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[00:00:05] We're going to be in, John, chapter 17 today versus 20 and 23. And then we're also going to be in Acts chapter two, starting in verse 42. So be ready to flip back and forth. If you're new to the Bible and don't have any idea what I just said, ask somebody to help you. I'm sure that they would love to help you find the passages that we're going to be reading together. John 17. And then it's also going be on the screen for you. Also starting in verse 20. These are the Lord the the the Lord's words. Jesus, I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word that they all may be one, as you father are in me and I in you. That they also may be warning us that the world may believe that you sent me and the glory which you gave me. I have given them that they may be one just as we are one I in them, in you, in me that they may be made perfect in one that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me. Flip over to Acts Chapter two. Starting in verse 42. And they continued as steadfastly in the Apostles Doctrine and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in prayer. When fear came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believe were together and had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all people.

[00:02:04] And a Lord added to the church daily. Those who are being saved. Let's pray. Father. We love you so much. We're here today, God, because we love you. We're not here to check off a box and come to church because we have to. We're here because we want to hear from you today. We're here because we believe that you have a word for us, a direction for our lives. That your word is. Living and breathing in is going to penetrate the depths of our hearts. God, we asked for that today. We're not afraid of it. We're not afraid of the conviction. We're not afraid of the encouragement. God, just show us. Or your will for our lives are. We do pray that you would speak to us. We love you. It's in Jesus name we pray, amen. So we find ourselves in dropping into the middle of two different stories. The first is what some scholars call the high priestly prayer. These are the last moments of our Lord Jesus Christ, and he is about to be taken to the cross in the next few hours. And he begins. During this moment, he begins to pray for his disciples. He prays for his current disciples, the 12 that were with him and all the other ones as well. But in this section that we read, we see he's specifically praying for those who will believe in the gospel, his future disciples, the ones that will be touched by the message that is spread across the earth. The second story is about 55 ish days later, we find. This is right after the Holy Spirit has come upon the disciples. The Holy Spirit has revealed His powers for the signs and wonders of the day of Pentecost.

[00:03:51] And Peter, who previously wasn't that great with words, preaches a message that is empowered by the spirit that reaches 3000 people and causes them to be born again. And while these two stories are in separate writings and are written by separate authors, they have an undeniable connection. That's really important for us this morning. It would seem that the description that we just read in Chapter two is the answer to Jesus's prayer to his father in John 17 and John 17, we see Jesus asking that the father would make it so that his disciples were one with each other and one with him. And then what we read in chapter two is that they were they displayed a level of oneness that you don't have to be a Bible scholar to see how incredible it was. They ate their food together. They gave of their possessions. They sold their possessions so that they could give money to those who were struggling. They continued daily together, worshiping God, eating meals together from house to house, being thankful for what they had. This is an incredible outworking of the vision of Jesus. And you guys know this whole series, what we're going through is what was Jesus's vision for the church? What did he pray about and envision when he died on the cross and rose again for our sins? What did he envision for us? And I think pretty clearly we see a beautiful vision of Jesus for the body of Christ when it comes to how we are supposed to act as a family. But jumping to today, I look at our church culture and what I mean by our church culture. I mean our Westernized American version of Christianity. And it would seem that we are struggling to live out the prayer of Jesus.

[00:05:37] Now, I know whenever I start talking about America, our culture in general, the reaction can be to get emotional and defensive. But I really want to encourage us today we're disciples of Jesus, not disciples of America. And it's important for us to be able to critique our culture and what has been influencing the church so that we can become more like Jesus. We all agree with me on that. I think it's safe to say that we live in the most individualistic culture on the planet right now and possibly that's ever existed. We in America have been socialized to believe that our dreams, goals and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group to which we belong. Our church family or our church or our families, for example, the immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long term health of the group. So we leave and withdraw rather than stay and grow up when the going gets rough in the church or in the home. We view life as an individual journey where we are free to be ourselves and perceive ourselves as we wish. In our goal is to be self-sufficient and the creator of our own happiness. There is much to be said about the positives of freedom, but there are some problems with this extreme view of individualism. Just hear me out here. For one, this view rips the life away from any long term, deep relationship. There is no possibility for deep relationships when love when someone is living in an extreme, individualistic worldview. For example, how can we expect a marriage to thrive when life is all about my happiness and the way I want to live? All the people that are married should agree with that, right? But on top of the relational damage it causes and how it causes us to not have any deep, long term relationship, people are feeling the effects of individualism through loneliness and narcissism.

