

## RANGER'S SAD SONG

Romans 12:9-11

Years ago a couple that owned a Dalmatian dog lived across the street from us. The dog's name was Ranger. He was a really good dog. He was well trained and very obedient. He had a happy temperament. He was big and when he saw you his tail would wag violently. It was nearly lethal if you got whacked by that thing. He was a super friendly dog and we really liked him. But I felt sorry for Ranger at times. There was a period before they moved out that Ranger's owners were gone a lot and they would leave him in the backyard. He'd be by himself back there and he didn't like it. Especially if he was alone in the evening he would begin howling. We would hear these loud, pitiful wails and moans emanating from behind that house. Poor Ranger couldn't bear to be alone and the entire neighborhood knew that for a fact. I wished I could console him sometimes.

Ranger is not the only one who doesn't like being alone. We live in a society that more and more is marked by disconnectedness, isolation and loneliness. Yes, people network by being on Facebook as well as texting and tweeting their thumbs off. Unfortunately all this connecting through electronic means, as nice as it might be, is no substitute for actual companionship and real intimacy. One can post every day on Facebook and still feel distant, disconnected from others and lonely.

I have shared this before but a few years ago I saw something that crystallized in my mind one of the problems of our digital society. One evening while on vacation Laurie and I went out to a restaurant for dinner. It was a little late, past the typical dinner hour, so there were not a lot of people in the restaurant. As we were being seated I noticed that there were only 8 other patrons beside us. There were 4 other couples, each of the pairs seated at their own table. All of them were using their cell phones. We were in a romantic place and these couples were not talking to each other. They were sitting across the table from each other texting someone else and checking Facebook pages. We both thought it was sad, so Laurie and I immediately got out our phones and began texting people about it.

In a recent report on loneliness the president of Barna Research Group, David Kinnaman, wrote, "As a nation, we are embracing the digital revolution, and, ironically, we are becoming a lonelier population...the social media revolution has not made us feel more connected, less lonely or replete with friends." The Barna research revealed that loneliness in our culture has doubled in the last 10 years. *Slate* online magazine reports that 40% of Americans feel lonely.

The problem here is not solely electronic media. It predates the advent of Facebook and Twitter. Those social media merely mask and in some cases exacerbate the problem, but

the problem is embedded in our culture. In her book, *Beyond Loneliness*, Elizabeth Skoglund wrote, “Loneliness is not a disease...it is the natural outcome of materialism, fast pace living, buying of services, and extreme individualism.” We value our individual freedom in this country as one of our greatest treasures. We all want to do our own thing. We want to go our own way, and the result is we find ourselves on our own. In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam, drawing from nearly 500,000 interviews over the past 30 years, shows that Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, social institutions and networks, and even democratic institutions. We know our neighbors less, belong to fewer organizations and even socialize much less with friends and family. He took his title from the fact that more Americans currently go bowling more than ever in our history, but many fewer are part of bowling leagues. Why is this such a big deal? Why make such a thing out of it?

### ***Connection is essential to the human heart***

We’ve seen it before many times as we read God’s word. Go back to the very beginning of the human race as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2. In Genesis 1:4 after God said “let there be light” and light came into being “God saw that the light was good.” In Genesis 1:10 after God created the seas and the dry land “God saw that it was good.” In 1:12 we read “the land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.” In verse 18 after he created the stars, moon and sun in the sky God saw that it was good. In verse 21 after creating birds God saw that was good too. In verse 25 after creating livestock and other animals God saw that was good. In verse 31 after making humans and finishing his creation “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” But in 2:18 look at what God says. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”

That was a profound statement about human nature. God made us to be social creatures. We were created with a built-in capacity and need to be in relationship with others of our kind. Why are we this way? It is because we are created in the image of God and this relational aspect is a reflection of God’s character. In the mysterious way in which God exists, something beyond human comprehension, God is one being with three persons, thus relationship is actually a necessary part of his character. When God created us in his image it follows that relationship would also be a necessary part of our character.

In his book, *Connecting*, Dr. Larry Crabb wrote, “The deepest urge in every human heart is to be in relationship...If you look carefully beneath all the non-physiologically caused problems that therapists label as psychological disorders, you will find disconnected souls, people whose attempts to live life in their own strength have left them isolated, detached, and alone.”

