

## Session #5 – Growing in Authentic Community – Going Deeper

### Premise

The Church is designed by God to fulfill a vivid reality of Abraham's promise: a global community of God. Christian discipleship has always depended on two risky endeavors: trust yourself into God's hands and choose to live in faith communities where everyone can find a place to belong.

### Key Scripture Passage

Romans 15:7 (NIV) Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

### The Only Way to Have a Friend is to Be One

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “The only way to have a friend is to be one.” And while much of what he believed and espoused are contrary to Christian beliefs, this idea lines up with Biblical truth. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus said: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

The only way to have a friend is to be one.

What do I want others to do to me? On the most fundamental level, I want others to be kind to me, to be friendly to me or as our key verse says: to accept me just as Christ accepted me.

At its core, community is based upon friendship. Friendship is an active endeavor. Emerson understood this principle. The hard truth is that if I am longing for friendship and feel like no one is reaching out to me and that no one likes me, there is a simple (and Biblical) solution: reach out to someone else who is lonely. When we do this simple act of kindness, it not only blesses the recipient of our kindness, it also blesses us. And guess what ... we have taken a small step in building community.

This principle of doing to others what we want done to us is central to living out our faith. Jesus explains its importance when He said that it: “sums up the Law and the Prophets.” From start to finish, the Bible is about community; from Adam and Eve and their relationship to one another to the members of the seven churches in Revelation. It should get our attention that Jesus is saying something radically important when He says the whole of the Old Testament is about doing to others what we want done to us.

... “doing to others what we want done to us” is central to living out our faith.

### Community In Secular Culture

We come into life pre-wired for community. It’s in our DNA to yearn for caring relationships. We long to know others and to be known by them. That’s why the TV show *Cheers* was so popular. The entertainment industry tapped into a real need, albeit experiencing community vicariously through the TV screen.

Starting in 1982, *Cheers* ran for eleven years and was set in the “Cheers” bar in Boston where a group of locals met to drink, relax, and socialize. Over the years, the show earned a top-ten rating during eight of its eleven seasons, including one season at number one. During its run, *Cheers* became one of the most beloved series in history.

The theme song from *Cheers*:

Verse One:

Making your way in the world today  
Takes everything you've got.  
Taking a break from all your worries  
Sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Chorus:

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name.

And they're always glad you came.

You want to be where you can see

Our troubles are all the same.

You want to be where everybody knows your name.

Verse one conveys the common need we all have to get a break from the weariness of life. The chorus expresses the need to be around people who know me by name and understand and can relate to my troubles and are glad to see me. The characters in the show all have flaws. However, they all have redeeming qualities as well. And, of course, this is also how real-life community works.

Caring for one another is not complicated. However, it does take effort and intentionality.

While we might object to finding community at a bar, the creators of the show understood the fundamental human need for community and tapped into that need. Each character in the show, in his or her own quirky way, demonstrated love and acceptance to the other characters. Caring for one another is not complicated. However, it does take effort and intentionality.

### **The Correlation Between Deep Relationships and Well-Being**

In Waldinger and Schulz's book: *The Good Life: Lessons From the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, they review the findings of *The Harvard Study of Adult Development*, which since 1938, has been investigating what makes people flourish. The study has established a strong correlation between deep relationships and well-being. Here's a quote from the book:

"Repeatedly, when the participants in our study reached old age, they would make a point to say that what they treasured most were their relationships. Relationships keep us happier and healthier throughout our life spans. We neglect our connections with others at our peril. Investing in our social fitness is possible each day, each week of our lives. Even small investments today in our relationships with others can create long-term ripples of well-being."

Relationships keep us happier and healthier throughout our life spans.

So, here we see that science confirms what we already knew from Scripture: relationships matter!

Let's look at an example from the New Testament.

### **A New Testament Model of Community**

Acts 2:42-47 says:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This was the first New Testament church. As we unpack the passage, it is helpful to recognize that there are cultural differences between the early Church and the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Having said that, there are fundamental principles regarding community that we can apply today.

They “devoted” themselves to community. They were committed to meeting together and were intentional about it. They recognized their need to hang out together.

From the business world, motivational speaker Jim Rohn said: “we are the average of the five people we spend the most time with. When it comes to relationships, we are greatly influenced, whether we like it or not, by those closest to us. It affects our way of thinking, our self-esteem, and our decisions. Of course, everyone is their own person, but research has shown that we're more affected by our environment [relationships] than we think.”

We are the average of the five people we spend the most time with.