[00:07:43] Our culture is more lonely than it ever has been, and I bet we're a bit more self consumed than we ever have been also. According to David Brooks, who's a columnist for The New York Times, 35% of Americans over 45 are lonely. 50% of Americans say no one knows them well. Married couples entertained friends at their home on average of eight times a year. Only 8% of Americans have meaningful conversation with their neighbors. The fastest growing religious movement is unaffiliated. Depression rates are rising. Suicide rates have risen 30% since 1999. Teen suicide rates have risen 70% in the last couple of years, and 32% of Americans trust the people around them. And for millennials, that number is only 18%. People are uncommitted, struggling to find support. Lonely, fragmented and lacking deep relationship. But this isn't just an out there problem meeting in the world. It's a problem in here, too, in our churches. Churches are full of people who view church as part of their journey to spiritual enlightenment, not a commitment to a family. People come into church, get their fix of Bible reading, go home, and that's it. When it comes to church, our relationship with the church can be half hearted and at the center of our church. Experience usually is us as individuals rather than the community of Christ. I wonder if chapter two verses 42 to 47 was written about us. What would it say? I think it would say this they studied the Apostles teachings. When they had time, they went to fellowship, when they confided in, they prayed when they needed something and got coffee together every now and then. They were content without and had no expectation for signs and wonders in their midst. They sometimes talked about generosity, but kept all their possessions to themselves.

[00:09:43] Two out of five Sundays, they came to corporate gatherings. They didn't invite people into their homes and rarely revealed their hearts. They were largely irrelevant to all people. And occasionally someone randomly got saved. I know that's scary. And I didn't. I didn't. This isn't original to me. But but I think it expresses where we are at as a big C culture. We are struggling to live out what we see in the Book of Acts, and it is blatantly obvious to most of us. But this isn't what Jesus wanted, is it? Some of us in this room are dealing with deep levels of loneliness as we speak. If we took a moment and looked around. I bet you we could all connect eyes with somebody who feels like no one knows them. Maybe you find yourself kind of in the same place as our imaginary versus in Acts, where you're struggling to live out what the Bible says about community. You're living out your own version of the church family. Or maybe if you're honest, you are consumed by your own ambitions to build a life for yourself. And you care little about what people that you care little about the people that we are supposed to call our eternal family. Dr. Joseph Hellerman says this exchange in the New Testament community centered approach to the Christian life for our own culture's individualistic view of spiritual formation that just means discipleship has in turn subtly skewed our conception of God. God has now been recast in the role of a divine therapist who aids the individual Christian in his or her personal quest for spiritual enlightenment, self-discovery and self-discovery. As a result, when people with His view of God encounter conflict with others, he or she generally feels that liberty to take their personal savior from church to church and from marriage to marriage, desperately hoping that they can somehow improve the quality of their life by escaping the immediate pain that often clouds potential redemptive relationships in which God has placed them.

