



Healthy Church

Session 9: Fellowship

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

In our Western world, it's easy to think that growing in discipleship is a solo practice. We can read our Bibles alone, pray alone, and even worship alone. However, that's not the way God created us to live. We're made for community.

In today's texts, we'll get a picture of how authentic fellowship with other believers is essential, not only to the ministry and mission of the church but also to each one of us in spiritual development. Some spiritual fruit—kindness, gentleness, and compassion, for example—are born out of the messiness of everyday life with other believers.

Fellowship is meant for more than just our own development; we're also meant to spur each other on. Much like a cowboy nudging a horse along, our authentic fellowship with other Christians is how we spur one another on to love God, love others, and share His mission in the world.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 13:34-35; Hebrews 10:24-25; Colossians 3:12-17

THE MAIN IDEA

Christian fellowship is more than just sharing prayer requests or a potluck. As we love one another, spur one another on, and serve one another, the church grows and our faith increases.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What are some incorrect ways you've thought about church fellowship? Look for ways today's lesson might challenge and expand your perspective.

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 13:34-35 The apostle John used the word *agape* for love seventy-six times in the New Testament. Agape love is the unconditional, benevolent love that best describes God's love for His people. A church is more than a collection of individuals. As believers show agape love for one another, they represent Christ and His love in their community.

Hebrews 10:24-25 Christians are called to do more than just pray for and encourage one another. We are called to "spur one another on" toward righteousness, love, and good works. When we neglect living in authentic church community and meeting regularly with other believers, we miss out on a vital part of the discipleship process.

Colossians 3:12-17 Christians are called to "put on" the character qualities of the Holy Spirit, walking in love, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and peace. We can't do it alone, and we can't grow spiritual fruit alone. The Holy Spirit grows His fruit in us as we live in community with other believers, serving and love one another in Christ's name.

START HERE

Based on the availability of resources today, it would be easy to “go it alone” in our Christian walk. We have seemingly endless access to fantastic sermons, books, podcasts, and music at the click of a mouse. However, today’s texts challenge us to pursue an authentic community. Fellowship isn’t just something that happens over lunch after church. Real fellowship happens when believers enter one another’s lives with love, action, and grit. As we do, our faith and the faith of those around us will grow.

DISCUSS

Do you look forward to church fellowship, or do you find yourself shrinking back from self-disclosure and community? What does authentic fellowship look like, and what are some barriers in our world that make it difficult to achieve?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. In healthy churches, members love one another.

John 13:34-35: *“I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

Unpacking John 13:34-35

If you’ve spent any time around middle schoolers, you know young teens love slang. Whether it comes from what’s trending on social media or a funny thing said in class that everyone latches onto, this age group has their own inside language. It can be difficult for parents and teachers to decipher, and that’s part of the appeal. A quick “teen slang words” search will return lists of words like “bussin” (awesome), “cap” (lying for no good reason), or “rizz” (short for charisma). Of course, the danger of printing a list of slang is that the moment it’s printed, some terms will drop off and new ones will appear. It’s enough to drive a parent batty!

Not only do adolescents like to use slang, but when a word is especially popular, you might find your teens using it excessively. This is their way of working the word into their everyday vernacular. In the New Testament, we also see instances where biblical writers repeatedly use a word. Matthew, for example, liked to give exact counts and numbers of things in his descriptions. Mark used the word “gospel” or “good news” (*euangelion*) eight times in his short book, when Matthew used it four times, and the other writers did not use it at all. And John, the beloved disciple? Well, his favorite word, no surprise, is love (*agape*). John used the word “love” more than the other Gospel writers combined. In his five books of the Bible (John, 1–3 John, and Revelation), he used the word *agape* seventy-six times! He demonstrated how love is the primary attribute of God and should be the defining characteristic of His people.

The apostle's use of *agape* begins in John 3:16, *"For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."*

For believers to know how to love one another, we must first understand how God loves us. While the New Testament Greek uses three words for "love"—*phileo* (brotherly love), *eros* (romantic love), and *agape* (unconditional/sacrificial love)—John uses *agape* to describe God's love for us. It is also what he uses to describe the way we should love one another. God loved sinners (that's all of us) enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins. This is a debt of love no person could ever repay, and it is God's love that initiated a way for us to spend eternity with Him. Understanding, receiving, and responding by faith to God's love is the very beginning of our faith and the only way we can ever love others as God commands.

When we experience God's love personally, our natural desire is to share that love with others. On the night Jesus was arrested, He gave a final command to His disciples: *"Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (John 13:34-35). Jesus said that the primary characteristic of followers of Jesus should be the unconditional, sacrificial love they show one another.

Love is the primary characteristic of believers because it is the primary attribute of God. The church looks most like Jesus when its members love and serve others in His name. In fact, in Jesus's garden prayer on the night of His arrest, He prayed for a unifying love among God's people. *"I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me"* (John 17:20-23).

What does it look like to truly love one another? John gives us a few clues. In 1 John 3:16-18, John says our love for one another should model Christ's love for the church: *"This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth."* Radical generosity, compassion, and selfless love for one another are markers of Christian love. Real love among believers is more than empty words or promises to pray. John says real love is marked by acting out of love and walking in truthfulness with one another.

