

## SESSION SEVEN

### *Being "For" One Another*

Reading adapted from a message by John Ortberg

**H**er name was Pandy. She had lost a good deal of her hair, one of her arms was missing, and generally speaking, she'd had the stuffing knocked out of her. She was my sister Barbie's favorite doll.

She hadn't always looked like this. She had been a personally selected Christmas gift by a cherished aunt who had traveled to Marshall Field's in faraway Chicago to find her. Her face and hands were made of rubber so that they looked real, but her body was stuffed with rags to feel soft and squeezable, like a real baby.

When Pandy was young and a looker, Barbie loved her. She loved her with a love that was too strong for Pandy's own good. Barbie slept with Pandy next to her and ate with Pandy beside her. When Barbie could get away with it, Pandy took a bath with her. For Pandy, it was a nearly fatal attraction.

By the time I knew Pandy, she was a mess. She was no longer a valuable doll. I'm not sure we could have given her away. But for reasons no one

could quite figure out, my sister loved that little rag doll still. She loved her as strongly in the days of her raggedness as she ever had in her days of great beauty. Barbie loved that little doll with the kind of love that made the doll precious to anyone who loved Barbie. To love Barbie was to love Pandy. It was a package deal.

Two things are true about us. First, *we are all rag dolls*. Flawed and wounded, broken and bent. Partly, our raggedness is something that happens *to* us. Our genes set us up for certain weaknesses. Our loved ones let us down when we need them most. But that's not the whole story. We each make our own deposits into the ragged account of the human race. We choose to deceive when

the truth begs to be spoken. We grumble when generous praise is called for. We betray when we are bound by oaths of loyalty. Raggedness permeates our whole being. We are rag dolls, all right.

But the second truth is that *we are God's rag dolls*. He knows about our raggedness and loves us anyway. Paul put it like this: "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. ... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6, 8 NRSV). God is fully aware of our secret. He knows we are rag dolls. But God has gone to the ultimate length to prove his love for us. He died at the *right time*—when we were ragged, weak, sinful—to make us new. This is a

love beyond reason. This is the love of God.

There are two commands that form the heart of our response to God's love, and they cannot be separated. All of God's will comes down to this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. "Love me, love my rag dolls," God says. It's a package deal.

If we are serious about loving God, we must be serious about loving the people around us. But how is this love expressed? There are many ways, to be sure. But somewhere very close to the core is this: Love is being *for* the one who is loved.

### **Balcony People**

If I love someone, I long for them to flourish and blossom. I want them to realize all their potential. To be *for* someone means that I am in their corner. I am cheering them on. I am a voice of encouragement.

Encouragement. In Greek, the word is *paraklesis*. It is used more than one hundred times in the New Testament, so its importance can't be missed. Its very origin creates a picture, "to be called alongside of." Gregory of Nyssa, an early church father, expressed it this way:

*At horse races the spectators intent on victory shout to their favorites in the contest. ... From the stands they participate in the race with their eyes, thinking to incite the charioteer to keener effort,*

*at the same time urging the horses on while leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hands instead of a whip.*

*... I seem to be doing the same thing myself, most valued friend and brother. While you are competing admirably in the divine race along the course of virtue ... I exhort, urge, and encourage you vigorously to increase your speed.*

Balcony people are those who take their place in the stands urging, exhorting, and encouraging, while you run the race of your life. The New Testament writers consistently urge us to become balcony people for one another.

*Therefore encourage [parakaleite] one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

— 1 Thessalonians 5:11

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage [parakalountes] one another ...*

— Hebrews 10:24–25

*... I have written to you briefly, encouraging [parakalon] you...*

— 1 Peter 5:12

Encouragement, properly understood, is essential language in the new community.

### **Community Killers**

Being *for* someone means I celebrate their victories and mourn their setbacks. It means I deeply and sincerely wish them well.

This is not easy to do. It doesn't take much truth-telling for me to admit that I don't want my enemies to succeed. More humbling is the fact that, deep down, I often don't even want my friends to succeed too much.