[00:11:49] Was this the prayer of Jesus when Jesus prayed that we would be one? Is this what he imagined? A group of people that are concerned with ourselves? A group of people that are struggling to live out the family of God. And I know that whenever we make statements like this, it's really easy to generalize and say These are problems. And I know individually maybe some of us are good at community and maybe some of us aren't struggling with certain things. But I think we all can find something in that description of the Book of Acts that that I read earlier that we lack and that we struggle and that we need to grow in. And you and I both know this is not what Jesus prayed over. This is not what Jesus wept over. This is not what Jesus died on the cross, or this is not what Jesus rose again on the third day and blessed his community. That's not what he envisioned. Right. Okay. Just making sure. So I did youth ministry and like every 2 minutes I had to say, you're with me. You're with me. Just because most of the time there's a little quietness and a little tiredness, you know? So if I say that, that's why. Okay, we know this is not what Jesus desired. We know this is not what he envisioned. So that means that we have to embark on a journey to understand what Christian community should be, not through the lenses of the American dream or any earthly understanding, but through the teachings of our Rabbi, Jesus, and the writers of the Scriptures. One of Jesus's favorite ways to describe those who follow him was to refer them as a family. And you see throughout the New Testament, each writer paints his picture.

[00:13:31] Also, they refer to God as their father. So there's a father relationship and they refer to the disciples, the other disciples of Christ as brothers and sisters. But to fully understand what it means to be a family, we have to understand what family looks like around the time of Jesus. Because when Jesus instituted that we were supposed to be a family, he was pulling on what everybody could see around them. So for most of us, we understand that the Middle Eastern culture of family looked a lot different than what family construction, what family is like today. There are two differences, and I know history for some of you is automatic turn off. So just bear with me. We've got two quick things. Two quick things about the differences between our conception of family and the ancient Mediterranean culture. First, in the New Testament world, the group took priority over the individual and what is called a strong group society. A person perceives his or her self as a member of a group and responsible to the group for his or her actions. Big life decisions, dreams and life in general. The individual person is embedded in the group and is free to do what he or she feels is right as long as it fits in what the group thinks is right and is in the best interest of the group. The group takes priority over the individual big life decisions, such as What am I going to do with my life? Who am I going to spend it with and where am I going to live? Are all made as a group, not as an individual. Now I know for 95% of us, we all just cringed inside thinking of someone telling us who to marry.

[00:15:08] Right. Oh, my gosh, I would freak out. Right. But hold on. I'm not saying that our culture should go back to that way of thinking. I do think it's really important for our eternal family to understand that for we'll get back to it, but it's really important. The second difference between our conception of family and the New Testament world is that the closest family bond was not marriage. It was the bond of siblings. If you've ever taken a premarital course or gotten some type of guidance or if you've been married for a certain amount of time, you know that marriage is the relationship where you are supposed to find the most intimacy, meaning satisfaction in most emotional and physical support one can have. Right. All the people that are supposed to say yes. There's a concept taught in our pre-marital classes that we do where it's called, it's called the inner circle. Right on the inner circle. You have you your wife or your spouse. Right. And and your kids. And then outside of that, you have your family, your your other family members, your siblings, your parents and stuff like that. And then on the outside of that, you have your friends and your extended family. And the core of your family is the one that makes the big life decisions, the ones that is there for you, the ones where you find your meeting and your support from. But in Jesus's time, it wasn't this way. In Jesus's time, there was actually there was the blood blood bond between siblings that was the most supportive, nurturing and satisfying relationship one could have. Probably has to do with not being able to pick the person you have to marry, but that's a different story.

[00:16:45] This didn't mean that marriage was an instrument, but it did mean that siblings provided each individual the highest level of emotional and relational support. This, in turn, meant a central value at that time was to display sibling loyalty, and the greatest act of human disloyalty was to portray one's sibling, not their spouse, which is really fascinating. Again, I'm not saying that we should go back to this way of living, but I am saying that these ancient family structures have a big meaning for what Jesus intended when he said that we would be a family. We can see exactly what Jesus meant when He said that we were going to be a family because we were. We're supposed to prioritize our relationship with each other above all else. We're supposed to seek the good of the Christian community for the good of ourselves. And we are called to be brothers and sisters, meaning that our bonds together are supposed to be the greatest level of support, intimacy, and meaning that we could possibly find on this earth because we share the same father. There's something. Yeah. When someone is saved, they're not just saved into a relationship with a father. They're saved into a relationship with brothers and sisters as well. We're not saved by the church, but into the family of God. Jesus intended his followers to live with that group in mind and to experience love, support, meaning and satisfaction in our relationships with our brothers and sisters. If you don't believe me, you can go read The Last Supper. And John and I think you'll find your answer there. But what does this mean for the church? So this was the family structure of the ancient times. So what did the first church actually do with this? What were the characteristics of the early church that set them apart from other community groups during that time? And what do we need to learn so that we can become a family? I see three distinct characteristics.