We recently had the opportunity to visit the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. For me it was riveting. I had heard stories from my Dad and my Uncle Merle, both combat veterans who fought against the Nazis, how they hated the German's fearsome "88." That was an artillery piece that the Nazis used to devastating effect. They have one of those 88's there at the museum. I'd never seen one before. They have a Higgins boat, one of the landing craft used in amphibious beach assaults, as well as a B17, a B24, a Corsair and many others. They have all the various rifles and pistols used by the armies of different countries, and much more. The thing that is germane here is not that I found this stuff interesting, but that it wasn't enough for me to just see it. I wanted to share it. I kept saying, "Laurie, look at this." Too her great credit Laurie did not once sarcastically respond, "Wow look at that. Yet another rifle." My point is I had a constant urge to share. The experience isn't complete unless you have someone to see it with and to talk to about it. We had the same thing happen when we went to Café du Monde and had beignets. They would have been good if I had one by myself I suppose. But it was so much better to eat them with Laurie, Carissa and Michael so we could all marvel at them.

An article in the May 2009 *Psychology Today* magazine revealed that surveys consistently reveal that people value connection to family and friends above wealth, fame and even physical health. In other words, when we say, "well at least you've got your health," what we ought to be saying, "well at least you've got your family and friends."

### ***Connection is crucial for our health***

Being disconnected from other people interferes with sleep, degrades the immune system and causes an increase in cortisol levels. Cortisol is a major factor in the increase of belly fat. Being lonely can make me fat? Yes it can! Recent studies by Dutch scientists reported in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychology* indicate that those who disconnected from others are more likely to develop dementia.

Studies have been done on what increases the odds of an early death. Living in an area with bad air pollution increases the odds of an early death by 5%. Being obese increases one's odds by 20%. Excess alcohol use increases odds of an early death by 30%. But loneliness increases the odds of early death by 45%!

### ***Connection is God's plan for his people***

1 Corinthians 12:27 says, "You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Romans 12:4-5 says, "Just as each of us have one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

Collectively we are the body of Christ, not individually. What good is a body part that does not belong to the body? Toby has shared some stories from his experiences in the emergency room at the hospital the past couple of years. One of them involved a man coming in who had managed to cut off a finger in an accident. His friends came in shortly after him with the finger in a cup of ice, obviously in hopes it could be reattached. Why bother? It's still a finger, right? We all know very well a finger disconnected from the body is utterly worthless and it will die. So it is with a follower of Christ cut off from the body!

Ephesians 3:10 says, "His (God's) intent was that now, through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." God wants to demonstrate his divine wisdom, and to our surprise his plan is to use the church. But it is the church collectively that will do that, not a few Lone Ranger Christians out doing their own thing.

God says there are two things that will impact our world and draw them to him more than even the most brilliant and unassailable arguments. One is love. In John 13:34-35 Jesus said the world will know we are his disciples because we love one another. We cannot love people if we are disconnected from them. The second powerful force is unity. In John 17:21 Jesus said that the world will know that he is from God by the fact that his followers are one. We cannot be unified if we are not connected to each other.

Have you ever thought about the strange fact that God has ordained that as part of worshipping him we should sing songs of praise to him as a group? That's a little unusual, especially in our society where we don't sing in groups, other than at the ball game. Do you consider yourself to be a good singer? Not many of us do. I like to sing, but when I sing by myself I don't like what I hear. And I avoid singing out loud when other people are around. However, I love singing as part of the church. It makes a good sound. All of us who range anywhere from somewhat limited as singers down to "what's that horrible sound?" somehow can band together and make something beautiful. Has it ever occurred to you that there might be a method in God's madness? God is showing us something. Together we can do something that honors him, something we could never do on our own. Our singing in worship is an object lesson to show us that we need each other. We need to be connected to each other in the body of Christ.

At this point you may be like the people in the GEICO commercials who after hearing a friend say you can save money on car insurance in just 15 minutes with GEICO say, "Everybody knows that." Well, did you know that Pinocchio was a bad motivational speaker? Everybody knows being disconnected and lonely feels bad. No one wants that. Yet here is the strangest thing: most of us feel that ache. We feel like we should be more

connected to others and we really wish we had better friends. Most of us wish we had better friendships. One of the downsides of life we often face is this sense of wishing we had better, deeper friendships. So the question is, what are we to do about it? Romans 12:9-11 points us in the right direction.

