



"Community Built Upon the Gospel"

Idea: Community is only as strong as what it is built upon.

Intro: Today and next Sunday, we are revisiting the theme of our summer sermon series. We were exploring the theology of biblical community, and we defined community as "a unified body of individuals" or *one-together*. In our study we have discovered that community exists and is desired in this world because creation follows the pattern of its Creator. God is a communal being comprised of three distinct Persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. One together, they dwell in perfect community, equal in being but subordinate in role.

The Bible testifies that the Triune God created all that there is; therefore, creation bears His mark of community. What we see in the universe, then, is that every part has its counterpart, and this is most beautifully seen in the creation of mankind. Adam was the very first human created. God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him (Gen 2:7). God also fashioned the woman Eve from Adam's rib, and the two of

them became a perfect reflection of the glorious community existing within the Godhead. Adam and Eve enjoyed the beauty and responsibility of overseeing God's creation without any shame (Gen 2:25).

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve's perfect community with God and with one another was destroyed when they sinned against the Lord by eating from the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve died spiritually and later died physically. Despite their rebellion, God still pursued them. God covered Adam and Eve's sin and promised that a Messiah would come to put an end to sin. God furthered that promise in the call of Abram and the establishment of Israel as He called out a people to Himself through whom the Messiah would come. The promised Messiah came in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. God the Son came to man. He lived a perfectly holy life, and He offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. The work, which Jesus accomplished on the cross and in the grave, made possible the restoration of man to the community for which he was created.

Individuals who repent of sin and place their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ are brought into the household of God. They become part of the community of faith called the church, sharing a common life in Christ. They dwell in *community*. The believers who make up the church are a unified body of individuals who are one together in Jesus Christ.

The early church presents a beautiful picture of what this community looks like. We learn from Luke's depiction of the early church in Acts 2 that they understood and embraced community. They recognized that it was Christ alone who had brought them near to God. Their belief in the gospel message ushered them into eternal community with the Godhead and with other believers. Jesus's disciples and those who were closely connected to him became the genesis of a multiplicity of small groups who met in the temple courts and homes throughout the city of Jerusalem. The early church became a

community of communities who were interconnected and interdependent following Pentecost.

In response to the community they now enjoyed, the members of the early church devoted themselves to the Lord, to certain spiritual disciplines, and to one another. We also see that the early church's strong sense of community resulted in their advancement of Christ's kingdom. Following Pentecost, the Lord continued to add to their numbers daily those who were being saved. In other words the Kingdom continued to advance as the community exemplified by the church validated the preached message.

The early church followed the pattern of Jesus in building community. Jesus dwelled in community with both large and small groups of people. He was together with the 120. (We can think of them as the church.) He was in community with His twelve disciples (small group). And He was in community with Peter, James, and John (discipleship group). This summer we discussed what it means to be a part of the body of Christ, the church, and why that is important in the life of the believer. We talked about the need to be in community with a smaller group of people and what that looks like at Red Lane. And we narrowed the focus and examined community experienced in discipleship groups. This morning, I want to unpack the binding force in community.

Inquiry: *“all things were created through him and for him”* – Col 1:16

You and I were created by God and for God. We were created to be in relationship with Him. Our sin, however, has driven a wedge between God and us (Is 59:2). Sin always separates and isolates.

“Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

As believers and followers of Jesus Christ who have had our sins forgiven and experienced new life, we must continually be on guard against the encroachment of sin into our lives. Sin is disastrous. It not only displeases God, it also pulls us away from intimacy with Him and from one another. The good news is that the Lord desires to be in community with you. This desire is why He went to such great lengths to secure your redemption from sin. The Enemy knows that if he can lead believers into sin, he can disrupt the relationship between Christ and the Christian. He also knows that it will disrupt the relationship between the Christian and other Christians.

God, however, as we learned this summer has already prescribed the protective covering and sanctification against sin. It is the church. It is the body of Christ and the believers' involvement in it. When believers are living in biblical community as a church, dwelling together in small groups, and replicating themselves through smaller discipleship groups the power of Satan and sin are loosened. And the loneliness of isolation turns into a community of intimacy.