[00:18:41] It's not an extensive list, but three distinct characteristics that we can notice that will really, I think, have a lot to do with what we're at today. First, the New Testament church shared their hearts with one another rather than run from emotional connections. One of the key characteristics of this eternal family was how the Holy Spirit began to weave in a sense of closeness and intimacy and vulnerability that was could only be done by God himself. The Church understood that because they were brothers and sisters, because they were this adopted family, that meant that they had to be vulnerable with each other. They had to build each other up. They had to support one another, and they had to love one another. This can be so clearly seen in the relationship between Paul and the family of God in Philippians chapter one verses 7-8, which is going to be on the screen for you as he says this, listen to this is beautiful. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, since I have you in my heart and whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. This isn't just a warm fuzzy. It's like like what we do with our emails and text messages when we say, I love you, but we don't really mean it. Like, like Paul actually meant this. Paul actually meant that he had incredible emotional attachment to the family he longed to see. Paul wasn't just some strange leader that wrote to people correcting them because he just wanted to put everybody on blast. Paul wasn't this leader that kept everybody at arm's length so that he could stay secure and safe.

[00:20:21] Paul wasn't somebody that had been backstabbed and wasn't willing to risk it all for community again. Paul loved his brothers and sisters, and Paul was so compelled by this love that he was willing to share his heart with them and be vulnerable with them, even though it was a risk. Paul says that he held them in his heart, regardless of his circumstances, and in other passages we see his expression of how much he longed to see the churches he was a part of. Often today, in our in our natural reaction to relationships, we keep everybody at arm's length. We're afraid to be vulnerable because we've seen people leave. We've seen people backstab. We've seen people use our words against us. So what our natural reaction is to do is keep everybody away. And we don't become vulnerable with the people that we're supposed to be calling family. But the early church understood that if they were going to survive the persecution and the onslaught that they were about to receive, they had to be willing to risk vulnerability with one another. It's not. Almost all scholars, regardless if their Christian or not, agree that that it is borderline. It is a myth. We believe it's a miracle. But they almost say it's a miracle that the church survived what it did in the early years of the church. And I can't help but wonder if if their vulnerability with one another, the closeness that they had had anything to do with their survival, their survival in the most persecuting, persecuted moments in the church's history. The Church understood that they were called to be means of God's grace and love to His children. Our brothers and sisters. And through their vulnerability and love, they could actually be that means of grace for one another.

[00:22:05] The second characteristic that we see in the New Testament church is that they shared what they had with each other rather than look out for themselves only. And while sharing our material goods with one another is a basic practice of Christianity, it can sometimes be one of the hardest ones for us. But sharing our material goods has always been a key aspect of a church, and it's impossible to skip over in first. John three 16-17 We read by this we know love because he laid down his life for us and we also ought to lay down our lives for the Brethren. We know that verse, right? But let's read the next one. But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? It would seem that John cannot perceive the love of God being in someone's heart or that person to shut up their goods. What they have from the people that are in need. You know, we hear stories all the time of people receiving that check in the mail. When you have a bill do right. You hear the stories of money on the desk when the car is broken or somehow someone in the family of God providing supernaturally through the Holy Spirit right for us to be able so that we can continue to do the things that we're doing right. And I myself have been and I've experienced this. I've experienced the provision of the family of God. And it is a beautiful thing when the family of God is willing to give what they have. But like when we think about this logically for a second, what's actually happening? A church family member sees the need and someone responds to the love of God, listens to the Holy Spirit, and shares what they, quote unquote earned with someone else.

