

2022: Building Bridges of Grace

Romans 12:9-13

Mark Vroegop

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality (Rom. 12:9-13).

I smiled this week when I saw a weather report for Western Michigan. The cities of Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and Holland are familiar to our family. They're where we grew up and where our first church ministry was located, from 1996-2008.

The forecast was calling for up to twenty inches of snow.

The reason I smiled is because I love visiting Michigan, May through November. But this is the season of the year when I'm grateful to be in Indiana. In fact, I played golf on New Years Day with my brothers-in-law!

I'm not a winter guy—except for one thing: fires! There are few things that I love more than a cold day and a warm fire in the fireplace. I wonder: how many of you would agree with that?

Consider what it is about a fire that you love.

Maybe it's the heat. Maybe it's the flickering light. Maybe it's the sound of crackling wood or the smell. I love all those things, and that's part of the reason why I don't like camping in any place that doesn't allow campfires. For me, a fire is essential.

Now, I don't cook on a fire (unless it's a s'more). And I don't need a fire to survive. So, why do I love a fire?

I love the environment that a fire creates. When you put together the heat, flickering light, crackling wood, and the smell; there are an ambiance and a feel that a fire creates. A fire creates a warm environment. It seems to bring my family together. We have lots of laughs and great conversations.

A fire creates a culture. Do you know what I mean by culture? You could think of it as the combination of beliefs, values, and behaviors of any group of people. It's the environment of your home, school, athletic team, Small Group, workplace, neighborhood, and church. Culture is more about who you are and what you are like than anything else.

Culture is hard to define, but it's really important. Maybe you've heard the famous quote by Peter Drucker that "culture eats strategy for breakfast." What does that mean? It means that the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a group of people are usually more powerful than what they plan to do.

That's true of a family, your workplace, your school, and also your church.

Gospel Culture & Grace Bridges

Next week, we'll start back into our series on Isaiah. We'll be in chapter 44, and our series will continue through June of this year. But today I want us to review some important elements related to our church culture as we move into this next year. There's much to celebrate, there will be challenges, and there are some great opportunities. A few examples:

- Our Christmas Offering for the seminary in Ukraine is at 1.2 million. This includes a special offering from our Special Needs Class and our Youth Ministry totaling nearly \$2,500.
- December was an excellent month for giving to the mission of our church. We ended the year 5 percent ahead of budget and 15 percent ahead for the month of December.
- Every week, I meet people who came to our Christmas concert and people who worshipped with us during Christmas Eve.
- I continue to hear from people who were helped by the Advent series on waiting.
- In terms of challenges, we've had to re-engage our COVID team to make a few adjustments for our staff so that we can protect our ability to continue to offer vibrant Sunday Mornings. We're going to do our very best to find creative ways to disciple our people during this season.
- Like you, our staff is deeply committed, but we're also easily discouraged by how hard and complicated things are.

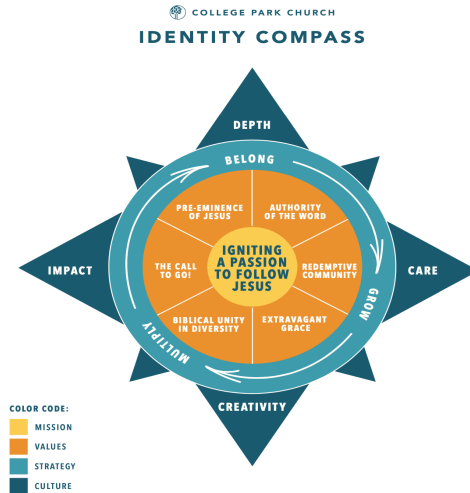
I'm thinking about this a lot right now because planning for anything is hard. And I'm weary of making plans only to have things not work out or having to make massive changes. It's exhausting. And I know that I'm not alone in feeling this way. When this happens, I find myself needing to return to some basics.

Identity and culture relate to who we are and why we do things in a particular way.

In a moment we are going to get into Romans 12:9-13, but first, let me just remind you how we think about our identity at College Park.

This is important for two reasons. First, because every gospel-preaching church has the same mission from Matthew 28—we are all called to go into all the world and make disciples. That's not negotiable. But *how* we do that is unique to each church. But the second reason is because, in a constantly changing world, our gospel identity is what keeps us grounded and even united.

