

**Series: Gospel-Centered Paradigm**  
**#4: The Gospel and Authentic Community**  
**Romans 12:9-21**  
**July 13, 2008**  
**New City Church of Los Angeles**  
**By Kevin Haah**

**I. Introduction to the Series**

We're in the middle of a series called "Gospel-Centered Paradigm." We have said that if you try to add Jesus into your existing paradigm, you are going to be very frustrated.

Most people's existing paradigms fit into one of two views:

1. The relativistic self-discovery paradigm: I want to do what I want to do. It's a rebellion based paradigm. It's the paradigm of the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal son.
2. Or the moralistic performance based paradigm: You are how good you are, how smart you are, how pretty you are, how skinny you are, etc. It's a performance based paradigm. It's the elder brother in the parable.

The basic foundation of our church is that we believe that neither is the biblical way. The third way is the gospel way which says that (1) we have all been running away from God, whether through rebellion or performance (we acknowledge the truth), yet (2) God radically loves us unconditionally (we acknowledge grace). The third way is both truth (the absolute reality of our sin) and grace (the absolute reality of God's mercy and love).

The conservative churches usually just preach against the first paradigm. Younger brother, come home. Stop sinning.

The liberal churches usually preach against the second paradigm—we should accept people for who they are stop preaching absolute morality to them.

We are neither conservative nor liberal because we believe that the gospel does not fit into those paradigms. We believe that both younger brother and the elder brother were lost, one by rebellion but the other by his moral performance. Both the younger brother's badness and the elder brother's goodness were ways to run away from the father. The truth is that we have been running away from God and trying to save

ourselves. But, the other side of the truth is his grace. That God loves us unconditionally even when we were running away from him.

## **II. Today, we're going to talk about how the gospel impacts our community.**

Let's go to Romans 12:1-21.

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Among other things (there's a lot of stuff here), this passage tells us three things: (1) the importance of community; (2) the character of Christian community; and (3) the power for such community.

## **III. First, the importance of community.**

Paul's been explaining what Jesus has done for us. The first 11 chapters of Romans is the best exposition of the gospel in the Bible. And then, he says: Therefore (what therefore?), in view of God's mercy (compelled by the gospel), to offer your bodies as living sacrifices. He commands us not to conform, but be transformed. In other words, he says we need grow as a Christian (compelled by the gospel). We need to change as a Christian (compelled by the gospel). We need to become a fully devoted disciple (compelled by the gospel).

I mentioned last week that the way we grow is not by fear or pride driven by our will power, but by the heart transformation that comes from the gospel. That's exactly what Paul is saying here.

In this passage, however, he gives us a little more insight on how we grow. It is compelled by the gospel but in a context of community. We grow in community.

We need to note that all of the "yous" here in chapter 12 are plural you—"y'all." Even when there is no "you" in English, there is in Greek. All of the sentences are in plural second person form. The assumed context of Christian growth is community.

So, first, Paul talks about growing the area of service. Look at verses 4-8. But the way he says we serve is interesting. He says we are one body and each of us is a member of one body. We were meant to live in community with one another because our mission is a collective mission. We don't do this by ourselves. This church plant is not something that Kevin does by himself. It is the mission of us as a body. I have a

function and you each have a function. That's why the development of a team that's going to launch the church is so important.

Then, in verses 9ff, he says to grow in love for one another. Why is Paul talking about love and how we should treat others? He is saying we are one body, we are one community, and we grow by loving one another. He is saying transformation happens in the context of loving community. We don't become a Christian and go off by ourselves to grow. We come to a relationship with other Christians and we grow in context of community.

Let me give you an example. How did Jesus do it?

When Jesus called his disciples, he said, come and follow me. Then, he created a small group of 12 disciples and helped them to grow. He had them enter into a relational environment for discipleship. He guided them. He coached them. He led them. He got them to serve. He got them to go on mission trips. He got them to preach the gospel and heal the sick. Then, when he said right before he ascended into heaven: "Go and make disciples." I think when he called us to make disciples, he is calling us make disciples like he made disciples. He did it through small groups.

