

Admonish One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 26, 2021-AM Service
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Colossians 3:12-17, Romans 15:14-16

Today we continue our 'one another' series. This whole fall we are re-learning the basics of community. The New Testament is full of one another statements. In each of these statements, the Holy Spirit teaches us how to live in community. Together they form a curriculum for community, a curriculum that we will study all fall as we re-learn the habits of living together as people of Jesus. Today's one another is a little different. Today we will read two passages where we are called to admonish one another.

Admonish is not a word we use in any other context except church. It's a Bible word. You hear it when someone reads the Bible, but out there in the world no one uses it. No one says, "My mother admonished me for failing to make my bed yesterday." It's just not a word we use much. But modern Bible translators still use it. It appears three times in our pew Bible, six times in the English Standard Version, It's something the Holy Spirit calls us to do.

Even though we don't use it much, we have a sense of what the word means. To admonish someone is to warn them. To correct them. To confront them. And that sense we have of the word is more or less in line with the original meaning in the Greek. The Greek word here is *noutheteo*. In the Greek, to admonish someone is to take someone aside and lay something on their heart. When you *noutheteo* someone you are calling for a course correction, for an attitude change.

As I say that, maybe you wonder the same thing I wondered this week as I approached this sermon. "Admonish one another. Do we really need more confrontation in these fractured times? Will this create community health?" I hesitate to use too many sitcom references in a sermon, but as I thought about admonishing one another, I kept thinking of the *Seinfeld*. Specifically, I thought of the episode about Festivus. Fed up with Christmas, George Castanza's dad comes up with his own holiday celebration. He calls it Festivus. The Castanza Festivus celebration include two communal practices. Feats of strength and the airing of the grievances. After dinner they take turns complaining about each other. "You! I've got a lot of problems with this guy!" Needless to say it doesn't go well.

Admonish one another?! Really?! Should we go to the multi-purpose room for coffee and start looking around for someone to rebuke? That doesn't seem like a good idea. Haven't we had enough conflict? And besides, how does this fit with some of the other Biblical material? Didn't Jesus say, "Do not judge or you too will be judged"? In Galatians 5:15, didn't Paul warn us to be careful lest we bite and devour each other? Aren't we supposed to live at peace with one another? How does admonishing one another fit in to all that?

Whether we are comfortable with it or not, there's no escaping the fact that the Bible calls us to admonish one another. I read two texts that specifically use the word, but there are other texts which call us to the same sort of thing. Hebrews 10:23-24, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess... And let us consider how we may spur one another to good deeds" "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault," says Jesus. Galatians 6:1 – "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."

We aren't drawn to these texts because this sort of mutual accountability runs contrary to the ethos of modern western society. We don't want anyone telling us what to do. We like to be lord of our own manor. But when you follow Jesus you don't get to be lord of your own manor. When you become a disciple of Jesus you give up the lordship of your life. Jesus is your Lord and you follow him down his paths. And you become part of this community that helps each other down the road of discipleship. Sometimes we help each other by encouraging one another. "*Come on! We can do this. Don't give up! You've got this!*" Sometimes we help each other by challenging each other. "*No that's the wrong path! Don't go that way! Turn around. Repent.*" So, we are called to admonish one another.

If we are going to do that well, if we are going to do that in a way that actually builds community instead of tearing it down, we need to see two things. First, we have to put the call to admonish one another in its proper Biblical context. Let's look at each passage. In Colossians, Paul calls us to teach and admonish one another, but this command comes right after an extended section which calls us to deep community. Before he calls us to admonish anyone, Paul calls us to clothe ourselves with a whole wardrobe of virtues designed to

keep us from tearing each other apart. “Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, gentleness, and patience.” Those are all virtues that help us live with each other’s brokenness. “Bear with each other, and if anyone has a grievance against someone, forgive just as the Lord forgave you.” Not, if anyone has a grievance, air it; if anyone has a grievance, forgive it. “And over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.” And then as if that lead up wasn’t enough, in verse 15 Paul says, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” Peace, patience, forgiveness, forbearance, love, unity in Christ, forgiveness in Christ. All these are in place before Paul gets to ‘admonish one another.’ In Colossians all those habits of sacrifice and communal love come before the call to admonish.

That’s Colossians, what about Romans? In Romans 15:14 Paul tells the Roman church that they are competent to admonish one another. What’s the context for that word? What comes before? From the beginning of chapter 12 to this point Paul has been establishing the same thing in Romans as he did in Colossians: A community of forgiving and forbearing love, built in the love of Jesus. Romans 12:5—we are all members of the same body and we all belong to each other.” We belong to each other. Hard to think of a stronger statement of communion than that. 14:10 “Don’t be too judgmental of your brother or sister. Don’t treat them with contempt.” 14:19 “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.” 15:7 “Accept one another, Just as Christ accepted you.”

