

## **DAY 19 CULTIVATING COMMUNITY**

You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

James 3:18 (Msg)

They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Acts 2:42 (Msg)

### **Community requires commitment.**

Only the Holy Spirit can create real fellowship between believers, but he cultivates it with the choices and commitments we make. Paul points out this dual responsibility when he says, "You are joined together with peace through the Spirit, so make every effort to continue together in this way.' It takes both God's power and our effort to produce a loving Christian community.

Unfortunately, many people grow up in families with unhealthy relationships, so they lack the relational skills needed for real fellowship. They must be taught how to get along with and relate to others in God's family. Fortunately, the New Testament is filled with instruction on how to share life together. Paul wrote, "I am writing these things to you ... [so] you will know how to live in the family of God. That family is the church."

If you're tired of fake fellowship and you would like to cultivate real fellowship and a loving community in your small group, Sunday school class, and church, you'll need to make some tough choices and take some risks.

### **Cultivating community takes honesty.**

You will have to care enough to lovingly speak the truth, even when you would rather gloss over a problem or ignore an issue. While it is much easier to remain silent when others around us are harming themselves or others with a sinful pattern, it is not the loving thing to do. Most people have no one in their lives who loves them enough to tell them the truth (even when it's painful), so they continue in self-destructive ways.

Often, we know what needs to be said to someone, but our fears prevent us from saying anything.

Many fellowships have been sabotaged by fear: No one had the courage to speak up in the group while a member's life fell apart.

The Bible tells us to "speak the truth in love" because we can't have community without candor. Solomon said, "An honest answer is a sign of true friendship." Sometimes this means caring enough to lovingly confront one who is sinning or is being tempted to sin. Paul says, "Brothers and sisters, if someone in your group does something wrong, you who are spiritual should go to that person and gently help make him right again."

Many church fellowships and small groups remain superficial because they are afraid of conflict. Whenever an issue pops up that might cause tension or discomfort, it is immediately glossed over in order to preserve a false sense of peace. Mr. "Don't Rock the Boat" jumps in and tries to smooth everyone's ruffled feathers, the issue is never resolved, and everyone lives with an underlying frustration. Everyone knows about the problem, but no one talks about it openly. This creates a sick environment of secrets where gossip thrives. Paul's solution was straightforward: "No more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself."

Real fellowship, whether in a marriage, a friendship, or your church, depends on frankness. In fact, the tunnel of conflict is the passageway to intimacy in any relationship. Until you care enough to confront and resolve the underlying barriers, you will never grow close to each other. When conflict is handled correctly, we grow closer to each other by facing and resolving our differences. The Bible says, "In the end, people appreciate frankness more than flattery. "

Frankness is not a license to say anything you want, wherever and whenever you want. It is not rudeness. The Bible tells us there is a right time and a right way to do everything." Thoughtless words leave lasting wounds. God tells us to speak to each other in the church as loving family members: "Never use harsh words when you correct an older man, but talk to him as if he were your father. Talk to younger men as if they were your brothers, older women as if they were your mothers, and younger women as if they were your sisters."

Sadly, thousands of fellowships have been destroyed by a lack of honesty. Paul had to rebuke the Corinthian church for their passive code of silence in allowing immorality in their fellowship. Since no one had the courage to confront it, he said, "You must not simply look the other way and hope it goes away on its own. Bring it out in the open and deal with it.... Better devastation and embarrassment than damnation.... You pass it off as a small thing, but it's anything but that... you shouldn't act as if everything is just fine when one of your Christian companions is promiscuous or crooked, is flip with God or rude to friends, gets drunk or becomes greedy and predatory. You can't just go along with this, treating it as acceptable behavior. I'm not responsible for what the outsiders do, but don't we have some responsibility for those within our community of believers?"

When conflict is handled correctly, we grow closer to each other.

***Cultivating community takes humility.*** Self-importance, smugness, and stubborn pride destroy fellowship faster than anything else. Pride builds walls between people; humility builds bridges. Humility is the oil that smoothes and soothes relationships. That's why the Bible says, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another."<sup>11</sup> The proper dress for fellowship is a humble attitude.

