

In the past, we have talked about who Jesus has asked us to be here—who we think that He is leading us to be.

- **MISSIONAL LIVING:** We talked about missional living, living life on purpose, and living with intention.
- **TRUTH:** We also talked about how truth is not just this Book, but to Whom this Book leads us. Jesus says that, “I am the Truth.” It is not a set of do’s and don’ts that need to be mastered, but rather, it is a Man. It is God’s self-disclosure of Himself to us.

These traits, that I have just mentioned, don’t take place in a vacuum and neither does intimacy with Jesus. Somehow along the way, intimacy with Jesus became completely up to the omnipotent Christian alone. So all of us feel very lonely in this pursuit, and we feel that we are not getting there because we are lazy or there is sin in our lives. Some of those may be the pieces, but this journey to know Jesus deeply is inescapably corporate. I want to talk to you about the glue that holds these traits together, which is this last trait. I also want to talk to you about intimacy with Jesus.

Constantine – 325 AD

But, we have to solve some things that went awry in 325 AD. The Roman Empire started to unravel at the time that this genius emperor Constantine noticed that Christianity was flourishing no matter how it was oppressed. Christians were killed, imprisoned, and their property stolen, but nothing stopped them. Constantine thought that if he could join Rome to this religion, maybe the Roman Empire would not implode on his watch. So Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the Roman religion. In an instant, what had always been about people became an institution. The problems that were birthed into our faith in 325AD are still trying to be solved today because Jesus never called us to be an institution. He called us to a body, and things get broken quickly when you can join an institution without joining the body. We find ourselves caught up into something bigger than most of us can fathom.

I want us to understand what it looks like to follow Jesus on its purest day and, hopefully, we can fight for that. Community, fellowship, and life together are this romantic idea that is very difficult to achieve.

Let me show you some things in Acts 2:42-47

42They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47praising God and

enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

So in its purest day, this is the closest picture of what the people of Jesus are suppose to look and be like. Now, I don't want to throw any romance into this text. Try to imagine thousands and thousands of people coming into a relationship with Christ with very few teachers and very few materials. This was a train wreck for a couple of hundred years. If you don't believe me, the reason that you have your New Testament is because of this wreck. Almost every New Testament Book is basically an attempt to right the wrongs, i.e., stop doing that and start doing this.

This time period is very messy, but we get some things that, as a whole, we may have lost. I think that every generation since 325AD has been trying to get back to the first century way of Jesus that is a body of people rather than an institution.

Discipleship

You can see in verse 42, the followers of Jesus were committed to two things. First, they were devoted to the apostles' teachings. Now, we have to redefine discipleship. Discipleship in our age is defined by going through a book with another person and memorizing certain texts. Discipleship during the early church was not memorizing Scripture and then putting a fish on your car. **Discipleship in the first century was simply: live this way.**

Jesus said that He came so that we might have life, not that we might have belief, and that we might live that life unto abundance. So He tells the disciples to follow Him, which translates into, "Live like I do". He takes them up the mountainside and right before He ascends into heaven, He tells them to go and make disciples and teach them how to live.

"We live like this; it is the way to follow and live the way of Jesus."

This idea of discipleship was not just built around collecting cognitive knowledge, but rather was a way of living. This is why the followers of Jesus were known, in Acts 9:2, as the Way because they had this way of living that was contrary to how the rest of the world lived. So the apostles' teaching is not just theology. It is a simple statement saying, "We live like this; it is the way to follow and live the way of Jesus." So they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and they devoted themselves to fellowship. So not only did they devote themselves to learning how to live, but also devoted themselves to doing it together.

What happens when the church becomes an institution rather than a body? The danger is that we can join the institution without ever joining the body. We can become devoted to the accumulation of knowledge and do simple acts of service and never devote ourselves to one another.