### LOVE SINCERELY

The literal meaning of the first phrase of this verse is to love without hypocrisy. But how can one love hypocritically? There are at least two ways we can be hypocritical in love, and if we were honest every single one of us would admit to doing both of them at some point.

A hypocrite is a person who says one thing and does another. The ancient Greeks took the term from the theater. A hypocrite was an actor, one who plays a role, who puts on a mask to appear to be something he is not. One way we can play a role, to act like we love is to say we love, to tell another person that we love, to tell ourselves that we love that person, when we don't actually do it.

Think about what love actually is. Is it an emotion, a feeling? Is it having positive thoughts about a person? Often that's how we think of it. We might say we love someone when what we really mean is we like that individual. We have a positive view of the person, maybe even enjoy being around them. There is certainly nothing wrong with having positive feelings about a person and enjoying being around them. But let's measure that against the real standard for love. In 1 John 4:8 the apostle John said "God is love." God defines love. He is the ultimate standard of what love is and how it acts. So when God loves us does that mean he has positive feelings about us, that he enjoys being around us? Do you think Jesus was having positive feelings about people when they were putting him on a cross? Do you think he felt all affectionate toward them? Of course he didn't, but he was so committed to act on their behalf, even though it was at enormous cost to himself, in order to do what brought about their good. That's real love. Romans 5:8 says "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus Christ knew what people were like. He knew the darkness of all human hearts. Yet he still acted to bring about our good, to give us the greatest gift we could ever receive. He acted for our good when there was no chance he had positive feelings about us and enjoyed being with us.

Love means not just enjoying a person, not just having a positive attitude about a person. It means being committed to act for that person's good. In 1 John 3:18 John wrote, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but in actions and in truth." You can measure how much you love a person by how much you do for them and how much you

sacrifice on their behalf. If you never do anything for them and never sacrifice anything for them, you don't love them.

If we say we love someone but that person cannot count on us to sacrifice to do good for them, we are loving hypocritically. Jesus would not have loved us if he had said, "Sure, I love you, but about that cross thing. I'm afraid that's asking too much. Can't help you."

Another way to love hypocritically is to love with ulterior motives. In other words, look like you're loving when in fact you are trying to get something for yourself. The classic way to do this, of course, is to use love as a tool of manipulation. One of my favorite television shows is *Castle*. In one episode the main character, Richard Castle, is awakened in the morning by his daughter, Alexis, who is bringing him breakfast in bed. He immediately says to her, "What do you want?" She says, "I don't want anything. Can't a daughter express love for her dad by making him a special meal?" He then begins to tick off all the times she had brought him breakfast in bed and named the ulterior motive for every occasion. Finally she 'fesses up. She wants a scooter.

Her goal wasn't to love her dad, it was to get something from him. We all know that strategy. We need to understand when we do that we are not loving people, we are *using* them to get what we want. Paul says hate the evil, cling to the good. In other words, refuse to give in to those ulterior motives and *choose* to focus on loving in truth without some purpose of getting something.

We cannot always help those thoughts of an ulterior motive from cropping up in our heads. What we must do is refuse that thought and cling to the good motive. Not long ago I saw a need to fill some gaps in our worship team for a time. I concluded that maybe I could help by trying to learn how to play the bass guitar. So I worked on that for about a month before launching off. The day before that first attempt I was very nervous about it because it is not something I'm good at. But into my head popped that thought, "I'll bet people are going to be amazed when they see me playing the bass. They'll be impressed." Great. Nothing quite like making it about yourself and your own little "glory." It was dumb because no one would be impressed and no one would care. I didn't choose that thought. It just showed up. So I had to tell myself, "That's dumb and it doesn't matter. What matters is trying to help the music be honoring to the Lord and encouraging to people." So I chose that. Good thing too because no one was impressed.

This is crucial because there is a subtle thing that we do. It is to say, "I am going to be a good friend to this person and love him or her so that the person will be a friend to me." That's manipulation. That's hypocritical love. It is the not sincere love God has for us. We are to love people, to be the friend, regardless of how they relate to us.