Let me take some time right now to tell you New City's discipleship process. Our goal is to extend the Kingdom of God, which means we are going to make disciples who makes disciples, in other words, extenders. Our vision statement gives us the process:

CONNECT>>GROW>>SERVE>>EXTEND

This is our process of making disciples.

The first step is to CONNECT to God: We want you to come to understand the gospel, received Jesus as your savior, and begin a relationship with God.

- The disciples accepted the invitation of Jesus to come and follow him.

The second step is GROW together. This is when you are learning about the gospel, the depth of the gospel, when you are learning to pray, read the bible, worship, learning to be led by the spirit. But, most of these things are done in small groups. That's what Jesus did. Then, when the disciples did it, they did the same things. They

put people into small groups. People met at their homes and broke bread, did bible study, prayed together, shared, and did life together. That's how they grew in their faith.

The third step is to SERVE the city. They become a part of the body's function to serve the city. Together, they served. That's what the disciples did. Jesus sent the 12 out to preach the gospel and heal the sick. Then, he sent 72 out to do the same. Jesus always got people to serve as a process of making them disciples.

Then, the fourth step is to EXTEND the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, now go make disciples of all nations. He is calling them to multiply disciples. The way the Kingdom of God will extend is by making extenders—disciplemakers.

For some of us, we become a Christian and then we just come to church to listen to a sermon but there is no connection with community. If there is no connection to community, there is rarely any growth because we GROW together. Think about it. When did you feel like you grew the most in your Christian life? Wasn't it when you were deeply connected to community?

We are called to become disciple-makers—extender. It is so important for us to engage in a relational environment for discipleship.

That's what our Community Groups are. We are kicking off our Community Groups this week. It is a relational environment for discipleship. It's going to be a place where you make friends, where you love and receive love, where you do life together. But, it is not a community for just community sake. According to this passage here, the community has a purpose: it was to be the body of Christ and to be the context for transformation, a relational environment for discipleship, where you grow, serve, and extend.

When I was the pastor of Love LA, I struggled with what we were doing. It's a great ministry, don't get me wrong. It's a parking lot church in the parking lot of Union Rescue Mission. They meet on Sunday afternoons and attract a couple of hundred people every Sunday. The Holy Spirit works mightily there. But, I just didn't get the feeling that people were changing. I didn't see long term transformation. I saw people get excited about God. But, we didn't have a community. There was no process for growth. I believe that transformation happens in the context of community, but there was no

community to help them grow and experience true change. Sometimes I felt like what we were doing was counter-productive. Maybe we are giving people what looks like church but really not a church. At the same time, God placed in my heart a burden to reach the new residents of downtown. So, one day in a Love LA volunteer meeting after we discussed the problem of lack of transforming community, I said, “what if we planted a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church in downtown LA.” That was the first time I expressed the vision.

God gave us the vision to plant this church not just so that we can create a great environment for Sunday gathering. He called us to make disciples by creating relational environment for discipleship. That’s why our Community Groups are so important. We don’t want people to just connect at our Sunday worship service; we want people to take the next step in the discipleship process by joining a Community Group.

Let me also point out a distinctiveness of our Community Groups. What do we do in our Community Groups? We worship together, do a discussion Bible study, and we share what’s going on with our lives and pray for one another. That’s what we are doing but, it is also a place where relationship is developed so that a person who is a little further in the process can help you along the journey. It is a place where is find relational discipleship.

Let me ask you something? How many of you have gone through a twelve step program? How many of you got to the step where you found a sponsor, someone who keeps you accountable, someone you can call if you feel like relapsing? How important was the sponsor? Do you think you would have been successful without the sponsor, or for some of you, you entered a program, and you got something equivalent to a sponsor. Do you think you could have done it without a sponsor? You know the Twelve Step program was created by a Christian. He knew the importance of community, accountability, and personal discipleship. Our Community Groups will create those relationships that will lead you to find someone to walk along side of you and help you grow. That’s what Jesus did with his disciples in small group, and that’s what we are going to do.

