

Introduction

Community is one of those basics of the basics in the Christian life, up there with the word, prayer, and walking in the Holy Spirit. Why is it so important? → First, it is basically the context in which we are to live the Christian life. Everything else we do in the Christian life is meant to be done in community and informed by community. And we receive training and instruction and support and help with every aspect of the Christian life in community. Second, community is of tremendous importance to God. It is the desire of God’s heart for his children and his plan for manifesting his glory. We will talk more about that in this study. But very simply, God is love, and community is all about love.

(Since the topic is community, the first thing for us to do is define it and talk about what it involves. So, how would you define community? What is it? What does it involve?)

I. Community means committed loving relationships in the context of the local church.

- 1 John 3:11-18

- What is the significance of this message being heard from the beginning? → It is basic and essential. Love for brothers and sisters in Christ (fellow believers) is fundamental to the Christian faith. See v. 14, which indicates that loving one another shows we are Christians and have eternal life and that we are not true Christians or saved if we don’t love one another. Community is incredibly important.

- What is love? → See vv. 16-18. Laying down your life. What does that mean? → Sacrificing for the good of another even unto death if necessary; putting another first before self

- How does v. 17 relate to love or laying down one’s life? → Gives a concrete example of it -- meeting another’s needs at own expense

A. Love is a commitment to another’s best interest even at one’s own expense.

- Who does “one another” refer to in the call to love one another? → brothers and sisters in Christ/fellow believers (vv. 16-17), especially in our local church since the original readers would have read this letter in the context of their local church and that was their main connection with fellow believers

B. Christian community is to be marked by self-sacrificing love in the local church, serving one another, and meeting one another’s needs, and working for one another’s best interest.

- Imagine a community of people dedicated to loving one another like this. What would that look like?

- Acts 2:42-47

- The Greek word for fellowship used in this passage is *koinonia*, which has the sense of sharing in something with others and participating in something with others. What does this passage reveal about Christian community and fellowship? → Devoting ourselves to the things mentioned here, sharing in them and participating in them together. Sharing in one another’s lives, living life together, sharing all that we have with one another, eating together, etc. New English Bible translation: “They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life.”

- What is the basis of all of this shared life together? What is it all to be about? → Jesus! Our community and fellowship, our shared life, should be centered on Christ.

- How often was the early church together from what we see in this passage? → A lot! Met together daily and ate together in their homes. They seem to have been loving one another, worshipping together, really knowing one another, and sharing all of life together.
 - A quick note: When the Bible talks about the church, it is not talking about a building, but about people. A local church is a group of Christians who gather together regularly to worship the Lord and to pursue the Lord and the things of him together, to live out his will together, live out community together as we are talking about it in this study.
- C. Community involves being together, participating in one another's lives, and living life together before the Lord.
- D. As committed loving relationships, community involves commitment.
- Various passages that we are looking at in this study clearly manifest the concept of commitment to one another. For one very explicit example, see Rom 12:10.
 - We have already defined love itself as a commitment, a commitment to another's best interest. Commitment is of the essence of love.
 - Christian love is unconditional.
 - What does all of this mean for our relationships in the church? → Our love for one another involves being there for one another, sticking together through thick and thin, and working out issues through the hard times.
 - Does that bring freedom in any way? If so, how? → The commitment to stick it out with one another frees us up to be real and frees us from anxiety over rejection and frees us up to help one another grow in Christ.
 - How might being with others who are different from us + even having conflict to work out be beneficial? → Helps us to grow in perspective, love, and Christlikeness
 - We are a family committed to one another and our Heavenly Father.
- What specific aspect of love/community do we see in Matt 18:15-17?
- E. Community involves accountability.
- How is the practice of church discipline (Mt 18) loving? → Holding one another accountable is loving because we are watching out for one another and our relationships with the Lord. Walking in sin is bad for us. If someone will not turn from their sin, discipline is a last resort option that might move them to repentance, and it lovingly protects the community from their sin if not. It also lovingly preserves the church's witness for the sake of the lost.
 - Where do we see accountability in Col 3:15-17? → In the words "teach" and "admonish," especially "admonish," which means "warn." Because we love one another, we warn each other against sin and ungodliness. We speak the truth to one another in love (Eph 4:15).
- What aspects of community do we see in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14-15?