Is that not amazing? Believers' living in community with one another drives away isolation and replaces it with intimacy.

“True friendship calls you out of the darkness of personal privacy into the loving candor of mutual concern. It moves you from being a sealed envelope to being an open letter.”
– Paul Tripp

We often use the phrase “personal relationship” when telling others about Jesus Christ. This past week I used it every time I spoke with people in India. I used it because those I was sharing with needed to know that the Lord is not another distant god like all the gods of Hinduism, so instead I stressed that God loved them and desired to be their friend and Father.

The phrase, however, is only part of the truth. The other part reveals that God's design is for believers to be deeply connected in community with other followers of Christ. If we

only speak of a believer's personal relationship with Jesus, then one might think that the Christian faith is private – only between you and God. Private Christian faith is an oxymoron, like white chocolate, jumbo shrimp, and ACC football.

If you are in relationship with Jesus Christ, then you have been redeemed individually. But you are not the only individual who has been redeemed. From the very beginning God has been building a people for Himself. He has been building a family of faith that unites across the dividing lines of race, nationality, politics, and economics. God dwells together in perfect community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And out of that divine community flows His design for humanity to be involved in relationships with one another.

It started with Adam and Eve, and from them to us today, mankind has always worked to be in relationship with others. This desire for community is personified by the popularity of social media. Facebook claims over 900 million active users. Services like Twitter and Instagram allow users to bombard each other with even the most boring details of their lives as they post selfies and pictures of their cheeseburgers. Technology has enabled humanity to be more connected, more informed, and more social than at any other point in history, but connectivity does not equate to community. The ability to connect quickly doesn't automatically require depth in relationships.

This is further illustrated by what we see at a typical Starbucks. There you will see a strange thing taking place among all the "connections." Starbucks was founded to be a place for relationships. The idea was to create a coffee shop environment where people would not just purchase coffee to go but stay and enjoy the coffee together. The founder sought to capitalize on the intrinsic desire for community.

What you find at a Starbucks, however, are people together in one place but also alone. They are sitting around with their faces buried in their laptops and smartphones. They have

earbuds in their ears. They are completely isolated from everyone else in the room. According to Matt Chandler, this "all alone, all together" phenomenon is merely symptomatic of what's at play in human relationships throughout our culture.

So although, we are more connected than we've ever been, we also feel more alone and unknown than at any other time in human history. We relate without relationships, all together but all alone. This perversion of community, so common today in our culture, is why most believers cannot understand the significance of the local church in their lives. So what is it that biblical community is built upon?

Read Philippians 1:3-5.

Paul was thankful for all of those who made up the Philippian church. Who were some of the members of this local church? Acts 16 identifies three of its members. First, there was a woman named Lydia. She was a wealthy lady who owned a thriving fabric business. She was the type of woman who today would fly first-class, eat at expensive restaurants, and take exotic vacations. She owned a large home, which she offered to Paul for the church. Second, there was a young slave girl who had been demon-possessed. She had a very dark past, having seen and experienced things that no young lady should ever have to undergo. She was deeply hurt. Third, there was the Philippian jailer. He was a blue-collar type of guy who probably was rough around the edges.

This little church in Philippi was made up of people like these three. There was the upscale businesswoman whose material success could never satisfy her; a slave girl with a deep, dark, wounded past; a tough nosed jailer and his family. What did these people have in common? They wouldn't have eaten in the same restaurants, hung out in the same part of town, or even listened to the same kinds of music. This little church teaches us some great lessons about the community of faith.

1. The gospel is the one thing that binds believers together.

Paul cherished the Philippians partnership in the gospel (vs. 5). Jesus had radically transformed their lives. They shared a common bond deeper than anything that divided them. As we have learned, the gospel by its very nature forms community.

“The church is...made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together...because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ...They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus’ sake.” – D.A. Carson

Every single person is different, but in Jesus Christ we are brought together as a unified body. Jesus doesn’t call us to uniformity; He calls us to unity. And unity in the gospel is much deeper than surface uniformity.