From the entertainment industry, we have what might be called the “Rocky Principle.” In the first *Rocky* movie, Rocky Balboa was walking home from a boxing match one night and ran into his niece who was hanging out with a gang that was not up to any good. In his signature gravelly voice, Rocky says to his niece: “If you hang around with nice people you get nice friends, hang around with smart people and you get smart friends, hang around with yo-yos and you get yo-yos for friends. It's simple mathematics.” We might debate the point with Rocky on mathematics, but his character in the movie understands the importance of choosing friendships wisely. If you want to be a yo-yo, hang out with yo-yos. If you want to be someone who is becoming more like Christ, hang out with those who have the same value.

In the Acts passage, when they gathered, they had teaching, fellowship, eating together, the Lord’s supper and prayer. While this is not an exhaustive list of activities experienced in Christian community, it gives us a peek into some of the activities that they identified as critical to growing in their faith together.

They had teaching, fellowship, eating together, the Lord’s supper and prayer.

“Everyone was filled with awe” is a sign that the Holy Spirit was alive and active in their midst. Some scholars would argue that these “signs and wonders” were unique to the early church. Others suggest that they are still active today. Whatever position we might take on the issue, there is certainly still room for being “filled with awe” as we see the Holy Spirit work today (in perhaps less dramatic ways) in community. Here are some examples from the life of this author:

- After praying for a guy in the Welcome Class ministry, who was given only a 5% chance of surviving cancer, he was healed of cancer, and still is after 15 years at this writing.
- After praying for a couple at a Sunday service, where it was their last gasp before seeking a divorce, they made a commitment to stick it out and learn to love each other.
- Some time after praying for a friend’s mother’s healing in the hospital, who was dying from emphysema, the doctor pronounced her dead. Her husband went to get a dress for the funeral and when he came back to the hospital the doctors told him that she had miraculously come back to life. While she was dead, she asked the Lord for one more chance to make things right with her estranged daughter and the Lord granted her wish. She became involved in a one-on-one Bible study and flourished spiritually.
- A woman came to church with a badly bruised shoulder after falling off a horse and was in great pain. After praying for healing, the Lord immediately and completely took the pain away.

There is something special about living out life in Christian community. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus promises that “wherever two or three gather, there am I with them.” It seems that hanging out together is not just good for relationships, but that in some mysterious way, the power of the Holy Spirit is more readily available. When God does supernatural things in our midst, it reinforces the sense of community.

In verses 44 and 45, it is clear that they were committed to sharing resources with one another. In our cultural setting, we won't likely have all our resources in common (although some faith communities do practice this). However, we can still learn from their example. We have opportunities such as contributing to the benevolence fund that helps those in need or volunteering to serve meals to the homeless or volunteering to help build houses with Habitat for Humanity or providing meals to a family in need. We can also help one another directly with financial assistance. We can open our homes for hospitality or for small group ministry. There are an infinite number of possibilities. The key value is having a mindset of sharing our resources with others in need.

The key value is having a mindset of sharing our resources with others in need.

In verse 46, we see that they met daily in the "temple courts." They had a commitment to meet on a regular basis so that they could grow in relationships and spiritually. In our cultural setting, this might equate to meeting for the church service or in small group settings regularly. We also see that they were hospitable to one another, having meals together in their homes.

One result of the early believers' intentional community was that they praised God. They had thankful hearts, likely because of the richness of doing life together. They "enjoyed the favor of all people," likely because of their witness of loving one another, reflecting God's glory to a world that was spiritually broken. And, they "added to their number daily those who were being saved," likely because the unbelieving people around them could "smell the aroma of Christ that was a fragrance of life" (2 Cor 2:15-16).

### The "Lone-Ranger" Christian is an Oxymoron

The "Lone-Ranger" Christian is one who says in his heart: "I've got Jesus. That's all I need. I don't need anyone meddling in my life. I am sufficient. I am in control." It's similar to the persona of John Wayne in many of his movies. And while we may admire some of his characters' qualities, the "Lone-Ranger" mindset is antithetical to Christianity.

The value of community and our need for one another is baked into Christianity. Following Christ apart from community would be like a fish trying to live out of the water or like us saying we don't need air to breathe. To be absolutely clear ... *living in Christian community and following Jesus are inseparable*. The whole of the New Testament, from start to finish, assumes we will be in relationship with other believers.

Living in Christian community and following Jesus are inseparable.

