

NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE 3

Community: Life Together

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." – John 13:34-35

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head... For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore." – Psalm 133 "

God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as it's primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant." – Dallas Willard¹

Pre-Article Question:

1. Can you describe a time when you experienced and enjoyed community? What specifically about this community did you love, find helpful, or find challenging?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He created night and day, light and dark, sky and land, animals of all kinds, and more. Then, quite mysteriously and unbelievably, man was created in the image of the Triune God. Finally, the Godhead went one step further and created a helpmate, a companion for man, and he called them good. Very good.

From the beginning, God created and intended us to be in relationships. We would not be a reflection of him if we did not desire relationships and flourish in them. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share perfect communion and give perfect love continually and eternally. Made in God's image, this same desire and need for relationship runs as deeply in us: we instinctually desire fellowship in the same way we breathe; we need to interact with others in the same way we need our hearts to pump. God created us in such a way that we are completely and utterly dependant on him for our survival, for he is Life Himself, and separation from him leads to our death (John 17:3, Ephesians 2:1-7, Colossians 2:9-14). We were separated from God in our sins; unable to experience the holy, life-giving relationship we were ultimately created for. But through his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus paved the way for us to be in a right relationship with God once again by making atonement for our sins (1 John 4:9-10). We are the objects of a love so deep, so passionate, and so generous that God gave his son in order to demonstrate the extent of his desire for us in a tangible way. And once we receive this gift of life and love, God wants us to grow in our experience of it by giving it away to others.

Loving others is so vital to our lives because it is the central and most important issue to knowing God and experiencing his kingdom. Jesus said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments," (Matthew 22:37-40).

Relationship with God and relationships with others bring intimacy, encouragement, and accountability to our lives, insuring that we will experience love, be filled with joy, and be sustained as we walk through this life. Only God can fulfill us completely with his love, yet he shares his love with us – and teaches us how to give it

1. John Ortberg, Everybody is Normal Until You Get to Know Them. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003. 27.

ourselves – through the people in our lives. No one has seen God, and yet we encounter him every time we interact with people in loving relationships (1 John 4:12, Matthew 25:34-39, 1 John 4:12).

Why are these two so inextricably linked? Because love is an act of giving. God is love and he gives himself to us. We cannot experience the depth of his love simply by receiving it. We too must also give it away. And we do this not just by building a relationship with God, but also by building relationships with the people all around us who also bear his image.

Jesus set the ultimate example for us, demonstrating with his life³ how to love well, how to sacrifice, live without selfish gain in mind, and call upon others for help. Love is not just flattering words, but living life together (1 John 3:18). There is nothing more powerful and life giving than people sharing one another's burdens and walking side-by-side. We see this clearly in Acts 2:42-47. The disciples had just experienced the tremendous loss of Jesus, but in love and obedience, they dedicate themselves to each other, the Apostles' teachings, and to prayer. The Greek word utilized for the word "fellowship" is *koinonia*. *Koinonia* means deep intimacy, communion, and sharing. That same word is used in 1 Corinthians 10:16 to describe our communion with Christ. When we share our lives with each other, we are sharing our lives with Christ; loving others and loving Jesus are one in the same.

Jesus knew that we couldn't do life alone. We weren't intended to. God knit the yearning for fellowship and community so deeply into our beings we are naturally drawn to others and to him, whether we realize it or not. Despite God's intricate design, we often find ourselves lonely, fearful, and living selfishly, struggling to be interdependent because of pride and previous hurts. At the end of our lives, or even at the close of each chapter, what do we have if we have lived isolated and alone? Do we have money? Achievement? Success?

Ecclesiastes 5:10-11 tells us that money will never satisfy, and will prove meaningless. But people, people have real value. Building relationships strengthens us as we walk together day-by-day, teaches us how to love and serve, and keeps us on the road that leads to life. Perhaps even more importantly, investing in people is investing in eternity and storing up riches through relationships that will never be taken away.

When we love people, we demonstrate God's love and glorify him by saying through our actions, "Yes, your design is very good indeed." Our greatest witness of what God is like can be seen through the relationships we build and the way we love others. The world is hungry for deep relationships and authentic community. It is as believers demonstrate these exist among themselves because of the love of Christ that others will see Christianity offers something different: that it offers life. The world needs to see the Church in deep relationship with each other, always encouraging, always serving, always comforting, and holding each other accountable. In living together like this we will not only be a witness to others, but will be filled with more of Christ's life ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity'—this is the Scripture's praise for life together under the Word. But now we can rightly interpret the words 'in unity

unity' and say, 'for brethren to dwell together through Christ.' For Jesus Christ alone is our unity, 'He is our peace.' Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another."² May we enjoy life together through the power of Jesus Christ, that we might know and be known, and experience the fullness of the love of God.

Scripture Questions:

1. When you think of community, what do you normally think of?
2. What are some ways that Jesus lived in community?
3. Why do you think the Lord loves believers living in unity so much?
4. Read and discuss the verses from Hebrews 3:12-13 and 10:24-25. What do these verses tell us about the role encouragement plays in our lives? Why is it so important?
5. What role has Christian community played in your life?

Application Questions:

1. Have your ideas of community changed or been confirmed while reading this? Why or why not?
2. Read Colossians 3:12-16. How do these commands to serve others cause us to draw near to Christ?
3. What role should Christian community play in your life?
4. Is there anything in your life that might be keeping you from deeper fellowship and stronger relationships with people?
5. How can you and the community of Christ reach or influence more people in your life?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the gift of relationships and community. Thank you that you made me with a desire for intimacy and fellowship so that I would grow as I connect with both you and other people. Thank you that you reveal yourself to me and love me through others, and thank you for teaching me how to love the people around me. Help me not to let past wounds and hurts keep me from connecting with others. Help me to reach out to people when I am hurting, and help me to support others when they are hurting too. Show me ways that I can encourage and serve the people around me, and give me the strength to do so. Help me to love others the way you love them, and let the relationships in my life be glorifying to you.

Prayer Partner Assignment:

Memory Verse: John 13:34-35 & Romans 15:5-7

This week meditate on the role of community in your life. If you have relationships that provide both encouragement and accountability, ask the Lord to strengthen these relationships. If not, ask the Lord how you can connect with other people.

Meet with your prayer partner this week and discuss the importance of relationships and living in community.

Additional Scripture:

John 17:22-23
Galatians 6:2
Ephesians 4:2-6, 5:1-2
Colossians 3:12-16
Hebrews 3:12-13, 10:24-25
1 John 1:7