conduct in all relationships. We are unable to transform ourselves by self-effort, and we certainly cannot change others on our own! Actually, when we want to “change” others, our motives are often selfish since their imperfections and sins may make life uncomfortable for us. God calls us to love, accept, and pray for one another, not “fix” each other.

**\*What gets in your way of seeing each person in our group or our church as a gift from God with something to contribute?**

**\*What hinders you from participating in the life of our group or our church more fully?**

**\*What challenges you about living out Christian community?**

**\*How can personal needs or wishes disrupt Christian community?**

**\*How could we lovingly bring correction in our group?**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

Christian community is not optional. We aren't called to live as lone ranger Christians. We are joined to Jesus Christ by faith in what He has done for us. We have His Spirit living in us; therefore we are also linked to one another in His Body. Christians loving and serving one another as they obey God are designed to be a powerful witness to the world that Jesus is Lord, that He is alive, and that He can overcome any differences that sin and human nature pose. Our being reconciled to one another because we are reconciled to Him, is meant to be a symbol of hope to broken people in search of love. We want to strengthen our life together and to exemplify the gospel, but this is not just so we have a place to belong. Christ has accepted us, and we in turn, are to pass that acceptance on to others. One of the best ways to communicate acceptance is to practice Christian community on a daily basis. In the next week, let's ask God for opportunities to show how His love is transforming our lives by the relationships we have with each other.

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