A few years ago, we developed something we call our identity compass. It's a simple and clear way to link our mission, values, strategy, and culture together. It's a way to describe who we are.



As we think about culture, there are four words that describe the “feel” of our church. You might think of this as the smell of smoke when you are sitting around a campfire. The combination of these words is what makes our church unique:

- Depth – a commitment to historical and theological truth, anchored in the Bible
- Care – people matter to us and God; make a big church feel small
- Creativity – find fresh and new ways to reach people and help them grow
- Impact – change the world, one person at a time

This is what our gospel culture is like, and it’s what we want it to be even more in 2022.

We call it an identity compass on purpose. It’s designed to remind us of who we are and who we aspire to be as we navigate new challenges and uncertainty in the future.

Candidly, I can’t believe that we are still wrestling with COVID-19 and all its implications. So much in our lives has changed, and we need to find new ways to apply the gospel to our lives—to find new ways to live in what I think is going to be a “new normal” for us.

I read a great interview of Tim Keller this week. Here’s what he said:

I’d say that the culture is definitely more polarized than it ever has been, and I’ve never seen the kind of conflicts in churches in the past that we see today.

In virtually every church there is a smaller or larger body of Christians who have been radicalized to the Left or to the Right by extremely effective and completely immersive internet and social media loops, newsfeeds, and communities. People are bombarded 12 hours a day with pieces that present a particular political point of view, and the main way it seeks to persuade is not through argument but through outrage. People are being formed by this immersive form of public discourse—far more than they are being formed by the Church.

This is creating a crisis.

No, I haven't faced anything like this in the past.

However, the way to navigate such waters is still to follow the book of Proverbs' prescription for your words. They must be honest, few, extremely well-crafted, usually calm, always aimed to edify (even when critical) and they must be accompanied with lots of silent listening.¹

I share this because I'd like for us to see this "new normal" as an opportunity to be embraced. As I said when we studied the book of James, this is a great time to be a Christian—if we'll each act like one.

Three Building Blocks for Bridges of Grace

The twelfth chapter of Romans is about how Christians should live. It's about being a living sacrifice and not being conformed to the world.

In verses 9-21, Paul gives us a recipe of what Christian character looks like. In other words, a Christian mindset is supposed to create attitudes, actions, and responses that are uniquely Christ-like.

What are the building blocks for bridges of grace? Love, faithfulness, and generosity.

1. Love

We begin with a call for genuine love in verse 9a. Paul starts with love (agape) because of its prominence in the commands of Christ and the life of the church. If there was one characteristic that was to mark the followers of Jesus and make them unique in the world, it was to be love. Jesus said,¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). And he also said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:13 that "faith, hope, and love abide. . .but the greatest of these is love." And Paul warned the church at Corinth that if they had all kinds of talent and gifts but didn't have love, they were nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Love is central to the Christian life.

However, this text invites us to a special kind of love. The Christian community is to be marked by genuine or sincere love. Paul is advocating for more than "niceness," "friendliness," or "civility." The vision of the church is more than just the absence of conflict or a welcoming culture. The biblical vision is a group of people who love one another with a depth and genuineness that is stunningly attractive and refreshing. Living sacrifices are sincere in love and affection for one another.

Tertullian (155 – 240 A.D.), an early Christian apologist, said that the society would say "See how they love one another!" in reference to the early Christians. This was to be remarkable because their society was known for hating each other. The church was to be marked by sincere love.

Skip to verse 10. The word for "brotherly affection" is different than the word for love in verse 9. This

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/tim-keller-on-the-church-crisis-that-he-never-had-to-face-as-a-pastor-but-you-do/>

word means the kind of love that one would have for family. In seasons of persecution, this was more than just a feeling; it was very practical since following Christ divided families. For those of you who do not have believing families, you can probably relate to this. The relationships that you have in the body of Christ have a depth and flavor to them that is so different than even what you have with your own flesh and blood. Honestly, that is how it is supposed to be. We are to treat one another with family-like affection.