The rest of that verse says, "... because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." This is the other reason we need to be humble: Pride blocks God's grace in our lives, which we must have in order to grow, change, heal, and help others. We receive God's grace by humbly admitting that we need it. The Bible says anytime we are prideful, we are living in opposition to God! That is a foolish and dangerous way to live.

You can develop humility in very practical ways: by admitting your weaknesses, by being patient with others' weaknesses, by being open to correction, and by pointing the spotlight on others. Paul advised, "Live in harmony with each other. Don't try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!" To the Christians in Philippi he wrote, "Give more honor to others than to yourselves. Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others."

Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less. Humility is thinking more of others. Humble people are so focused on serving others, they don't think of themselves.

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**Cultivating community takes courtesy.** Courtesy is respecting our differences, being considerate of each other's feelings, and being patient with people who irritate us. The Bible says, 'We must bear the `burden' of being considerate of the doubts and fears of others.' Paul told Titus, "God's people should be bighearted and courteous." In every church and in every small group, there is always at least one "difficult" person, usually more than one. These people may have special emotional needs, deep insecurities, irritating mannerisms, or poor social skills. You might call them EGR people-"Extra Grace Required."

God put these people in our midst for both their benefit and ours. They are an opportunity for growth and a test of fellowship: Will we love them as brothers and sisters and treat them with dignity?

In a family, acceptance isn't based on how smart or beautiful or talented you are. It's based on the fact that we belong to each other. We defend and protect family. A family member may be a little goofy, but she's one of us. In the same way, the Bible says, `Be devoted to each other like a loving family. Excel in showing respect for each other."

The truth is, we all have quirks and annoying traits. But community has nothing to do with compatibility. The basis for our fellowship is our relationship to God: We're family.

One key to courtesy is to understand where people are coming from. Discover their history. When you know what they've been through, you will be more understanding. Instead of thinking about how far they still have to go, think about how far they have come in spite of their hurts.

Another part of courtesy is not downplaying other people's doubts. Just because you don't fear something doesn't make it an invalid feeling. Real community happens when people know it is safe enough to share their doubts and fears without being judged.

The fellowship of the church is more important than any individual.

**Cultivating community takes confidentiality.**

Only in the safe environment of warm acceptance and trusted confidentiality will people open up and share their deepest hurts, needs, and mistakes. Confidentiality does not mean keeping silent while your brother or sister sins. It means that what is shared in your group needs to stay in your group, and the group needs to deal with it, not gossip to others about it.

God hates gossip, especially when it is thinly disguised as a "prayer request" for someone else. God says, "Gossip is spread by wicked people; they stir up trouble and break up friendships." Gossip always causes hurt and divisions, and it destroys fellowship, and God is very clear that we are to confront those who cause division among Christians. They may get mad and leave your group or church if you confront them about their divisive actions, but the fellowship of the church is more important than any individual.

**Cultivating community takes frequency.**

You must have frequent, regular contact with your group in order to build genuine fellowship. Relationships take time. The Bible tells us, "Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another:" We are to develop the habit of meeting together. A habit is something you do with frequency, not occasionally. You have to spend time with people-a lot of time-to build deep relationships. This is why fellowship is so shallow in many churches; we don't spend enough time together, and the time we do spend is usually listening to one person speak.

Community is built not on convenience ("we'll get together when I feel like it") but on the conviction that I need it for spiritual health. If you want to cultivate real fellowship, it will mean meeting together even when you don't feel like it, because you believe it is important. The first Christians met together every day! "They worshiped together regularly at the Temple each day, met in small groups in homes for Communion, and shared their meals with great joy and thankfulness." Fellowship requires an investment of time.

If you are a member of a small group or class, I urge you to make a group covenant that includes the nine characteristics of biblical fellowship: We will share our true feelings (authenticity), encourage each other (mutuality), support each other (sympathy), forgive each other (mercy), speak the truth in love (honesty), admit our weaknesses (humility), respect our differences, (courtesy), not gossip (confidentiality), and make group a priority (frequency).

When you look at the list of characteristics, it is obvious why genuine fellowship is so rare. It means giving up our self-centeredness and independence in order to become interdependent. But the benefits of sharing life together far outweigh the costs, and it prepares us for heaven.