

COMMUNITY

PRODIGAL MESSAGE #7

Memory verse of the week:

Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

I was in the middle of one of my typical “busy weeks” when I remembered my community group weekend retreat. So, I quickly texted my group leader to find out the agenda for the retreat, and I discovered that we would be focusing on our marriages. I breathed a sigh of relief as my marriage was problem-free—or so I thought. Once our group arrived, we were each handed some questions to consider, answer individually, and then review with our spouses. We would then discuss those same questions with our group later.

Imagine my shock when I discovered that my wife’s answers were dramatically different from my own! So my wife, Ginny, took this opportunity to tell me that she honestly felt like I took her for granted, and then she gave me specific examples. As we reviewed our answers together, I—of course—justified and rationalized her answers. I felt that she just didn’t understand all the demands that I had on my time. I loved and cared for my wife immensely, and if she couldn’t see that, then I didn’t know what else to do. I thought that the way she felt was her problem, and I felt that her response showed a lack of understanding and empathy toward me. I was frustrated.

That evening, Ginny and I sat beside one another in two chairs which faced the rest of the group as we read the same answers that we had just read to each other a couple of hours earlier. The crazy thing is that I had somehow convinced myself that the group would see things my way, but the minute we both sat down in on our “hot seats,” I knew the truth. That night, in front of the whole group, my wife voiced what would become a famous line in our relationship—that I made her feel like a “comfy slipper.” As her answers were read in front of the other couples, I could not easily shrug off the weight of the truth of her words. I was so convicted that I began to weep, as it was clear that I was taking for granted, and not wholeheartedly pursuing, the woman that I loved so much.

That weekend, I was reminded of the power of, and need for, community. Thus, Ginny and I started on a journey that would grow our marriage to the amazing place that God desired—where we would love each other more than ever. Simply put: The value of community, done well, cannot be overestimated or overstated.

Introduction

Many people say they have their “own deal with God” or that “religion is a private matter.” However, there is absolutely no biblical basis for such statements. In fact, God’s Word strongly calls us to community, which guides and sharpens us as we process biblical truth together. Life change happens best in the context of wise, caring, biblical community (Hebrews 10:24–25; Ephesians 4:15–16). There are 59 verses in the New Testament that urge us—among other things—to love, encourage, sharpen, rebuke, teach, and serve “**one another**.” Community is a critical element that God wants us to incorporate into our lives so that we can grow together in Christ. It is modeled as a non-

negotiable throughout the New Testament, and it is modeled here in our Prodigal small groups.

The biblical call for community

We have explained in other messages that the Word of God can be trusted and that it supports our “reasonable faith.” Scripture provides all the wisdom we need to guide our lives. The problem, however, lies in the application of its truths to our own lives as our sinful human nature can blind us from recognizing our shortcomings. For example, consider our breath. It is difficult to know when your own breath is offensive. So, you need someone who loves you to tell you to brush your teeth—or to chew some gum! In the same way, we need to process the truth of God’s Word with a community of wise believers that love both God and us enough to call us out to the sin in our lives that we may be blind to. The following are several biblical examples that support the importance of, and need for, community:

- God Himself is an example of community, as the Godhead exists in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who share one essence (Genesis 1:27; John 14:16–17, 20, 26; 16:13–15; 1 Corinthians 2:9–16; 8:6; 2 Corinthians 13:14).
- Jesus modeled community in that He spent the majority of His time in ministry with His 12 disciples (see all throughout the four Gospels).
- The early church paints an amazing picture of community (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37).
- God created humankind for community—He saw that it was not good for man to be alone, so He created a woman so that they could work together and complement each other (Genesis 2:18–25).
- Community guards against *isolation*, which is a tool of Satan (Proverbs 18:1; 1 Peter 5:8).
- Community not only sharpens each of us in truth but also encourages each of us through fellowship and prayer; thus, life change is best accomplished in the context of relationships (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 10:24–25).
- God uses communities to bring people into relationship with Himself—both the people of Israel (in the Old Testament) and the Church (in the New Testament and beyond) are communities of believers whom God intended to reach and transform the world for Himself (Genesis 12:1–3; 1 Kings 8:41–43; 1 Peter 2:9–12).