Rhythms

The Bible tells us that iron sharpens iron. The book of Hebrews tells us to encourage one another daily. We talk a lot here about how God created the world to run on rhythm, i.e., we work six days and rest on one. There is this rhythm, beat, or groove underneath all that is and happens. One of the rhythms is that, in order for my relationship with Jesus not to grow stagnant and cold, I need to do real life with somebody. Otherwise there is no built in accountability for the actions of my life. If I don't have this, then I continue to suck in knowledge and do nothing with it. However, if there is this group of people who come together and say they are going to live the way of Jesus, they need each other to get there. So let's not devote ourselves just to learning, but also to doing real life together. The early Christians had a fierce commitment to one another that, if you look around, is lacking in the church today.

In order to mature, we must really walk together in committed relationship. So the early church members devoted themselves, not to classes and books, i.e., Paul's latest book or Peter's latest CD, even though those things are not wrong. However, **if the girth and weight of your spiritual growth involves only you, then I think that you are going to grow to a point and then grow cold.**

When there is true devotion to a family, there are these other things that begin to happen. One of them is in Acts 2:45

45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Now, this is a very emotional text. These people are doing life and walking together in such a way that, when one of them has life go bad, others are selling all that they have to make the pain stop. These are the people who live out the Biblical mandate of mourning with those who mourn and rejoicing with those who rejoice. The concept that we are connected at that level, where the joys and sorrows of others bring us joy and sorrow, is foreign to most of us.

Hotel Rwanda

I don't know if you have seen the movie, Hotel Rwanda? If you haven't, you should see it, but don't take the kids. There is a part in the movie that so describes us because we are so idealistic in our minds, but lazy in our lives. In the movie, a reporter had just filmed these people who were being massacred, and the Rwandans were thankful that it was going to be broadcast on the news. They thought that Americans would see it and help them. The reporter who worked for CNN said, "I want to be really honest with you. What is going to happen is that the Americans are going to be eating dinner while watching the news and think—how horrible—and then switch over to "Will and Grace" and continue eating." I wonder if we have created insensitivity to the hurting, wounded, broken, and needy.

It eventually will become me

Let me tell you the danger in developing that kind of insensitivity. Eventually, it will be me in the hospital; eventually, it will be my family who gets the bad news; eventually, it will be my daughter who goes crazy for two weeks or two decades. And, eventually, it will be you who will lose your job, etc. The younger ones in the room may disagree, but surely, if you are over forty, you know your turn is coming. No one escapes pain forever. So what happened in the early church, is that there was a fierce commitment to, not only teaching and truth, but to caring and sharing all that they had. This was done to such an extent that people were moved to sell their stuff to solve other people's crisis. How often have you heard that happen in our churches today? It is a rarity at best.

Not only is mutual care created, but also love. Look at Acts 2:46

46Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

They were going to each other's homes to eat meals together. There was food, drink, laughter, gladness, confession, prayer, and talk about Jesus. I believe that this went way into the night, only to be repeated the next night. Dinner is a lost art in the States. Here, if we don't have our drink, appetizer, meal, and ticket in nine minutes, the server has lost his tip. Of course, we leave a track to punctuate that we are cheap Christians! So we have lost the art of conversation, story, and real connection. Instead, we have defined fellowship as the potluck dinner and Super Bowl party. How did we let such a beautiful idea get hijacked by the sport's enthusiast?

Pretenders

Here is the thing about real Biblical fellowship: it can only happen when all the cards are on the table. That is the only time when we are honest about who we are, where we are, what's really going on in our lives, what are our struggles, and what are we doing right. When we are pretenders, wear the right clothes and say the right things, but have no real relationship to Jesus, then we can never receive love. We can never feel cared for or even feel liked because we know that people might like the false us, but we are not sure that they would like the real us. So if we say that our life with Jesus is great, but in reality, we can't find Him anywhere, then we are reduced to throwing out these bumper sticker, Christian cliques. People may like us and want to hang out with us, but there is no way that we can receive that as genuine love and affection. The reason that we can't is because we are liars and that is not the genuine us.

So real fellowship happens when we tell others who we are, about our real struggles and our real growth. In that moment, real fellowship occurs. Everything else is superficial chatter, which can be a good time, but not biblical fellowship. Biblical fellowship has sincerity of heart attached to it—honesty. Where we are not honest, we are not in fellowship. Here is another thing that I want us to see, and it is a big one.