[00:23:52] We live in a culture where you don't share what you've earned with other people, right? Look at them. They're not doing enough. They need to do more. Don't worry about keep your stuff. It's about your retirement. It's about your your your life. It's about your family. Don't worry about the media. Be doing A, B, and C to get better on back on their feet. But that's not how the early church lived. The early church made it so that sharing material goods was an essential piece of demonstrating love to the family of God. The early church practiced radical generosity, but also radical hospitality. It wasn't just that they shared their money with each other. They shared their homes with each other. They were inviting people daily in to share a meal and spend time with each other. And I can't help or think that what type of closeness to this family have that was willing to give it all just so that we could survive another day. The third characteristic. Of the family life in the early church was at the new church. New Testament church stayed embrace pain and grew with one another rather than live unchurched lives. It is said that one cold, gloomy day, Dale Moody, who, if you don't know who that is, is an American evangelist, visited a man who had expressed some interest at one of Moody's meetings. Moody was ushered into a comfortable room with a fire blazing on the hearth. And after some gracious preliminary conversation, the man began to argue that it was possible for a person to be a Christian without participating in the life of the church. As he made his elaborate in detail arguments, Moody leaned forward in his chair, took a poker and pulled a flaming coal from the fire out onto the stone hearth.

[00:25:33] Moody watched as the coals slowly dimmed and went out. Then he turned and looked at the man without saying anything. After a long pause, the man said, Mr. Moody, you have made your point. In today's world, it's not uncommon to encounter someone who is a, quote unquote, unchurched Christian. Often the terminology is something like, I love the Lord, but I don't love his people. You know, have you ever heard that right? Some of us are probably said that I know I did so. But unchurched Christians are common in our culture. And it's not just people who don't come on Sunday gatherings. People can come on Sunday gatherings and still be an unchurched Christian. People can come and sit faithfully every Sunday and never experience real off. That's a Christian relationships. People can come in and never be a part of the life of the church, meaning the day to day doing life with one another. We have a lot of unchurched Christians in our big C culture, but in the New Testament church you can't find an unchurched Christian. You can't find one person that was able to live their Christianity out unchurched. Some may say that the thief on the cross and the Ethiopian eunuch are unchurched believers, but clearly they are the exception, not the rule. One was literally accepted Jesus in the moments of his death. The other, we have great his church history, but a beautiful church was started through the Ethiopian eunuch. The New Testament church understood that while they weren't saved by the church, they were saved into the church or into the family of God. And this led them to embrace each other's pain and grow up together. I find it really interesting that in the writings of Paul, you know, Paul wrote to some crazy churches, really messed up churches.

[00:27:23] Corinth and Galatia come to my mind first Corinth was sin filled and chaotic, disorganized. It was just nuts. I couldn't imagine being there. Like it's not working for my personality type. But then also, Galatia was a church filled with legalism, a church filled by Judaism. You said you had to keep all of these rules for ever to think you would become a Christian. What I find so interesting that even in the sin filled, chaotic church of Corinth, Paul never says to leave. And also just as interesting in the legalistic church of Galatia, he never says to leave either. Instead, he encourages them to stay and to change. It's almost like the problems in our church aren't reasons for us to find a new one, but chance for us to grow as disciples of Christ as the body. Well. We live in a church culture where we've talked about this in the past week where we treat churches like you're buying something from the store. If it doesn't meet my expectations or what I want, I'm not going to be here. But that's not what the new New Testament church did. They understood that if the flame of the gospel was going to thrive in a world that was extremely anti Jesus, they couldn't hop around from church to church. They couldn't try to find the one that Paul like. They couldn't go to Philip II, all of them at once, you know what I'm saying? They had to stay with one another. They had to look past their preferences and sometimes even past their struggles and their problems and figure it out together and embrace the work of dealing with each other's hurt, pain and struggles. This group was able to grow with each other, even in some crazy circumstances.