Hebrews 10:24-25 commands us to hang out with other believers: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Hebrews was a letter written to a group of Christians who were very much in danger of compromising their allegiance to Christ. It does not appear they had grown to believe any different doctrines; they were just on a slippery slope of succumbing to the pressures around them and starting to be secretive or ashamed of their faith. Some felt it would be easier to go back to the way they had been living before. To blend in. These verses in chapter 10 of Hebrews offer us an important practical application on how to hold fast to Jesus: stick together.

In Hebrews, the importance of community was first introduced in verse 3:13, where we are told to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Sin is pictured as an active force, and one that claims isolated victims more easily. We are oftentimes too quick to trust ourselves, our own judgments, our own abilities to live the Christian

life. Only through the helpful encouragement and challenges of other believers can we see how vulnerable we really are to fall prey to a false reality. Community is an important tool in our toolbox that helps us stay focused on intentional discipleship. Caring for one another is vital if we want to maintain soft and teachable hearts.

Of the ten commandments, the first four are about our relationship with God and the last six are about our relationship with one another. Jesus said that all the Law and the Prophets can be summed up with “love God and love others.” In the Old Testament and New Testament alike, the message is the same.

As we spend time together, we learn to accept one another, even though we are different. We have opportunities to serve one another and as we do so we discover what our spiritual gifts are. We invite others into our homes and in so doing we demonstrate that they have value. As we greet each other warmly, we bless one another.

We have opportunities to serve one another and as we do so we discover what our spiritual gifts are.

The bottom line is that God designed us to be in relationships. We need each other! We will be spiritually stunted without deep and meaningful relationships with one another and will never reach the potential that God has in store for us. Biblical community takes time, and it takes work.

### **What does Christian community look like in our cultural context?**

For most of us, experiencing deep and meaningful relationships means connecting in more than one setting because no one setting will likely meet all of our needs for community.

While church services can tend to be impersonal, especially in large churches, they meet needs that are somewhat out of reach in other contexts. There can be a sense of awe when worshipping or taking communion with a large group. The teaching/preaching may be by better-equipped and more highly-gifted people than in smaller settings. There is generally more structure, staffing and planning around the church service, which means it is more likely to be intentional and to meet regularly. Giving, which is an important part of community, is usually best done in the larger group context.

While the larger church service can and does meet important needs, you will likely be disappointed if you are looking for intimate relationships at a church service (unless the service is less than say 50 people or so). It's nice to be greeted by a greeter on Sunday morning, but it does not fulfill the need to be known and to know others. Smaller group settings better fill that need.

When compared to the large church service, Sunday School classes and Life Groups are settings where:

- You know everyone's name.
- Intimate relationships are more likely to develop.
- There is time to tell one's story and to hear others' stories.
- Work projects, outreach projects and meals together are oftentimes a better fit.
- There is time to pray for one another.
- They allow for more people to use their gifts, apart from the professional, paid staff.
- It is especially important that small groups provide a means to spread out the pastoral care for people. It not only takes a burden off the pastoral staff, it allows others to step up and use their gifts.
- There are more possibilities for accountability.

Mentoring is great for accountability and really getting to know one another.

Just hanging out with one another without an agenda is great for friendship. It might be a meal together, taking a walk, watching sports, hunting, quilting, going out for coffee, etc.

The bottom line is that every “community” setting has its strengths and weaknesses. For most of us, if we want to grow in Christ, we need to be engaged in more than one setting.

### **The “One Anothers” in the New Testament**

There are at least 42 unique “one anothers” in the New Testament. At least eight of them are mentioned in multiple passages. For example, “greet one another” is mentioned in at least four verses. These “one anothers” give us clues on how to live in authentic community.

As we read through the list below, we might get the distinct impression that “one-anothering” is an important concept in the New Testament. Relationships matter to God! We are called to practice the “one-anothers” laid out in the New Testament. And, to do that, we must spend time together.

One of the primary ways we demonstrate our love for God is how we treat others. Of all the “one-anothers” in the New Testament, “love one another” is the one most prominent. Our love for one another not only demonstrates our love for God, Jesus said that it demonstrates to the world that we are His disciples. It is a testimony of *God’s* love and grace.