In our Western culture, we often view the Church as a collection of individuals who are learning alongside one another. The early Church, however, experienced a different kind of fellowship than we often see today. The book of Acts paints a vivid picture of what fellowship looked like for these believers: *"Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and*

broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). Their commitment to authentic community created a subculture for Christ that was undeniably visible to the world around them. Many people became Christians after witnessing the genuineness and extravagance of their love for one another.

In his book *Love Does*, author Bob Goff says, "But the kind of love that God created and demonstrated is a costly one because it involves sacrifice and presence. It's a love that operates more like a sign language than being spoken outright."¹ The real, physical presence of believers in one another's lives serves as the real, physical reminder of God's love and presence in each of our lives. In essence, the better we love one another, the better we love God.

DISCUSS

- *Why is the word agape fitting to describe not only God's love for us but also the way we should love one another?*
- *How does a Western view of the world impact the way we see church community?*
- *What can keep us from experiencing the kind of loving church community we just read about?*

2. In healthy churches, members spur one another on.

Hebrews 10:24-25: *"And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching."*

Unpacking Hebrews 10:24-25

Thinking back to our example of middle schoolers, if you are a parent of an adolescent, you know what it's like to try to motivate the unmotivated. A parent's job can feel like an endless cycle of reminding kids to wear their retainers at night, clean up their messes in the kitchen, or to put their dirty clothes in the hamper instead of on the floor right in front of it. While we know they will grow up and take care of things on their own one day, for now, a parent's job is to continually "nudge" their teen toward growth and responsibility.

In the same way, our job as a church community is to continually "nudge" one another toward Jesus. While our tendency might be to embrace individualism, the New Testament teaches that fellowship with other believers is more than just loving and praying for each other. We are supposed to encourage one another toward a growing and maturing faith.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer spent the first part of the book outlining the new covenant we have entered into with God through Christ. Now, he turns his attention to the community found among believers. In Hebrews 10:24, followers of Jesus are told to consider how we can "*spur*

one another on toward love and good works". Many things in the Christian life can be done in isolation—reading one's Bible, praying, memorizing Scripture, even worship. But loving one another is something that only happens in community. If we attempt to live the Christian life outside of fellowship with other believers, we will miss an essential element of our faith.

Like parents might spur their teens on toward cleaning their rooms and taking out the trash, knowing those disciplines will help mature and shape them, we are called to nudge each other along toward love and service. In verse 24, the author of Hebrews used the word *paroxysmos*, meaning to "provoke" or "irritate." It's only used one other time in the New Testament in Acts 15:39 to describe the sharp contention that arose in an argument between Paul and Barnabas. This is not a meek word: *Paroxysmos* is like a cowboy using his spurs to get a horse moving; it carries the idea of provoking one another, purposefully, in the direction of Christ.²

In many biblical accounts, we see someone nudging another believer in the direction of righteousness. Sometimes, like Nathan the prophet with David after the death of Uriah, it was a corrective posture (2 Samuel 12). Another example is Paul's correcting Peter for behaving differently around Jewish and Gentile Christians in Galatians 2:11-14. Other times, nudging someone looks more like a warning, such as God telling the prophet Ezekiel to warn God's people and encourage them to turn from their sin. God even said He would hold Ezekiel partially responsible if he failed to warn them (Ezekiel 3:16-27). Nudging might also mean encouraging someone to do the right thing, such as Daniel encouraging his friends not to defile themselves by breaking their food laws (Daniel 1:8-20). Not only did Daniel nudge his friends in the right direction, but he also modeled this by going first. God's Word is clear that we belong to one another as part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12). Whether rebuking, warning, or encouraging, believers are called to live in authentic community where we look out for and help one another follow Jesus.

Perhaps that is why we are instructed, in verse 25, to "not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching." Some Jewish Christians had minimized the need for or even stopped gathering regularly with other believers. Spending time with God's people isn't just a good idea; it's God's idea, and Hebrews tells us that regular assembly is where we encourage one another. Notice the kind of encouragement that is specifically noted—encouraging one another as "the Day" approaches. The early Christians faced all manner of trials and persecutions. Gathering and reminding each other about the promise of Christ's return strengthened their faith and allowed them to stay strong. Neglecting fellowship likely did the opposite and would have made it more difficult to stay true to Jesus during trials.

John Stott, in his book *The Living Church*, said "We are not only Christian people; we are also church people. We are not only committed to Christ, but we are also committed to the body of Christ. At least I hope so. This is not a matter of option: our membership in the Church is part of our Christian discipleship."³

In the last few years, it has become possible to “attend” church without ever leaving the house or even getting out of your pajamas! With access to the internet, you are just a few clicks away from watching or listening to worship and preaching from some of the most influential leaders in the world. Online church made it possible for believers to maintain a spiritual connection during the COVID-19 lockdown. It continues to bless those today who cannot leave home due to health issues, aging, or other special circumstances. While there are lots of ways to hear God’s Word proclaimed, there is no real substitute for meeting regularly with God’s people in church. That is why David wrote in Psalm 122:1, *“I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let’s go to the house of the Lord.’”* When believers gather, we worship God in community, love one another authentically, and serve one another generously. We practice discipleship in real time as we seek to build a loving community from a diverse group of people who share a common bond in the Lord Jesus Christ.