Additionally, Paul says “we should outdo one another in showing honor.” This is an extension of the affectionate love that we have for one another, and it reflects the kind of attitude that Paul talks about in Philippians 2 – “in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). The church is to be filled with people who are considerate of one another because we are part of the same family.

2. Faithfulness

The second building block is faithfulness in our godliness and righteousness. Believers are to love one another, but they are to hate evil and cling to what is good. The ESV uses the words “abhor” and “hold fast.” The point is that the believer’s posture toward good and evil cannot be passive. Evil is not to be tolerated; it is to be hated. Good is not just hoped for; it is clung to.

Impurity does not simply happen out of nowhere. It works its way into our lives as we are no longer shocked or repulsed by evil in the world, in our culture, in one another, and in the church. Given the context of sincere love, Paul probably has in mind the kind of evil that destroys Christian relationships. Gossip, slander, bitterness, hurtful words, anger, lying, selfishness, partiality, pride, sexual sin, and a host of other issues are not just harmful. They are destructive to the witness of the Church and bond of love. A Christian mindset hates evil and clings to what is good. It cherishes godliness.

At our THINK conference in March, we’ll explore how to help one another in the work that we do. With the increasing secularization and challenges to religious freedom in a post-Christian society, we need to think carefully about how to live righteously.

In verse 11, there are three statements: (1) *Don’t be slothful in zeal* – Believers are not to be lazy in their commitment to one another. They should make efforts to be engaged in one another’s lives; (2) *Be fervent in spirit* –The word “fervent” has the idea of bubbling, boiling, or constant activity. And the word “spirit” either means something inside of us or the Holy Spirit; (3) *Serve the Lord* – While we are pouring into people who are part of the body, we are always aware of the fact that ultimately our service is an offering of worship to the Lord. We are sacrifices who live passionately.

In verse 12, there are three more statements that seem to focus on taking the long view: (1) *Rejoice in hope* – this is the overarching theme of perseverance. The believers endure by rejoicing in the hope that awaits them. The community of faith is to be marked by rejoicing in a future hope; (2) *Be patient in tribulation*—the word “patient” means to endure or to bear up under. Believers are called to face difficulties by not giving up, not becoming anxious, and standing firm; (3) *Be constant in prayer*—to be

marked by a continual devotion to prayer, especially when the people of God are facing opposition.

Do you see the importance of the role of the church here? By gathering with God's people we celebrate our hope, we help each other endure, and we pray together for God's help. Living steadfastly is a community project. You do not remain steadfast very well on your own. You need others to encourage you to live faithfully, help you, and support you, especially through trials and hardship.

That's one reason why we are pushing hard in this first quarter to find ways to connect you to one another and to help you grow spiritually. Here are a few of the ways:

- Join a Small Group
- Attend one of our classes
- Join a women's Bible study
- Engage with other men in *Heart of a Man*
- Participate in our prayer week
- Join the effort to read through the Bible in 30 days

Let's work together to help each other be faithful. So that we can build bridges of grace into our world.

3. Generosity

The body of Christ is also to be marked by generosity as it helps people in their needs. A Christian mindset is reflected in seeing your money and your possessions as the means of God's grace to others. This is where being a living sacrifice becomes very practical. Do you give regularly and sacrificially? Are you quick to meet the needs of people with your possessions or time? Do you open your home to people? Sacrificial giving and Christian hospitality make unique and clear statements to the world about who we are and what we love.

It can be a tendency in crisis to only focus on your needs. Generosity is realizing that I've been graced with so much that it's a delight to give to others.

And there's also a call here to live with hospitality. The word means to welcome guests or strangers. The idea is that we are to be on the lookout for those who are on the margins. We need to look for ways to help our neighbors and our community.

How should a Christian live? What should the flavor of Christian the mindset be like? What does it practically mean for a believer to be a living sacrifice?

This list is convicting. I hope that as we walked through a few of these words, you found yourself a bit convicted and exhorted. There are important ideas in this passage, and I'm sure that we all could grow in a number of areas. Let's ask God to help change.

This list is counter-cultural. It is striking to me how radical these characteristics really are in comparison to the culture around us. This text has reminded me, once again, that the body of Christ is meant to be very unusual.

But this list is also really beautiful. College Park, this list is what we should look like personally and corporately.

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