1. Accept one another. Romans 15:7.
2. Admonish one another through psalms, hymns, and songs. Colossians 3:16.
3. Agree with one another. 1 Corinthians 1:10.
4. Eat together with all (do not exclude some). 1 Corinthians 11:33.
5. Be at peace with each other. Mark 9:50.
6. Be compassionate to one another. Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 3:8.
7. Be devoted to one another. Romans 12:10.
8. Be gentle with one another. Ephesians 4:2.
9. Be humble with one another. 1 Peter 3:8; Ephesians 4:2; 1 Peter 5:5.
10. Be kind to one another. Ephesians 4:32.
11. Be like-minded with one another. 1 Peter 3:8.
12. Be patient with one another. Ephesians 4:2.
13. Be sympathetic toward one another. 1 Peter 3:8.
14. Bear with one another. Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13.
15. Build up one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:11.
16. Carry each other’s burdens. Galatians 6:2.
17. Confess your sins to each other. James 5:16.
18. Don’t bite and devour each other. Galatians 5:15.
19. Don’t give up meeting with one another. Hebrews 10:25.
20. Don’t grumble against one another. James 5:9.
21. Don’t pass judgment on one another. Romans 14:13.
22. Don’t provoke and envy each other. Galatians 5:26.
23. Don’t put a stumbling block in the way of one another. Romans 14:13.
24. Don’t slander one another. James 4:11.
25. Encourage one another. Hebrews 3:13; 10:25.
26. Forgive one another. Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13.



27. Greet one another with a holy kiss (in our cultural context, this might be a warm hug or firm handshake). Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14.
28. Have equal concern for each other. 1 Corinthians 12:25.
29. Honor one another. Romans 12:10.
30. Instruct one another. Romans 15:14.
31. Live in harmony with one another. Romans 12:16.
32. Love one another. John 13:34-35; John 15:12, 17; Romans 13:8; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Peter 3:8; 1 John 3:11; 1 John 3:23; 1 John 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 1:5.
33. Offer hospitality to one another. 1 Peter 4:9.
34. Pray for each other. James 5:16.
35. Serve one another humbly in love. Galatians 5:13.
36. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs. Ephesians 5:19.
37. Spur one another on to love and good deeds. Hebrews 10:24.
38. Submit to one another. Ephesians 5:21.
39. Teach one another. Colossians 3:16.
40. Value others above yourselves. Philippians 2:3.
41. Wait for each other. 1 Corinthians 11:33.
42. Wash one another's feet. John 13:14.

### So, how do we get there?

We have seen the importance our culture places on community from TV, movies and the business world. We have seen the scientific evidence of the correlation between deep relationships and well-being. We have seen that community is important in the Old Testament law as well as in the first New Testament church. We have seen in the New Testament that there are at least 42 *commands* for us, as Christians, to pursue relationships with "one another."

The church is called to equip us so that we will be built up until we reach unity in the faith and become mature (Ephesians 4:12-13) and as such, provides many connection points: e.g. Sunday service, Sunday School, Life Groups, mentoring, mens' groups, womens' groups, service opportunities, short-term missions trips, outreach opportunities, and many more.

Notwithstanding the church's responsibility to provide connection points for us as individuals, at the end of the day, it falls on me to be intentional and proactive in pursuing connections. If I am lonely or feel there is no place for me in the church, it is a sure sign that the Holy Spirit is urging me to take action. I have the power and responsibility to do that!

... at the end of the day, it falls on me to be intentional and proactive in pursuing connections.

### Thoughts on Potential Ways to Grow in Community

- Regularly attend, at the same time each week, in person, the weekly Sunday church service. Hang around after the service and talk to someone. Sit in the same section of the sanctuary every week and be intentional about getting to know the names of those who sit around you. (Most people tend to sit in the same section every week.)
- Get involved in an intentional discipleship opportunity such as: Sunday School, Life Group, mens' group, womens' group, mentoring, etc. Keep in mind that these groups are not usually for "life." Over time, expect to have to start over, as there is a natural life cycle of groups where

some groups end and new ones begin. If you don't know where to start, go to the church's website and find the staff page and email various staff for ideas.

- Begin serving in some way. There are a multitude of opportunities. Not only will you be blessing others, you will make new friends and discover your gifts along the way. If you don't know where to start, go to the church's website and find the staff page and email various staff for ideas.
- Make a new friend. Invite someone out for coffee, or even better, over for a meal at your house.

As we intentionally make an investment in relationships and community, we will reap the benefits of knowing others and being known by others. We will discover (or rediscover) our place in the Body of Christ. We will begin to feel celebrated for who we are and for how God uniquely created us. And, we will reflect God's glory to a world that is spiritually dying around us.

Who are you becoming?

### **Going Deeper Reflections**

1. Part of the benefit of being in community is being able to count on others for our well-being and allowing people to be able to trust or to count on us. Take a survey of your current relationships and seek ways to grow in community.
2. Review the "Thoughts on Potential Ways to Grow in Community" above and consider how you might take the next step.
3. Read through and meditate on the "One Anothers" above. Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight one area for you to lean into with the people in your life.