

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Following Jesus 101: Sharing Lavishly – Part 2  
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Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Romans 12:9-21

I am not sure if you have noticed this or not, but Christians, churches and denominations disagree about a whole host of things; things such as sharing. In other words Christians now and in the past, have disagreed about how to share, how much to share, and even if to share. What I have discovered is that there is a spectrum of sharing on which all churches and believers find themselves. To help us get at the heart of what it means to share lavishly, I want to begin by describing the spectrum. On the one end we have what I call “Just Jesus” Christians. These Christians believe that the only thing we ought to share is the good news about Jesus. We are not to share anything else, including money, food or shelter, because we will either be making people dependent on our help or we will interfere with the lesson God is trying to teach them; meaning if someone’s life has come apart it is because God is trying to teach them something. The other end of the spectrum is that we are to share everything. The perfect example of this is the Bruderhof communities. These communities are modern day Christian communal associations in which people share everything; childcare, work, homes, schooling and incomes. No one owns anything. Those then are the ends of the spectrum ... share just Jesus or share everything.

The questions these extremes present to us are: where ought we to be on this spectrum? What does it mean for us to share and share lavishly? Fortunately for us, Paul, in our passage from Romans gives us some insight into answering these questions. But for us to truly understand the radical and multifaceted nature of sharing that Paul puts forward, we need to take a moment to understand the context of his comments, which means gaining a better understanding of the Roman Empire. I want us to begin by imagining a pyramid. At the very top of the pyramid is the Emperor. Just below him are his family and close advisors. Below them are the ruling class including the Roman Senate. Below them are the generals, then the wealthy, then workers, then foreigners, then the slaves at the very bottom. In this pyramid all power flows from top to bottom. Those on the top are to be worshipped and those on the bottom are to be ignored, oppressed or killed. While there may have been some movement between these levels, Roman society was clear. The upper classes were everything and the lower classes were nothing. And woe to anyone at the top who treated those on the bottom as equals and those on the bottom who presumed they were equal to those on top. Got the image? Ok, so here we go.

We are to share respect. Paul writes, *“Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor (vs10) ... Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”*(vs. 16) I hope that you will understand just how radical this sharing was. In a society in which lower classes were understood to be less than human, where the upper classes were to be worshipped and deified, where contempt was shown by each class to those below them, Paul says that we are to share respect. We are to treat each human being as an amazing creation of God; a child of God. This mattered because the Roman church was one with both slaves and members of Caesar’s household, with both Jews and Gentiles, with both citizens and non-citizens. It was a divided humanity, from which God was making one new people ... and if they were to be one new people, then they needed to share respect. What Paul was telling them to do was to flatten the pyramid. This is our charge as well. We are to share respect with all persons regardless of race, rank or religion. We are to share respect with all those whom we serve and who serve us. We are to flatten the pyramid by lavishly sharing respect.

We are to share resources. Paul writes, *“Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers (vs. 13) ... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”* (vs. 20) In these few words Paul not only moves us away from the “Just Jesus” end of the sharing spectrum, but he moves the Roman church away from its moorings in Roman culture. I say this because in Roman culture, taking care of the needs of others was socially unacceptable. If the poor died, they died. If someone found themselves in need, they could sell themselves into slavery. Enemies were to be abused and perhaps executed. Paul instructs the Roman Christians to do the opposite. They were to share what they had with friends, strangers and enemies. They were to do so because, it was what the scriptures call on them to do. It was what Deuteronomy commanded, *“If there is anyone among you in need ... do not be tight fisted, but open your hand ... ”* Oh, and just a side-note, heaping burning coals on someone’s head was perhaps the most important type of sharing. It was sharing live coals from one’s own fire with someone whose fire had gone out; who could no longer warm themselves or cook their meals. The reference to the head was that the coals were carried in a heavy blanket on the head as they were transported. Paul said that the church was to flatten the pyramid so that the resources of the Empire flowed to all. This is what we are called to do as well. We are called to share our resources, time, talent and treasure, with those who find themselves in a tight spot. We are not to be “Just Jesus” people. We are to flatten the pyramid by lavishly sharing our resources.

We are to share relationships. Paul writes, *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another (vs. 15-16); If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (vs. 18)”* The Apostle is asking of the Roman Christians what would have seemed almost impossible; for a socially, culturally and economically disparate community to live as one body, one family sharing in one another’s lives. But for Paul this makes sense of his understanding, which just precedes this section, that the church and the world are not pyramids but living organisms. And if we are a single living organism we will laugh and cry together. Let me ask, how many of you have laughed such that your entire body shook? Or cried such that your whole body cried. Here Paul is not just flattening the pyramid, he is changing its nature into a living being. From my perspective this is the most difficult of the three ways of sharing lavishly for us to accomplish. It is the most difficult because we live in different neighborhoods, work for different companies in different locations, have circles of friends outside of the church and so do not have the connections that say, a Bruderhof community has. Perhaps then the way to understand this sharing is to see ourselves as part not only of this community, but the entire human community. That we are to rejoice or weep with all, whether it is to weep and be concerned for those nations in which the corona virus is spreading or celebrate with the Kansas City Chiefs for their Super Bowl victory. We are to flatten and transform the pyramid by lavishly sharing relationships.

Where does this leave us on the spectrum of sharing? It leaves us in the middle, which is where Presbyterians often end up. And we are in the middle not because we can’t decide what sharing lavishly means, but because on the one hand we know that we cannot be “Just Jesus” people. We are to share our resources with those in need. On the other hand, we know we don’t need to be part of Bruderhof-like communities, so long as we share relationships both in our churches and in the world. The challenge for each of us then is to ask ourselves, how am I lavishly sharing my respect, my resources and my relationships in such a way that the pyramid in our time and place might be flattened and transformed into a single, loving community of God’s people?