2. Community is shallow and temporary when it is built on anything other than the gospel.

The reason most relationships do not last is because they are built upon commonalities that change over time. When the common bond changes the relationship changes.

Illust: In Alabama we had some really good friends who lived across the road from us. They have three young girls very similar in age to ours. Most evenings we would hang out together in the street, eating dinner in lawn chairs. Our girls would ride their bikes and electric cars. We talked all the time. Since moving to Virginia, our relationship has weakened. We still talk, but it is not very often. What happened? The context changed. Even though our friends are believers, our relationship was not built upon the gospel. It was built

upon the proximity of our homes and the fact that we have girls who are the same age.

If relationships aren't built on something deeper than living in the same neighborhood, working at the same company, or having kids in the same activities, they will change whenever the common bond is no longer there. Community is only as strong as that which it is built upon. Like the Philippian believers, we must build our relationships on the gospel. Our common bond is the knowledge that each of us were broken people who have been made whole in Jesus Christ.

3. The gospel must continually form community.

Though the Philippian believers had been brought together only because of the gospel, Paul knew that the gospel must continually form community. The Christian faith is and has always been an interdependent grouping of people rescued by Jesus. We have been made righteous in position but are not yet fully righteous in practice. The Holy Spirit is sanctifying us. Thus, there is a continual battle between our old sinful nature and the new spiritual nature in Christ. This struggle ought to constantly lead us back to the gospel.

When believers forget the gospel and all that Jesus has done for and in them, in the context of community they will drift in one of two ways. Believers will drift toward dependence or independence. Those who become dependent on other believers find their identity, security, or worth in someone else. It might be their pastor, a friend, a certain teacher, or a person they can't live without. Unhealthy dependence is actually a form of idolatry because the believer is finding ultimate fulfillment in someone other than God.

Others drift toward independence, which is equally destructive. Believers who pursue independence

foolishly attempt to live an isolated faith, recklessly believing that the Christian life can be lived in one's own might and merit. Independence shuns community and refuses to lean on others for maturity, growth, sharing, and serving.

The gospel does not point us to dependence or independence. It pulls us toward interdependence. Paul reminded the Philippian believers to keep the gospel as the impetus for their community.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, – Philippians 1:27

In 2:2 Paul encouraged them because of Christ to have “the same mind”, “the same love, and “to be in full accord and of one mind.” He pleaded with them to submit to one another as Christ submitted to death, to have the same humble attitude as His (2:5-8). Paul knew that contrary to a community centered in Jesus is the thinking that some believers are at a different level of righteousness than other believers...that some believers are better.

The problem with this thinking is that the Bible never speaks of it. There are no levels in Christianity. No believer is more righteous than another believer. Positionally, every follower of Jesus has been made righteous before God. Therefore, our community is built upon the gospel as we behold the Lord Jesus.

If something other than the person and work of Jesus becomes the foundation for a group of believers, that “other thing,” whatever it is – economic level, social manners, music preferences, common life experiences – becomes what it used to differentiate themselves from

others. And it immediately becomes a point of boasting, a way to feel justified.

For the Galatians, the commonality became circumcision. Those in that church began to only fellowship with those who had been circumcised. Today in our churches, it can be a myriad of things like “we’re the deeper group” or “the missions group” or whatever. In our sinfulness, these commonalities can become the bond that holds us together instead of the gospel. Or even worse they can become prideful distinctions that repel others from a community that should be inclusive and open.

Conclusion: The gospel is the commonality which all believers share together, and that will never change. Whether we are single or married, with children or no children, hyper-religious or irreligious, young or old, all Christ followers living in biblical community have a common place to stand together. In fact if your small group is not centered on the common need for and common experience of grace, then it is actually doing more harm than good to the gospel movement. If our groups are not gospel-centered and gospel-fueled, they are merely a social outlet for people, and they lack the power for transformation. Next Sunday we will unpack the transformational aspect.

What is your community built upon? Are your relationships built upon the gospel or something else?