One of my earliest church memories is of a time when our Sunday School teacher decided to have a Bible verse memorizing contest. We all had a poster that went on the wall, and for every verse you could recite, you'd get a sticker. If you won the contest, you would win a white Bible with your name printed on it in gold letters. I wanted that Bible so badly I would have violated most of what's in it to get hold of it.

Not long into the contest it became clear that the competition was really between me and a girl named Louise—a freckle-faced, snotty little kid with big glasses. For weeks it was nip and tuck between the two of us. We matched each other sticker for sticker. But in the final month she began to pull away. In the final week, it was clear she was going to win.

I wanted the Bible so much that I began to won-

der what I could do about Louise. So I killed her. At least in my mind I did. I did not like her. I did not rejoice when her name was the one called. I did not celebrate her victory.

I hate to say it, but that was not the last time that I've turned church into a contest.

Competition, comparison, envy—they are all anti-community. Paul said that we are to “rejoice with those who rejoice; [and] mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15). Competition and envy cause me to mourn when others *rejoice* and rejoice when others *mourn*. They lead me to diminish others instead of building them up. They cause me to be *opposed* to other people instead of being *for* them.

### **Being “For” Is Not Being “Soft”**

Love is often confused with softness. When we speak of doing “the loving thing,” we sometimes think it means “always doing what the person I love would want me to do.” This is, of course, not love; it is not even sane. Try it with a three-year-old and odds are he'll never make it to four.

Being *for* someone is deeper than just wanting to spare them pain. If I am really *for* a person, I am willing to risk saying painful things, if pain is the only way to bring growth. For “the Lord disciplines those He loves” (Heb. 12:6). True love is ready to warn, reprove, confront, or admonish when it is needed. But only humbly, reluctantly.

True love never desires to inflict pain for pain's

sake. All too often, I'm not only willing to inflict pain on someone, I'm looking forward to it. Probably a safe guideline is that I need to be very careful of creating pain for another person if I feel a twinge of enjoyment in the process.

### **God Is *For* You**

"If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:31, 35) This is the truth that staggered the apostle Paul. For all of his raggedness, *God* was *for* him.

And the God of the universe is *for* you. He longs for you to blossom and flourish. He celebrates your victories. He mourns your setbacks. He is on your side. He is in the balcony, cheering you on.

## **SPIRITUAL EXERCISE**

**T**his week, experiment with the radical commitment of being *for* the people in your relational world. Throughout your daily encounters, ask yourself the question, "How can I be a 'balcony person' right now?" For example:

- How could you build up someone who you often tend to overlook completely—a waitress, busboy, cashier, etc.? Consider looking them in the eye, saying a sincere "thank-you," extending a simple compliment, even leaving a more

generous tip! How creative can you be in conveying the message that they matter to a God who is *for* them?

- Be especially generous with encouragement this week. When you notice something worthy of affirmation, don't hold back. *When you see it, say it!* Err on the side of overdoing it a bit.

- Deliberately try building up someone who is a difficult person in your life. Stretch yourself to be *for* them in some way this week. See what happens, positive or negative.

- Notice when someone is succeeding, and celebrate it. Find the people who are winning at their game and cheer them on. Do this even if (*especially* if) it means breaking through your own feelings of competitiveness or envy. (Maybe even go out on a limb and talk to them about those feelings!)

- Encouraging someone might mean lovingly expressing a concern regarding a pattern of behavior. You might want to say, "I am *for* you. I care about you, that's why I'm saying this." Let them know that you're on their side.

- Be *for* someone this week through concentrated prayer. If appropriate, send them a note letting them know you are praying on their behalf.

- Finally, make a point this week of encouraging the individual members of your small group. On a separate piece of paper, complete the fol-



lowing thought regarding each person in the group:

One thing I really appreciate about you is ...

Bring these encouragement statements with you to your next small group meeting (or retreat, if your group chooses that option).