The “one anothers”

As previously mentioned, it cannot be missed that there are roughly 59 verses in the New Testament that use the phrase “one another.” These repeated occurrences clearly indicate the importance of living in community with “one another.” It is worth our time, therefore, to review how the verbs in those verses instruct us to live together:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love (John 13:34) • Ask (Acts 2:12) • Talk (Acts 26:31) | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love with brotherly affection and outdo in honor (Romans 12:10) • Live in harmony (Romans 12:16) • Do not judge (Romans 14:13) |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome (Romans 15:7) • Greet with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) • Bear with (Ephesians 4:2) • Address with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32) • Address in hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19) • Submit to (Ephesians 5:21) • Bear with and forgive (Colossians 3:13) • Teach and admonish (with the Word of Christ indwelling in you; Colossians 3:16) • Encourage and build up (1 Thessalonians 5:11) • Warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone (1 Thessalonians 5:14) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to do good to (1 Thessalonians 5:15) • Encourage daily (Hebrews 3:13) • Stir up to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24) • Meet together with consistently and encourage (Hebrews 10:25) • Do not slander against (James 4:11) • Love earnestly from a pure heart (1 Peter 1:22) • Have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind (1 Peter 3:8) • Show hospitality without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9) • Have fellowship by walking in the light (1 John 1:7) • Love and walk in love (throughout 1 and 2 John) |
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Community in perspective

When Jesus was teaching His disciples how to pray, He addressed God from a community perspective—that is, “**Our** Father.” It is also interesting that every 12-step recovery program understands the importance and necessity of community to achieve one’s intended goals. For example, consider Step #1 in the Alcoholics Anonymous program: “**We** admitted **we** were powerless over alcohol – that **our** lives had become unmanageable.”¹ Whether religious or otherwise, people realize the significant role that community plays in bringing about change in one’s life. Thus, we would be wise to follow suit.

Self-Assessment

“Those who hold to the biblical doctrines of the work of Christ as the basis of acceptance tend also to take the Bible’s instructions concerning righteous living more seriously. Those who have created a system of their own tend to water down what is required in the practice of their faith. They also tend to create standards of behavior that fit their own lifestyles; standards that they know they can meet without the need of supernatural assistance. The outcome is a way of life that is characterized by ignorance and conceit.”

– William Wilberforce²

¹ “Alcoholics Anonymous Step 1: Admit Powerlessness,” Recovery.org, last modified March 1, 2018, <https://www.recovery.org/topics/step-1-aa/>.

² William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity: A Paraphrase in Modern English of A Practical View the of Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*,” originally published 1797, revised and updated by Bob Beltz (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2006), 63.

Anyone who has accepted Christ must have, first, recognized their own need for a savior. In a similar manner, it is difficult to accept sharpening, rebuke, and correction from our community unless we have an accurate assessment of our own sinful condition and tendency to minimize—or even totally miss—our own faults. The more you humbly realize your need for sharpening, the easier it will be for you to accept correction with gratitude and grace. Without such a paradigm, however, you cannot follow through on a mission statement that centers on glorifying God.

One way to determine your receptivity to constructive criticism is to complete an honest and accurate self-assessment. Consider assessing how well you did this year, this week, or even just today in regard to the following areas:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dying to self • Serving others • Evangelism • Producing fruit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining joy in all circumstances • Spiritual disciplines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming recurring sin • Giving up control to God |
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Furthermore, concerning your prodigal journey, you may ask yourself how well you did in regard to the following areas:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting boundaries • Enforcing consequences • Entrusting your prodigal to God | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letting go of your “idols” • Not enabling or rescuing • Not living in fear | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having joy and glorifying God in the midst of your prodigal chaos |
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Now, while it is important to assess yourself, it is also critical to include your community in the assessment process, as they can help you accurately evaluate yourself. Once again, Wilberforce—who wrote in the late 1700s—offers excellent wisdom concerning this concept:

“*Self-deception* is one of the great enemies of a practical faith. That is why it is often helpful to have *relationships with other Christians* who can give you an *accurate appraisal* of the true state of your life. ... It is important to look at what you are trying to accomplish or acquire. Are you after the wrong thing? Because it is so easy to get caught in self-deception, check this with a few close friends. If you are unwilling to do this, it should be a signal that something is wrong. When you become aware of this, begin to distrust yourself.”

– William Wilberforce³

As an example of good assessment done in the context of community, consider the following questions:

- Are we maintaining our quiet times regularly and deeply?
- What is the status of our marriages? Do our spouses feel like we are prioritizing them?
- Have we recently experienced or succumbed to any sexual temptations (such as pornography or emotional fantasy)?
- Are we maintaining our finances and giving sacrificially to our local churches?

³ William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity* (Beltz updated version), 102–104 (emphasis added).

- Are we tending to our bodily health?
- Are we honoring God with our vocation, our calling, or our service?
- Have we controlled our tongues recently?
- Have we controlled our anger recently?
- Are we exhibiting a critical spirit toward our spouse or others?
- Have we shared the good news (the Gospel) with a non-believer recently?
- Are we lying to our community about any of the above?