This is something that is at the foundation of our church. If you told me we couldn’t have small groups, I would fold our church today. If we just focus on our

Sunday worship for our growth, we just become bunch of babies who don't know how to feed themselves and ultimately, as we grow in number, there will be no authenticity left because people would not know each other. There will be no love left, but people would not know.

So, I want to challenge everyone of you to take the step of participating in the Community Group so that you can place yourself in a place where you can grow.

#### **IV. Second, the character of Christian community**

I want to hit this from two angles: I want to look at the character of community in the way it relates to one another; and (2) the way it relates to people outside.

(1) In terms of how we are called to relate to each other, it starts out by saying: *Agape Anahypocritos*. Love must be sincere. Christian community is characterized by agape love which is not hypocritical. Agape means self-sacrificial love and *anahypocritos* means not wearing a mask. Hypocrites were Greek actors who wore a mask. It means Christian community is authentic and transparent. It is a place where we can be as we are, without pretending.

I love the fact that you all share very honestly about yourselves, without pretending. I love the fact that we have developed a culture of authenticity at New City. And it is my prayer that we will take this culture into our Community Groups. Dwight, you shared about how after your son was killed, you stopped caring about life and became homeless. Then, you shared about how God saved you. Someone shared about his addictions after his parents were killed by drunk drivers. Someone shared about her experience of getting sexually abused as a child.

It's not just the past. Some of you have shared your current struggles—Someone shared his struggles in his marriage. Someone shared her struggles with being a lesbian. Some of you shared how you are realizing that your heart is darker and more evil than you thought.

I think we are able to face our demons and become authentic because we find ourselves in the common journey of brokenness. We find that everyone is normal until you get to know them. We find that all of us are messed up. The more we grow, the more we find out how dark our heart is. (I've been preaching for a last couple of weeks

that even our goodness is motivated by our selfishness, our darkness). When we get the gospel—that we are all sinners, even after we become a Christian, and yet, God loves us unconditionally no matter what. We live in the confidence of God’s love. He becomes our anchor and we are freed to admit our sins; stop our denials. (The reason that most addicts can’t admit to their addiction is because they can’t face the reality of who they are if they admitted that they are an addict. Their world view is that of the elder son, and they can’t admit that they are a younger son. But, if they understood the gospel, they can put their anchor in Jesus, his unconditional love, and this gives us the power to stop denying, stop acting). In the same way, it is only when we place our self-value to what God says we are—that we are unconditionally loved as a son or daughter—that we can become authentic. Without this theological context, our authenticity is destructive. People will start feeling like they are vulnerable. Why did I say that? And ultimately, people will go back to judging and pretending.

Let’s go on to verse 10, it says: be devoted to one another in brotherly love. What do you think the Greek word for brotherly love is? *Philadelphia*. The Greek transliteration is: in brotherly love, to one another, be lovingly affectionate. The word to be lovingly affectionate is *phila-storge*. In C.S. Lewis’ book *Four Loves*, he talks about four words for love in the Bible: *agape, philos, eros, and storge*. The word “*storge*” means family love. It describes the love of a mother to a child or a child to a mother. It is family affection, love.

C.S. Lewis notes that *storge* is particularly powerful because it does not discriminate. They just found themselves in the same household. It’s the only kind of love that does not discriminate. If they weren’t in the same family, they wouldn’t have anything to do with each other. There is something wonderful about growing fond of someone simply because they happen to be there. You did not choose to be with this person. But, you are saying things like, “he not like me at all but he’s wonderful in his own way.” You’ve crossed your comfort zone. *Storge* is a deep sense of connection with people who are not like you. Someone said dogs and cats should be brought up together because it will broaden their minds.

That’s what’s going on at our church. We’ve very intentionally decided to mix everyone up. I know we’ve got people here going through recovery and there is a

recovery ministry culture. We can peg people into recovery and support groups, but we've intentionally decided that everyone should mix and experience *storge* love—the kind of love that broadens your world, the kind of love that the gospel meant to liberate us into.