F. Community involves edification, encouragement, support, and help.

-- Romans 12:3-18 – What aspects of community do we see in this passage?

v. 3 – Humility

vv. 4-5 – Body metaphor; we belong to one another!

vv. 6-8 – We all have gifts to be used for the Lord and his body. Every individual has a job to do in the body. We should all be contributing and doing our part.

vv. 9-18 – We treat each other as members of the same body. We love and care for one another. Each member is devoted to helping and supporting the rest. We rejoice and grieve with one another.

-- What does all of this suggest for decision-making? → For decisions about our individual lives, take into account how they affect others in our church family and the best interest of our church community and get prayer and input from fellow church members, especially church leadership

G. Community involves a humble, community outlook and corporate decision making.

- Are you fully involved in the church and in committed, loving relationships here?

II. Community is the desire of God's heart for his children.

A. God's heart for community pervades the NT. It comes out even in the way most of the NT epistles are addressed, to churches rather than to individuals. You can't even fulfill many of the NT's commands unless involved and committed to a local church since so many are about relating to brothers and sisters in one's local church family.

B. What do you think parents want for their children relating to one another? → One of their greatest desires is for their children to get along, be there for one another, serve one another, and be best friends; the wellness of their household depends on it. We are God's children. We are his family. And his great desire for us is to love one another. He greatly desires that we live in community together.

C. Ephesians 4:25-5:2

1. In this passage, do you see this point that the desire of God's heart for his children is community as we have defined it? How? → The whole passage describes community life. But 5:1-2 really brings home this point as it connects our being God's dearly loved children to the call to imitate him.

-- And as his dearly loved children, how are we supposed to imitate our Heavenly Father? → Sacrificially love one another as Christ loved us

-- Do you think of your church as your family?

2. Community is of supreme importance to God. And if it is of supreme importance to him, it should be of supreme importance to us.

3. What does it suggest that our attitude should be toward the church with it being the body of Christ? → We should love it. Since the church is the body of Christ, it can hardly be separated from him. Therefore, the church should be at the center of our lives because Jesus should be at the center of our lives. Our lives should be centered around Jesus, one another, and the mission he has given us.

- Do you organize your life (and the life of your family) around your church as the household of God and the local expression of the body of Christ ?

III. Community is God's plan for manifesting his glory.

A. What is the glory of God ? → The revelation of his being and character, and the honor due his glorious majesty

B. Romans 15:5-7 – How do these verses indicate God is glorified through community? → Unity, a way of referring to community, glorifies God. Loving one another, brings him praise.

C. John 17:20-26

1. Jesus expressing his heart right before going to the cross. This is among the most important things on his heart.
2. What does Jesus pray for in vv. 20-23? → For his followers to be united. He prays for community among us.
3. What is the result of unity/community? → The World will know that the Father sent Jesus and loves us. The World being drawn to Jesus and his salvation. The Lord being glorified. He reveals his nature of love as his children love one another so that the World beholds his glory; they see his salvation and love. God glorifies himself through us, through our love for one another, through community.
4. Compare John 13:34-35. Love glorifies Jesus. Community glorifies Jesus.

D. The triune God is love because he is three divine persons who love one another perfectly; he is a type of community, a community of love. And his desire to glorify himself is his desire to manifest and multiply his love throughout all of creation.

1. So where do we and our community come in? → God has lavished his love upon us, sacrificing his own Son so that we might share his love in eternal life. And he seeks to produce his love in us so that we might love one another and thereby reflect and manifest his glory, that he might be all in all!
2. In a sense, God is seeking to reproduce himself through community. He is the God of love and wants each church to be a picture of him and his glory.
3. Community is at the heart of who God is and it is his goal for creation, that we might have community with him and one another.

Conclusion

Community means committed loving relationships in the context of the local church. It is the desire of God's heart for his children. And it is his plan for manifesting his glory. We are part of God's family. We are his children and brothers and sisters in Christ. And God calls us to live in loving community with one another for our own spiritual growth, well-being, and protection, for his glory, and for winning the World to Christ.

- Is there anything you need to change in your life in order to live out God's plan for community?
- What could you do to live out community more in your situation?

Questions for further discussion if there is time:

- How are Christian relationships countercultural?
- What kind of impact has the church made in your life in terms of feeling a part of a Christian family?
- In what ways do you find it difficult to live in community with others?