What is the goal of community?

The goal of community is not simply accountability or encouragement—those are just tools to be utilized to accomplish community’s goal. **The goal of community is to help believers know, understand, and love God more fully and be more like His Son, Jesus Christ** (see Jeremiah 9:23–24; Ephesians 4:11–16). As Proverbs 27:17 states, “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” This inspiring verse gives us clear direction for how we are to live in, and be shaped by, community. Envision, however, that as iron physically sharpens iron, things get red hot and sparks fly! And so it is with community; thus, open, honest, and authentic community is *hard*, and there is no way around it. So, if you don’t maintain the proper focus and understanding of community and you don’t believe that your “sharpeners” truly love you, then community will be almost impossible to endure. But, if it seems hard and difficult at times—be encouraged! You are on the right path. Community that is easy, without challenges, and without “iron-sharpening” friction is not true, impactful, or God-honoring.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 calls us to warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, and—at the same time—be patient with everyone. Let me remind you that of all the “one another” verses listed above, the most common verb (or command) is “*love*.” One must deliver truth balanced with love and grace. As the following saying reminds us, “Truth delivered without love will not be heard, but love given without truth is not love” (see also Ephesians 4:1–2, 15; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 4:2; Titus 1:3).

The alternative to community: Isolation

Lack of community means isolation, which is foolishness. As Proverbs 18:1–2 says, “Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment. A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” Furthermore, when we are isolated, Satan does his best work, whispering lies and untruths in our ears. As Jesus says of him in John 8:44, “[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

As an example of how isolation can thwart biblical community, consider **David**. In Old Testament history, David was “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14); as a result, God honored him throughout his life. Rightly so, David is highly regarded as the greatest King that Israel ever had. Furthermore, it is through David’s line that Jesus Christ was born and upon David’s throne that Christ will sit when He returns to establish His earthly kingdom (2 Samuel 7:11–16; Luke 1:32–33). However, even great and godly people, like David, can stumble and fall if they isolate themselves. For example, 2 Samuel 11:1 says, “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, ... David remained at Jerusalem.” See, David should have been with his men and counselors but, instead, he was back at home, isolated in his palace. His eyes wandered to the

beautiful Bathsheba bathing on an adjacent rooftop (verse 2), and then he allowed lust and selfish desires to overtake him. Thus, this man after God’s own heart—overcome by his own sinful desires—initiated a series of unthinkable events that culminated in the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah. The consequences for David were devastating—he lost his young son to an illness, and he let down the people who knew, loved, and trusted him as their king.

Another example of how isolation can undermine community is **Judas Iscariot**, one of Jesus’ original 12 disciples. Judas had issues with Christ and His leadership, but he never really addressed them (see John 12:1–8; Mark 14:3–11). Even though he was living in the midst of one of the greatest community groups ever assembled, Judas was essentially living a lie in isolation. He lost perspective of his own mission and purpose for Christ. He did not take heed of the wisest counsel ever given—that is, by Jesus Christ Himself—and, as a result, his name has become synonymous with betrayal, evil, and even Satan himself.

Isolation from biblical community leaves us vulnerable—vulnerable to our own selfish desires, vulnerable to the consequences of our own folly, and vulnerable to the schemes of the devil (1 Peter 5:8). It is critical, therefore, that we maintain and actively participate in biblical community, for our own sake and for the glory of God.

Not all “community” is biblical community

When seeking community, some will selfishly find “fools” who will only tell them what they want to hear. The problem is what they want to hear is often pleasing in the short term, but the consequences of such pleasantries may have catastrophic consequences. The following passages from Proverbs demonstrate this principle well:

- Proverbs 12:15: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”
- Proverbs 13:20: “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”
- Proverbs 14:12: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”
- Proverbs 15:14: “The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.”
- Proverbs 27:6: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

Conclusion: Community and your prodigal journey

The secret to navigating the storms of life in a way that brings lasting personal peace and honors and glorifies God is this—trust Him. The Prodigal Ministry simply intends to help believers grow to better understand, know, and love God; to recognize and accept their need for Christ; and—ultimately—to depend completely upon the Lord. Good community helps each of us consistently live out our God-given purpose—and the Prodigal Ministry hopes to be a good, safe place of community for each of you. We want to equip believers and build up the body of Christ, help each other attain Christian maturity and the fullness of Christlikeness, speak the truth in love to one another, and work together as a community to grow up into Christ Jesus (Ephesians 4:12–16).

Remember that, in each and every moment, **our view of God is the most important thing about us**. So, in summary: A proper view of God necessarily drives us toward biblical community, which then draws each of us into an even deeper understanding of, and relationship with, God; and an improper view of God consequently drives us into isolation. The choice is yours to make and the consequences are eternal.