When I started to minister in Skid Row, I really didn't feel like I can connect. People were so different from me. I thank God that I grew up in the barrio when I was young; I didn't feel intimidated. But, I don't come from a substance abuse background. I have never been homeless. I went to church with mostly second generation Korean-Americans. But, God called me out to minister here. I had a strong desire to do so. There was some awkwardness in the beginning. I didn't know how to respond to certain things. But, over time, God developed *storge* love. I met Johnny, who had such a powerful gift of encouragement and unending zeal for God. I met OG who engaged in community development and had such love for each person on the street. I met Dwight, who is full of wisdom. I met Michael, who overcame tremendous tragedy to become a faithful servant of our Lord. I met Eugene, recovering from heroine addiction but full of spirit and love, willing to roll up his sleeves and clean toilets for Jesus. I started to learn from them. They were so honest about themselves. Their modeling of Jesus humbled me. I love you brothers! You see, I would not have met them if I stayed in my 42<sup>nd</sup> floor office in US Bank Tower. I met them because I followed God's call to *storge* love. So, if you feel like you want to be in a small group with people like yourselves, get over it. Learn *storge* love! It's beautiful!

I love the story of Matthew Henry's parents. Matthew Henry wrote one of the greatest commentaries on the Bible in the 19th century. His father Philip Henry was from a poor family and his mother was from a rich family. Her parents were opposed to the marriage, saying, "we don't know where he is from!" She responded and said: "I don't know where he is from, but I know where he is going."

You see, a Christian community is a multi-socioeconomic and free of snobbery.

And family is also emotionally together. You weep with those who weep and you rejoice with those who are rejoicing. You are not emotionally detached from one another. I know if you open your heart to love, your heart can break. It can be an

unrequited love. But if you lock your heart, you will not be broken, but your heart will be dark. You must be willing to be heart-broken.

This is the nature of *storge* love. This is the way we treat one another in the community.

(2) The thing that really makes us a radical community is not the way we treat each other, but the way we treat others outside of the community.

There are a lot of communities and religions that talk about each other as brothers and sisters. Think about gangs. Think about an Al-Qaeda terrorist cell group. They treat each other like brothers and sisters.

How are we as Christians compelled by the gospel different? We are different in the way we treat people we disagree with.

The reality of the world is that people are very different. The world is very pluralistic, particularly here in Los Angeles.

One view, the view of the younger brother self-discovery types, is to say, let's get rid of exclusive truth. But, this is completely naïve. Don't tell anyone you have the truth and that you have to believe in the gospel in order to be saved. If you do that, what are you saying? You are saying that you have the truth and that truth is that there is no exclusive truth. The reality is that everyone has a truth claim.

So, the way we treat people outside of the community couldn't be to just not proclaim the truth. Then, what is it?

It is how you treat people who are different from you. How do your beliefs lead you to treat people who disagree? The Bible here talks about blessing those who persecute us and serving our enemies (not just someone who disagree but someone who's out to get you). If God wants you to love someone who is out to get you, how are you supposed to treat someone you disagree with? Bless them. It's a heart thing. To bless them means to wish them well. You want to get to the position that you are seeking their flourishing. (We exclude enemies from ranks of human beings and we exclude ourselves from the ranks of sinners). We've got to realign ourselves to the gospel: that we are much darker than we think we are. Second, serve them; it's the outer thing. We usually say: "I'm gona get you sucker" or "forget it—I don't want to deal with it." The Bible

calls us to love them through action, by serving them and blessing them and seeking to fulfill their needs.

So, what makes a Christian community is not only family love, but how we treat people on the outside.

**V. Third, where do we get the power to create such community?**

It all starts from, “therefore.” Remember, all of these actions must arise out of the gospel.

Why do we take the time to hang out with people who are not like us? Because Jesus, who is not like us at all, hung out with us.

Why do we bless, love, and serve not only one another but also those outside the community? Because Jesus blessed, loved, and served us, even though we were far away from his community.

Our core paradigm is God’s son on the cross who died for his enemies because he loves them. Our core paradigm is gospel-centric. If we focus on what Jesus Christ has done for us, how can we doubt our need for community, discipleship, and love.

Christian community is a place where natural enemies come together because of their common brokenness and redemption in Christ.