*Loving sincerely is about the **manner** in which we love.*

## BE DEVOTED

Next, Paul tells us to be devoted to one another. In the original language he used two different words that speak of family relationships. In other words, be devoted to one another the way a family is devoted. How is a family devoted to each other? I know that not all families are devoted, but this is Paul using what we should expect of families. I had a set of friends in high school. Out of all of them I have very rare contact with one. I have no idea what happened to the rest of them. I had another set of friends in college. I have contact with exactly zero of them. I had yet another group of friends in my years as a single man after college. Again I have very sparse, intermittent contact with one or two. Then Laurie and I got married and planted a church here. We developed a new crop of friends. We have occasional contact with about 3 couples from those early days, all of whom live far away. So it has gone through the decades. People come and go out of our lives for a wide variety of reasons. During all those years and those waves of friendships, I have had one set of parents, one brother, one wife and two children, and they have been there through all of it. They will be there until the end. They don't go out of my life ever. That's how it is with families. Others may come and go, but family remains.

That is the way Paul is saying we need to approach relationships. Again the standard of love is God. What is his love like? “Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Being devoted means that we keep loving people even when they are not perfect, even when they make mistakes or hurt us, even when they do stupid things or let us down. Nothing is to separate them from our love.

It turns out that this kind of devotion is key to real closeness. Philosopher J. Glenn Gary wrote in his book, *The Warriors* (quoted in Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*, p. 22), “Organization for a common and concrete goal in peacetime organizations does not evoke anything like the degree of comradeship commonly known in war... At its height, this sense of comradeship is an ecstasy... Men are true comrades only when each is ready to give up his life for the other, without reflection and without thought of personal loss.”

In his book, *Band of Brothers*, Stephen Ambrose wrote about some soldiers in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division that experienced some of the most intense fights of World War II. Those guys hated the Army and hated combat even more. He wrote, “Anything was better than the blood and carnage, the grime and filth, the impossible demands made on the body—anything, that is, except letting down their buddies. They found in combat the closest brotherhood they ever knew. They found selflessness. They found they could love

the other guy in their foxhole more than themselves. They found that in war, men who loved life would give their lives for them.”

The closeness we long for is only found in loss of freedom, in sacrifice, in being so devoted to other people that you would without hesitation give up your life for them. It is about recognizing that we are in a war, a spiritual war, and we desperately need each other. So it is about saying, “nothing can ever stop me from loving you.”

*Being devoted is about the extent to which we love.*

## GIVE HONOR

The last phrase of verse 10 struck me as a bit unusual. Honor one another above yourselves. What is the deal with honoring? Are we supposed to have award ceremonies like Hollywood does and give each other little statues? What does honoring have to do with relationship? Recently Laurie and I were walking into a restaurant. I opened the door for her and let her walk in first. It hit me that what I did there was a trivial example of what Paul is talking about here. I honor Laurie when I open a door for her and let her go first. That small act says I am here to serve you and to honor you as important, to treat you as special. And that is what Paul is talking about here. It means through our actions telling others that they are special, that we are here to serve them and honor their great dignity and importance. Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourself.” That’s a parallel to what Paul says here. Make serving them the priority. Make that the thing that matters, not how they respond or what you get out of it. Honor them by serving them and saying, “You matter to God and to me.”

Laurie and I have had the conversation multiple times in which we reminded ourselves, “God has put us here to care about people, not to get something back from them.” Or job is to open the doors for them, to honor them and serve them. That can be a hard thing. Laurie and I were walking down a street in the French Quarter in New Orleans when we had a curious encounter. A homeless person said to me, “Sir, can you give me 37 cents?” His request caught my attention because why would you ask for 37 cents? Why such a specific small number? Perhaps that was part of his plan. It was so unusual it caught my notice. I had some change in my pocket so I figured I could give him whatever I had. I didn’t know how much I had but I thought it was more than he was asking. I reached in my pocket and pulled out the change. It wasn’t as much as I thought. It was a quarter, a dime and 2 pennies – 37 cents! How weird. I handed it to him, thinking what in the world does this mean? What a bizarre incident. Was this guy somehow tied into the occult and knew what was in my pocket? Or was this some sort of divine appointment? It was apparent that it likely wasn’t a divine appointment because he wasn’t pulling with both



oars at that moment, if you know what I mean. He thanked me then began commenting on the loveliness of my wife. He said if he was with her he'd be holding her hand and so I should hold her hand. We started walking away but he followed us and kept talking about how I should hold that woman's hand. I just wanted to get away from him. I did hold Laurie's hand, but he kept following us. He finally gave up, to our relief.