A few years into our prodigal son's rebellion and chaos—but long before God led Ginny and me to start the Prodigal Ministry—we sought biblical community for help. I enjoined biblically wise friends and family members to join with me in an intervention for my son. As it turned out, I gained more insight and revelation at that intervention than my son did. See, he was not ready to hear and accept the truth but—by God's grace—I was.

During the intervention, my friends and family all spoke truth. I received revelations from my son that I had never heard before. And when the discussion came to an end after two hours, though I felt that it had ended a bit early, I thought it went really well. My son left with a plan to be completed but many in the group remained to process what we had heard together. To my surprise, I was the only one who felt like progress had been achieved—everyone else clearly saw that my son was holding back, manipulating, and lying.

I am not used to being the naïve, blind person in a discussion. Anyone who has endured prodigal chaos knows well those moments when large knots form in the pit of your stomach. They are hard to describe but unmistakable, and they come on suddenly and without warning. That's how I felt upon hearing everyone else's reaction in contrast to my own. So, I examined the motives and wisdom of everyone in that room; but, not a single person had any reason to lie or to cause me or my son harm. And they all saw it the same way—including my wife!

So, at that point, I made a decision that changed my life. I decided that I would follow their wisdom and direction over my own opinions regarding my son. I told them that although my heart didn't agree with them, my mind, logic, and reason could only conclude that they saw the truth that I was unable to see.

Little did I know that a short two weeks later, my son would relapse while he was working at a Christian camp near Branson, Missouri. So, with personal doubt still remaining, I followed the group's advice. My wife and I contacted the leader of the camp, who gave my son just enough money for a bus trip back to Dallas. My son was given then the option to use the money to return to Dallas, where we would get him help, or to start his life on his own.

The next morning, Ginny waited at the bus station with hope and anticipation. The bus arrived and, miraculously, our son stepped off of it. And four hours later, we put him on a plane to a rehabilitation center in Marion, Montana.

My son's journey—like any addict—is a lifelong journey. The same can be said for all of us who have a prodigal in our lives. We still take life one day at a time. At the time of this writing, my son's journey has continually been a roller coaster and the final chapter has not been written. So, I ask sincerely and passionately that you would pray for him.

The purpose of this story is to demonstrate how community has impacted my journey—the only journey that I have any control over. Please consider how community has impacted my prodigal journey so far. First, that initial intervention made me realize

that I could not trust my own instincts alone; instead, I needed to trust the godly and wise counsel of others. And I have consistently done exactly that ever since.

Second, I will never forget what my pastor said to me after that intervention. As I thanked him for taking time out of his extremely busy schedule to lead the intervention, he responded that while he rarely had time to do such things, today he had been purposeful. He looked me in the eyes and said that he wanted to be involved because he knew that, one day, I would be leading others who have struggled with addiction and prodigal chaos. He saw a weak enabler who was blinded by his own emotions, and yet he encouraged me to use my pain for God's glory. Who would have thought?!

With that seed planted, a few years later, my regular church community group encouraged my wife and me to start the Prodigal Ministry. Though Ginny and I had processed life together with the other three couples in this group since 2004 (and still do today), I argued that I was too busy with my surgical practice, that I wasn't equipped enough, and that I was too overwhelmed by the prospect of starting a new ministry. My community, however, saw it differently—they realized that while it may have been impossible with me, it was certainly possible with God.

The Prodigal Ministry formally began in February 2010. And I have never been more assured that I have been in alignment with God's will than when I have had the joy of serving in this ministry. I have seen and felt God more in these last several years than throughout the rest of my life combined. God is so good—He has shown me the truth of Psalms 119:71 (“It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes”) and Romans 8:28 (“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”).

Wherever Ginny and I are in our journey, because of a loving, wise, and biblical community helping us to process truth, we are more trusting of, and in love with, our Savior. And so, we hope the same can be true for you as well!

CLOSED GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Day 1

How would you describe the goal of community?

Day 2

What is the biggest obstacle that you have in living faithfully in community? How do you overcome those obstacles?

Day 3

Community done faithfully and well is rare these days, even in stable and faithful churches. How would you biblically support the importance of community for those who are questioning the effort required to abide in such community?

Day 4

What do you believe are the most important personal character traits that would allow one to optimally grow and flourish in community? Please explain in detail.

Day 5

Describe the pitfalls of isolation and why it is so dangerous.

Day 6

Describe a situation in which someone told you something that hurt you deeply, but, with time, you were so thankful because you realized it was loving and helpful. Also, please share with the group if you *haven't* had such an experience.

NOTES