[00:29:12] This is a beautiful outworking of the vision of Jesus, is it not, by a community of people centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, each other being vulnerable with each other, practicing radical generosity and radical hospitality, staying on with one another, embracing each other's pain. This is a real church family. But the problem there's a problem with this vision of community. There's a problem with this idea of church family. And the problem is you and me. I've grown up in the church, as most of you know, and I know some of us here haven't grown up in the church. But I think you're going to able to understand what I have to say. I've heard the vision of community. Right. Beautiful preaching. Great. Great. You know, options at our church for what community can look like. Amazing Bible studies. And I have seen it not practiced. Do you know what I'm saying? Growing up. It's a I'm not going say that, never mind. The Holy Spirit is good, right? I've seen Christian communities that were defined by gossip and slander. I've seen entire communities get consumed with earthly kingdoms rather than then the work of the Kingdom of Heaven. I've seen and heard and unfortunately experienced the hurt and the pain that sometimes comes with being a part of the community of Christ. I've seen people backstab. I've seen people tear down with their words. I've seen people claim to be Christian and say they love Jesus. And at the same time, never really display that love. In their lives. I'm willing to bet that I'm not the only one. I'm willing to bet that some of you here today are struggling with the idea of entering into the family of God. You love God. You love God.

[00:31:18] But man, have you met his family? They're nuts. Sometimes church feels more of a burden than it does a gift. Sometimes people tear you down when they're supposed to be building you up. Sometimes when you come in and you're vulnerable with your problems, all you get is a Bible verse slapped in your face until the get on with it and you just hurt. And I bet some of you today are struggling with deep levels of pain and loneliness because you came to the body of Christ. But you haven't experienced this beautiful vision that Jesus laid out for them. Some have said that there's four stages of Christian community. The first one is excitement. This is what happens when you come to a church for the first time or you join a Bible study or you join a small group. You come the church, you find the church. Teaching is good, the worship is amazing and oh my gosh, there's coffee afterwards. This is great, right? This is my home church. I'm sticking here. And then for a small group, for example, the same thing. They meet on the right night. They're going through an awesome study. They're super deep and super vulnerable. They let your kids run around and be crazy, like it's just good. And they have coffee, right? Coffee is a consistent theme in this stage of excitement. You come and you're excited and you see that this is potentially the community that I've been searching for. This is potentially what's going to heal me. This is potentially what's going to show me the love that I feel like I need and I deserve. This is this is where I'm going to find hope. And then you meet disillusionment. This is the second stage.

[00:32:53] You suddenly realize that you are in a community of people just like you. I thought this was going to be a group that was going to heal me. I thought this was going to be a group that was going to love me. But in reality, they're just as mean as I am inside of my head. Disillusionment causes us pain because we realize that what we thought was a community of saints, we actually got a community of sinners and people make mistakes and we're hurt by those mistakes. We can't just brush off their mistakes. We can brush off our own mistakes pretty easily. Right. But we can't. Those other people's mistakes hurt when they say something that hurt that rubs you the wrong way. Or they do something that that causes you pain or pluck on strings that are just from your past. Deep, deep levels of pain. You experience disillusionment. What we thought was going to be a safe community and meet all of our needs and provide us everything that we ever desired in an eternal family. We actually realize that people make mistakes. Unfortunately, this is where most of us stop. Most of us stop at this stage. And we go from place to place, group to group, relationship to relationship, church to church. Just meeting those two stages, we get excited and we come down and get excited and we come down and we just stop there. If you're an introvert like me, well, you probably do when you experience pain as you crawl back into your shell and find healing in your isolation. My wife when I was talking to her about this teaching, she said something so good. She said, I've never seen isolation work. I've never seen somebody go into isolation and come out a better Christian.