I thought, "What was that about?" I don't know what the cosmic meaning of the 37 cents incident was, but it did illustrate something for me. I wasn't trying to honor that man. I just wanted him to go away. I had things I wanted to do and he wasn't on the agenda, so I just did what I thought would get rid of him quickest. It occurred to me that we do something similar a lot. We do whatever we have to in order to appease people and keep them relatively happy rather than honoring them above ourselves. When we do so we are not creating real brotherhood. We are not building the body. We need to prefer one another in honor.

*Giving honor is about the **priority** of loving.*

Please think about what a priority should mean. It means this thing is more important than other things, so I do it first. I do not sacrifice it when something else gets in the way. I say no to other things so I can do this thing. If honoring, serving people out of love, is really our priority, we will say no to other things so that we can do this thing.

### SERVE THE LORD

Loving and serving people can be hard. It would be easy to think if that's what it takes to create real deep relationships maybe I'm better off just enjoying my freedom and doing my own thing. But that is both disobeying God, which is the most important thing, and it is a dead end street. It will always prove to be empty and lonely. But how are we supposed to love people the way these verses tell us? Especially how do we do that when to be frank, people are letting us down and doing it a lot? Here's the key thought: if you try to make loving people a transaction, not only are you not loving them, but you *will* be disappointed. You will not get the return you hope for. You will think that you've tried harder than others and they are not being the friends you long for. That's human nature. That's life in this world, I guarantee it.

The key is in verse 11. It is in our loving to serve the Lord. We must think that our goal in loving others is not to create some image of ourselves, not to convince them to give something to us, not to be our friend or to love us. It is simply to serve the God who loves us. We must remember that God loves us so powerfully and so well, God has given so much to us that we desire to express our love back to him and to thank him. And we do that by loving others as Paul commands us here.

It is when we keep our eyes *on God* that we can do this, and we can keep on doing it as long as we draw breath. The instant we start thinking we are serving people or we start serving ourselves, the wheels will come off. But as long as we remind ourselves that we are serving God we can keep going with enthusiasm.

When my daughter was in high school she was in the high school musical all four years. So she was part of the cast of *The Princess and The Pea*, *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Bye, Bye Birdie*. I went to all of them multiple times. I didn't do this because I am such an ardent fan of the musical theater, especially at the high school level. To be frank, if invited to attend a high school musical I would eagerly look for some excuse for not accepting the invitation. The acting and singing in such productions is at best, not very good. No, I'm not a huge fan of the musical theater, but I am a big fan of my daughter. I attended those things and even worked to help put them on because I love her. Because of my love for her I did it willingly and enthusiastically. That's what serving the Lord does for us. If we try to love people as this passage describes because they are worthy of it we will end up disappointed and resentful. We love them because it is how we express our love to God who has loved us and given himself for us. As long as we keep our eyes on him, on expressing love to him, we can keep loving people with great enthusiasm as long as we live.

*Serving the Lord is about our **motive** for loving.*

Follow the example of Christ. He loved and gave even when we were rejecting him. There is a message there. Jesus didn't make a deal with us. He didn't say "I will sacrifice and die for you but I expect the following in return." He just sacrificed, died and gave to us to bring us life. He did not calculate whether he got an acceptable return for his efforts. If we are to truly connect with other people we must love as he loved, which means to accept that we do not calculate whether we receive an acceptable return from others. I assure you that by your calculation in most relationships you will not get an equal return. Here's the secret principle of life. Jesus said it is better to give than to receive. In other words, you don't find life in getting back from others, as nice as that may be. Life is found in the giving. It is in loving and serving of people without expectation of return. As soon as you start thinking about whether you're getting an acceptable return from them you have stopped loving and headed down the road to death.