Look at Acts 2:43

43Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

Picture of old men talking and telling stories of the good old days

So we are listening and laughing and, for some reason, the Holy Spirit seared that picture into my mind.

My dream is that we will be sitting with our coffee and telling stories. But what do people talk about who just hop and never tie into a body of Christ? What will they talk about when they are in their seventies and sucking coffee? Will they just talk about sermons and songs? They would not be able to talk about lives changed by the gospel, when marriage were healed, when neighbors were saved, workplaces impacted by Jesus, or mission trips together. What are the stories that go along with mere attendance at a church? There is no awe in taking sermon notes or listening to music.

I'll never forget the training that I got for planting MDC. It there where I heard an older guy named Del Steel

“ I hate the music at The Village—it is loud! I would rather listen to hymns played on a piano or an organ, but don't cater to me. If men and women are being saved, if we are faithful to the Word of God, if I get to live in awe of Jesus reaching the generations behind me, then play whatever you want and I'll bring earplugs. ”

See here is how it is—we have to become a real critic if we are not in the game, and the entire church experience is about us and what we want. This is the reason that so many have no awe in their lives.

Our journey is inescapably corporate, and the more individualized it becomes, the more difficult or impossible it is to mature in Jesus. Even in our individual pursuit, what begins to happen is that we acquire all kinds of knowledge, but have no real way to push that knowledge out and do something with it. So in the end, even with all of our theological brilliance, we are really cold, hard-hearted people who never weep or rejoice with others. We would never sell our property to help others “who got themselves into that predicament”.

So the church before Constantine was fiercely committed to teaching and learning the way of Jesus and doing it together. We see barely a shadow of that these days. We have been beating our head against a brick wall for the last 1500 years by trying to grow into maturity with no connection to one another. This idea of really walking together in an intimate way is difficult. We hear a sermon like this, and then we go our small group and think that there will be mutual caring and fellowship. Then we get there and decide that we really don't want to do it with these people. We want all those things, but we don't like any of these people.

Can I tell you why community and fellowship is so difficult?

Can I tell you why community and fellowship is so difficult? It is because we have to deal with our own issues to get deep with others. It's because our own issues boil up and come to the top, and most people don't want to deal with their own garbage. They just want to point out everyone else's. So when we want to do life deeply with others, we tend to put this barrier around ourselves and just can't let go. I think that one of the confessions that has to take place in community is just that we confess this very real struggle.

I know that we need that time to heal, but here's the thing. We can't say that, because it is risky, we aren't going to do it. If we think that way, then

- we should not be married because marriage is risky and
- we should never have kids because they are risky, too.
- We certainly wouldn't want to travel—look at the risk that we are taking by doing that.

Why do we attach this mentality to the church when we don't attach it to other areas of our lives? We think that it is too risky to be real, so I want no part of it. In reality, everything is risky! I am telling you that the risk is worth the reward. We are going to ask you to get into the game because we believe that one it is how God created us.

But here is another reason, the world, including the church is relationally impoverished. We have a lot of work to be done in terms of teaching, forging, and creating community. We are going to need the Holy Spirit of Jesus, working through you, to help. You have been given gifts, and we need you to get into the game. I can't institutionalize this for you. I have done the best that I can by telling you that you can't be a member here without being in a small group.

We have to fight for this because I don't want to be the ringleader in some circus. I want to be in a place that fights for depth of relationship and community. It is not going to be clean; it is bloody and dirty, but in the end, the garden grows. I can't make it happen—you will have to fight for it. I am fighting for it by trying to be honest with the people God has me running with. I'm learning to be honest about my struggles, my sins, when I feel near to Jesus, and when I don't. We are learning to fellowship together and to love Jesus together. I'm trying to be fiercely committed to that, but I can't institutionalize it.

Men, I think that you, especially, are not verbal and are stuffed full of pride. We don't want to admit that we don't have our marriages and our money figured out and that we feel very alone. So may Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, give us the courage to be His people. Let us not bend our knees to the idea of an institution, but know that our connection to Him and our connection to one another are all a part of His plan. May we live counter-culturally, and may we once again learn the art of dinner.