[00:34:36] We know this is not what God wants, though we know deep down inside we can read our Bibles. We can understand that we are supposed to be isolated, but we cannot perceive another way for us not to get hurt. So what do we do? We run away and keep everyone at arm's length. We come in a little late so we don't have to talk to anybody. We sit there, worship. We leave a little bit early. And so we don't have to talk to anybody. And that's our relationship with the church. But God desires us to push through disillusionment and come into the third stage. Not third stage is recognition. First, we have to recognize that it's possible to hang out at church a lot, come to Sunday worship, raise our hands during worship. Amen the pastor, read our Bible and still never transform into the image of Jesus. It's possible to come in here and still be the same when we walk out. It's possible for us to actually not experience the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, even though we are physically present in the room. We have to realize that this Christian walk is more than just learning to hide our sins, but learn to become people with less sin through the transformation into the image of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have to become aware that our relationship with God is less about knowing where we end up when we die, but more about becoming like his son, Jesus Christ. And once we realize that in us, once we realize that we're on a spiritual journey, we can recognize that everyone else is on a spiritual journey also. What we normally do. Maybe this is just me and I'm guess I'm just a super private person.

[00:36:24] But I talk about vulnerability, so we're rolling with it. I usually view myself a lot farther ahead than everybody else is on the journey. You guys know what I'm talking about, like maturity level spiritually. Like I'm there. You guys are back there, right? And I don't mean it. I just for some reason, that's how we view life. I don't know what the psychology is behind that, but for some reason we always view ourselves farther ahead. But the reality is we're not farther ahead or farther back. We're just in different places on the same journey becoming like Jesus. And when we recognize that we're all in that journey and all of our goals is to become more like Jesus. And all we can expect from one another is to say, Yeah, you know what? I am a sinner, but I want to be like Jesus more today than yesterday and more tomorrow than today. Once you recognize that we can have grace for the pain that people cause us, we can have grace in the relationships that are easy. We can have grace for the people who say things the wrong way and use words that hurt us. Because you know what? They're on their journey also. And I probably make the same mistakes. We're all on a journey. And when we recognize that, the final thing that we need to recognize is that we are part or supposed to be parts of communities that are not just Christian Hangouts, but communities that are centers of spiritual transformation. When we gather, our aims should be to journey with one another towards Christ like this. We're on this journey together. When we push through that stage of recognition, we get through the pain. We begin to recognize our own incompleteness and brokenness and our need for Jesus and not in others as well.

[00:37:59] We get to the final stage and that final stage is experiencing unconditional, transforming love for one another. Community is no longer about our personal preferences. Community is no longer about what we don't get or what we do get. But it's about all of us transforming into the image of Christ and loving one another without condition. I love how Robert Mullholland puts it when we don't feel like worshiping the community should carry us along in its worship. Well, we can't seem to pray. Community prayer should enfold us when the Scripture seems close to us. Community should keep on reading, affirming, and incarnating it around us. And when God begins to do the work with us at the deep levels of our incompleteness and brokenness, our bondage and sin, we need the Body of Christ to support, encourage, challenge and nurture us towards wholeness. We may be able to do some. We may be able to work through some of our bondage and brokenness alone with God. But when God begins to deal with the deep distortions of our being, we need others. Once our communities become central centers of spiritual transformation, that is when we can live out the vision of Jesus, when our life groups are men's studies, our women's studies, our youth. And young adult groups. Every Bible study that we have on this campus, our Sunday gatherings, when we all come with one another saying we want to become more like Christ today. We want to take a day and take one step in our spiritual journey, and we want to do it together. When we do that, that is when we are at Awaken Las Vegas will experience the vision Jesus had for his family. A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Tony showed you the screen.