Before there is one word about admonition, there are three chapters about making sacrifices for each other and not being too judgmental. And those three chapters are built on eleven chapters which are all about how we have been saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So in both passages, Paul sees the work of admonishing one another as built on a foundation of love. Admonition, correction, challenge is built on a foundation of love. We can be even more precise. There are two layers of love under admonition. You can’t really admonish others until those layers are in place. At the bottom is God’s love for us in Jesus. At the bottom is the knowledge that we are sinners saved by the amazing grace of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. Our confrontation will always come from a place of humility. We don’t confront each other as heroes of righteousness. We’re sinners saved by grace. That’s the bottom—the firm foundation. On top of that layer we build a deep love for each other. Colossians has a pretty clear picture of the layering. “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” That’s the bottom level. The grace of God. “Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and faithfulness, bear with each other and over all these things put on love which binds them in perfect unity.” That’s the second layer. Love for one another worked out in all these virtues of sacrificial community. Once you have a deep sense of how you’re a sinner saved by grace, and then established deep love and trust for each other, then you are in a position to challenge and admonish each other. You can’t admonish people you don’t love.

Actually you *can* admonish them, but it won’t work. Early in my ministry I read a book about pastoring by Richard John Neuhaus. In that book he quoted Martin Luther King. King said, “Those whom you would change you must first love, and they must know that you love them.” Some of the best ministry advice I ever read. You can’t change people, challenge people, admonish people if you don’t have the foundation of love. This is why arguing with people in the comment section of a Facebook post or an online article is a complete waste of time. If there is no relationship, your attempt to correct that person or influence that person is a complete waste of time. It will only create more anger and bad feelings. Admonition without love is just a noisy gong or a clashing cymbal. Without love, admonishing people just starts fights and creates bad feelings. Those whom you would change you must first love.

There’s a lot of talk these days, lamenting the fact that church discipline is not what it used to be. “We used to be willing to call a sin a sin! When someone in the community was going off track we used to be more ready to say ‘that’s wrong!’ Now we just let everyone do whatever they want and we don’t say anything.” Most of the time people attribute this to a lack of moral courage, or a lack of moral clarity. “We don’t have the guts to say what needs to be said.” That’s partly true. We could certainly use more moral courage and moral clarity. But I wonder if the reason for the weakness of our admonition and discipline is actually foundational. I wonder if it’s the weakness of our love for each other that keeps discipline from being effective. We haven’t done the work of building deep, intimate community. We just don’t know each other that well.

The second thing we should understand is that when we admonish each other, we should reverse the proverb we use for gift giving. When giving gifts we say, “it is better to give than to receive.” But when it comes to admonishing one another, we should probably say, “it is better to receive than to give.”

When we read the call to admonish one another, we immediately imagine ourselves in the role of the person doing the admonishing. Paul say admonish one another and we think, “Oh yeah! I’m ready! I can think of a few people I’d like to admonish right now!” But maybe we should be thinking the opposite. Maybe we should be thinking, “Who can I trust to tell me some honest hard truths about myself?”

In my Library I have a book published by InterVarsity Press called *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. It’s written by Adele Calhoun and it contains a whole collection of Christian spiritual practices. Things like prayer and Sabbath and silence and fasting and giving. One of the practices is mutual accountability. According to Calhoun, that’s a practice where two or three Christian friends agree to meet together to hold each other accountable. They effectively ask their friends to gently admonish them. “How am I doing? Are there places in my life where I am straying from the path or causing others pain? Do I have moral blindspots?” It’s basically admonition. It’s done out of a context of deep love and trust for each other, and on that deeper sense that they are sinners save by grace, but basically they are asking their friends to admonish them. That practice reminds me of Proverbs 27:6—“an enemy multiplies kisses. But faithful are the wounds of a friend.” So often, even with people we love deeply, we tell another person their faults in a heated context, in the middle of an argument. How much better if we could be admonished in a context of love and trust and calm, a context where we open our hearts to hear hard truths. This would be really hard of course. But it would form deep community. Such honesty, such openness would create something really strong.

At the beginning of the Methodist Movement in England, one of the things that really gave the movement its strength were covenant groups. Methodist church members joined covenant groups. These small groups were intentional and close and they included admonition. Here are some of the questions that Wesley himself wanted new members to be asked as they entered into community: “Does any sin, inward or outward, have dominion over you? Do you desire to be told of your faults? Do you desire to be told all your faults, and that plain and clear? Do you desire that in doing this we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?” Without the foundation of love and relationship and intimacy those questions would be a horror. They’d be an inquisition. But with a small group of people who are united in love and who are willing to listen to each other, this sort of admonition can be something the Spirit uses to create community that is rich and strong and full of Jesus.

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