DISCUSS

- *Why is church community such an important part of discipleship?*
- *How are you tempted to neglect gathering together in this way?*
- *Can you recall a time someone nudged you toward righteousness and it made a positive impact in your walk with Christ? How have you done this for others?*

3. In healthy churches members serve one another gladly.

Colossians 3:12-17: *“Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

Unpacking Colossians 3:12-17

Not much is more awkward than a middle school dance. Picture a gymnasium filled with boys in scratchy dress clothes and girls trying to walk in heels for the first time. No one is quite sure how to act, and on top of it, they’re supposed to slow dance with someone of the opposite sex! It might be torture for the kids, but it can be quite entertaining for the adult chaperones.

Sometimes, it is difficult to know how to act in new social situations. You're not sure what to wear, where to sit, when to stand, or who to talk to. In New Testament times, it was no different. The church at Colossae was made up of mostly Greek converts to Christianity. The founder of the church, Epaphras, a former student of Paul, pastored the congregation, but the church began to encounter cultural challenges to their new way of life. In short, these new believers were not sure exactly how to act, live, and love others as part of Christ's church. Paul, himself a prisoner in Rome at the time, had never visited the church in Colossae. He wrote this letter to remind them of Christ's authority in all things, to encourage them to stay true to their faith, and to instruct them on Christian living. Colossians 3:12-17 serves as a blueprint for what faith in community should look like for followers of Jesus.

First, Paul reminded them to whom they belonged. As God's children, chosen and dearly loved, believers should put on the character of Christ daily as a witness to our relationship with Him. Paul lists the character traits that should mark God's people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience (v. 12), forgiveness (v. 13), love (v. 14), peace, and gratitude (v. 15). Paul said these traits should be the qualities of individual believers, and that the way we love one another should be a bond of unity among the body of Christ. That's quite a list! How could anyone live up to it?

You might notice a similarity in this list and the fruit of the Spirit Paul named in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things." Surely the overlap was no accident. While it is true that the Spirit is the One who grows spiritual fruit in our lives, we must also "clothe ourselves" and live God's way as the Spirit enables us to do so. Perhaps that is why Paul wrote in Philippians 2:12-13, "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose.*" We cooperate with the Spirit when we walk out what He is working in us.

It's worth noting that at the end of the call to action in Colossians 3:12-15, Paul said, "*Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts*" (Colossians 3:16). After his call to action, he pointed right back to the church. We need each other. If we are to fulfill the high calling of Christ in our lives and in our community, we will only do it together with other believers. Our discipleship and our worship will be stifled if we try to go alone.

Finally, Paul concluded by saying, "*And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*" (Colossians 3:17). It's interesting how often we see this verse used as an individual call to a hard work ethic. When we look at it in the context in which it was written, however, we see Paul's heart for the church in Colossae. As they clothed themselves with the fruit of the Spirit, and as they served one another and instruct one another, they should do so in the name of Jesus and with thanksgiving for what God has done. Paul called the people to do the work of fellowship with all their hearts to honor Christ.

Charles Spurgeon once said, “Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude. But believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect, that they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks, and so do God’s people.” ⁴ The apostle Paul would agree. As we walk together through the joys and difficulties of life, we live according to the Spirit. He equips and enables us to serve God and one another as we live together in community in Him.

DISCUSS

- *How can joining a body of believers feel like an awkward middle school moment?*
- *How would you respond to someone who said, “I don’t want to come to church because I won’t know how to act or what to do, say, or wear”?*
- *How does Colossians 3:17 challenge the way you think about your responsibility in deepening your own sense of fellowship and community?*

GOSPEL FOCUS

The church is called to endure and live sacrificially with one another as Christ has done for us. Many are deterred from joining a church because of legitimate hurt or fear. Christ endured more than will ever be asked of us to save His people and bring them to Him forever. This doesn’t mean our hurts or fears don’t matter, but it does mean God calls us to work through these things in the context of a local body that will love us as Christ loves us and point us back to the gospel at every point.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *Where have you diminished the importance of fellowship with other believers?*
- *How have you experienced the spurring on that takes place in Christian community?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

- *In John 13:34-35, Jesus essentially said the world can judge our relationship with Christ based on our relationships with others. How would the world judge you by this standard?*
- *Who is God calling you to stir up or spur on toward godliness this week?*
- *How can you live sacrificially for the sake of others in the church this week?*

APPLY

Joining a community of believers can be difficult because it is made up of imperfect people just like you. But community is worth the pursuit. The Bible makes clear that we cannot live fully as God intends in isolation. What further step do you need to take toward fellowship in the church this week?

REFERENCES

¹Bob Goff, *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

²*Blue Letter Bible*, “Strong's G3948 – paroxysmos,” accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3948/niv/mgnt/0-1/>.

³John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 19.

⁴Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best: Over 2200 Striking Quotations from the World's Most Exhaustive and Widely-read Sermon Series*, comp. Tom Carter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988).