[00:39:49] And as you can see, the center beam is filled in in the horizontal one is not. The pastor, Tony, said this Before we can become the church, we must have a rightful identity and relationship upward this week. What we're going to do, we're going to take a look at the next one. The center beam is filled in. For us to become the church, we have to have a rightful relationship with each other. We will never experience Jesus, his vision for his church and for us as people until we live in transformational communities. He desires us to. And when we do that, when we have the right relationship with God and right relationship with with others, we are living out the gospel of Jesus Christ. This transformational community cannot be forced on anyone. None of us can make you go to a Bible study or a life group. It takes all of us being willing to respond to the message of Jesus and willing to be vulnerable and walk in this spiritual journey with each other. When we begin to do that, we will experience building up the building up of each other in love. We will experience radical hospitality and radical generosity. We will experience a family like community and everything else Jesus envisioned for his family. But it starts with us being willing to walk with one another. In our journeys of spiritual transformation. The journey is in front of us. Are we willing to walk it? The question for many of us becomes How? How do I do that? For a lot of us, it's this is a really important question because it's one thing to hear. It's another thing to do. And we want to be doers of the word. Not heares only am I right? There are a lot of practical things that we do at our church to help foster these communities of transformational spiritual transformation.

[00:41:45] But one that I want to highlight today is our life groups. Life groups are not designed to be another church program, but they are. They are designed to be our best attempt to replicate what the early church had in the New Testament. If you're a Bible nerd like me, you probably noticed that there are two types of gatherings in the new church, New Testament Church and acts. The first was a corporate gathering for worship. Right. They got together and they praise the Lord in the temples. And then the second gathering was from house to house. They gathered together in their homes. They shared meals together. They lived a life with one another on a very basic level. And this is really important. And this is what our life groups are. Our life groups are a practical interpretation of that. We want if if we were a healthy like if everybody was super healthy in our church, our thought, our our theory is that we would all be living this model out that we see in Acts. We come together on a Sunday, we would gather together and then we would gather during the week in some form to be with each other and do life with one another. And these life groups are the way we are encouraging us to do that today after we're done here in the lobby. There's going to be some new life group leaders that don't have a lot of people in their life group because they just started. They're going to be at the iPads by the reach wall. And I want to encourage you, if God's placing on your heart today to join a life group, go talk to them, go up, make a conversation and get join in.

[00:43:15] And if there's nobody, if you don't find the person or you're unable to get plugged into personal contact, go on the website and get get plugged into a life group. These are our way to live out transformational community. But it doesn't stop there. That's very practical. But but in reality, you and I need our hearts changed. We need an overabundance of love for one another to come. That only this the Holy Spirit can bring. Today. What we're going to do is we're going to take a moment to respond to the Holy Spirit. And I know that some of us today have struggled with community. Some of us have been hurt. Some of us are dealing with pain. Some of us are dealing with just things that were said or done to you that just really hurt you because of the community of Christ. And I want to encourage you with two things. First, we're going to have some people that are going to come up in the front and they're going to be here for prayer for you guys to to receive prayer and be healed. Right. And then also, Miriam is going to come up and she's going to lead us in some music. And as she does, I really just want to encourage us to take the time to respond to the Holy Spirit, to pray what he's been speaking to you, to ask him where he's putting on your heart. Maybe there's somebody he's asking you to give to. Maybe there there's he wants you to open up your home on a certain a regular basis. Maybe he wants you to be a part of a life group or start a life group. I don't know what the Holy Spirit is speaking to you, but you and him do.

[00:44:46] So let's take a moment today and really engage with the Holy Spirit and not live lives where we hear and we say Amen and then walk out and never change, but live lives that are changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. Father. As we enter a time of just prayer and. A moment to respond to you. God, I pray that you would just begin convicting our hearts. That we would begin to be willing to say Whatever you have for me, Lord, I am here. I am your servant, and I will do what you called me to do. And I know that some of us in here have struggled with the family of God. And we've been hurt and we've been we're lonely, maybe are experiencing levels of of of narcissism, and we're just consumed with ourselves. God give us the ability to break free from those chains, to be actually free, not free, just to do whatever we want to free, to live the life that you've called us to live. God we ask that today that as we respond to that, you would just place people in our minds place ministries in our minds, God. That we would begin to see a transformation in the church Awaken Las Vegas.