**Community**

**Prodigal Message #7**

**Memory Verse**

**Heb. 10:24,25** And let us consider how we might spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not stop meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.

 *I was in the middle of one of my typical “busy weeks” when I remembered my community group weekend retreat. I quickly texted my leader to find out the agenda and discovered we would be focusing on our marriages. I breathed a sigh of relief as I had no problems in my marriage…or so I thought. Once we arrived, we were handed some questions to consider, answer individually, and then review with our spouses. Later, we would discuss those same questions with our group. I was shocked to find that my wife’s answers differed dramatically from mine. She took this opportunity to honestly tell me that she felt like I took her for granted and gave me specifics. As we reviewed our answers together, I justified and rationalized her answers. I felt she just didn’t understand the demands I had. I loved and cared for her immensely and if she couldn’t see that, then I didn’t know what else to do. I thought it was her problem. I felt her response showed a lack of understanding and empathy. I was frustrated.*

 *That evening we sat side beside each other in 2 chairs facing the rest of the group as we read the same answers we had read to each other a couple of hours before. The crazy thing as I look back on it is that I had convinced myself somehow that the group would see it my way, but the minute we both sat down on our “hot seats” I knew the truth. She voiced what would become a famous line in our relationship. She told me in front of the group that I made her feel like a “comfy slipper”, but not passionately pursued. As her answers were read in front of the other couples, the weight of the truth of her words could not be lifted so easily. I was so convicted I began to weep.*

 *I was reminded that weekend of the power and need for community. That weekend started a journey for us that grew our marriage to the place God wanted, an amazing place, where we love each other more than ever. The value of community, done well, cannot be overestimated.*

**Introduction**

Many people say they have their “own deal with God” and that “religion is a private matter”. There is absolutely no Biblical basis for these positions. In fact, God’s word strongly calls us to community, which can sharpen us as we process Biblical truth together. Life change happens best in the context of wise, caring, Biblical community (Heb. 10:24,25). There are 59 “one another” 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 tool that God wants us to utilize in order to grow in Christ. It is modeled as a non negotiable throughout the New Testament and is modeled in our Prodigal small groups.

**Biblical Call to Community**

We have explained in other messages that the word of God can be trusted and supports our “reasonable faith”. It gives all the wisdom we need to guide us in life. The problem lies in the application of those truths to our own lives as our human sin nature can blind us of our shortcomings. A crude but accurate example is our breath. It is difficult to know when your own breath is offensive. You need someone who loves you to tell you to brush your teeth! 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 tell us when we are blind to the sin in our lives. There are many Biblical examples to give us strong support for community.

* God, Three in One, is an example of community, as God himself exists with the Holy Spirit and Jesus. Gen 1:27
* Jesus modeled community in the way he spent the majority of his time with the community of his 12 disciples (the Gospels)
* The early church paints an amazing example of community (Acts 2:42-47)
* Not only is community helpful for sharpening us in truth, but solid Biblical community is also a useful tool to encourage us through fellowship and prayer. Life change is best accomplished in the context of relationships (Heb. 10:24,25; I Thess. 5:14)
* Community guards against isolation which is a tool of Satan (Prov. 18:1)
* It is interesting to see that God realized that it was not good for man to be alone and created woman in Genesis 2:18

**The “one anothers”**

* + As mentioned in the introduction, it is not to be missed that there are roughly 59 verses that use the phrase “one another” in the New Testament. These repeated occurrences clearly indicate the importance of living in community with “one another”. Those verses use verbs to describe how we are to live with one another and it is worth the time to review them below.

*Discuss* (Luke. 6:11)*Love* (John 13:34)*Ask* (Acts 2:12)*Talk* (Acts 26:31)*Devoted* (Rom. 12:10)*Honor above yourself* (Rom. 12:10)

*Live in harmony* (Rom. 12:16)*Do not judge* (Rom. 14:13)*Accept* (Rom. 15:7)*Greet with a holy kiss* (Rom. 16:16)*Treat with humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with* (Eph. 4:2)*Treat with kindness, compassion, forgiveness* (Eph. 4:32)*Speak through hymns, psalms, spiritual songs* (Eph. 5:19)*Submit* (spouses)(Eph. 5:21)*Bear with and forgive grievances* (Col 3:13)*Teach and admonish* (with the Word of Christ indwelling richly within you) (Col 3:16)*Encourage and build up* (I Thess. 5:11)*Warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone* (I Thess. 5:14)*Encourage daily* (Heb. 3:13)*Spur one another on to love and good deeds* (Heb. 10:24)*Meet with consistently and encourage* (Heb. 10:25)*Do not slander* (Jas 4:11)*Love one another deeply from your heart* (I Peter 1:22)*Live in harmony, compassionate, sympathetic, and humble* (I Peter 3:8)*Offer hospitality without grumbling* (I Peter 4:9)*Have fellowship by walking in the light* (I John 1:7)*Love one another, walk in love* (multiple times in 1 and 2 John)

**Community in Recovery**

It is noteworthy to point out that when Jesus was teaching the disciples how to pray he addressed God from a community perspectiveeg…**”Our”** father. It is also interesting that every 12-step recovery program understands the importance of community to achieve the intended goals. The serenity prayer exemplifies this perspective well. “**We** admitted **we** were powerless over **our** addiction….that **our** lives had become unmanageable…”

**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 Wilberforce 1797

 Anyone who has accepted Christ, must first recognize their need of a Savior. Likewise, it is difficult to accept community sharpening, rebuke, and correction unless we have an accurate self-assessment of our own sinful condition and our tendency to minimize or even totally miss our faults. The greater you humbly realize the need for sharpening, the easier it will be for you to accept the correction with grace and gratitude. Without that paradigm you can not follow a mission statement that centers on glorifying God.

 One way to check yourself is to honestly and authentically assess how you are doing. For example, how did you do this year, this week, or just today in regard to:

* Dying to self? / Serving others? / Evangelism? / Producing fruit? / Maintaining joy in all circumstances? / Spiritual disciplines? / Overcoming recurring sin? / Giving up control to God?

Such questions can be modified for your Prodigal or parenting journey

* Setting boundaries? / Enforcing consequences? / Trusting your child to God? / Laying your Isaac down? / Not enabling and rescuing? / Not living in fear? / Having joy and glorifying God in the midst of your prodigal chaos?

As exemplified in my opening story about the “comfy slippers”, it is important to assess yourself, but much *more powerful to recruit your community to help you process this*.

Again, Wilberforce summarizes this concept well. It is important to realize that Wilberforce penned these words in the late 1700’s.

*“Self deception is one of the great enemies of 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…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 Wilberforce 1797

A sample list of questions for a men’s community group might look something like this.

1. Are we maintaining our quiet times regularly and deeply?
2. What is the status of our marriage: are we treating our wives like a priority in their eyes?
3. Have we suffered any sexual temptations (including pornography) recently, and how have we responded?
4. Are we maintaining our finances and tithing in a scriptural fashion?

5. Are we tending to our bodily health?

 6. Is our business or profession God-honoring?

 7. Have we controlled our tongues recently?

 8. Have we controlled our anger recently?

 9. Have we had a critical spirit towards our spouse or others recently?

 10. Have we shared the Good News with a nonbeliever recently?

 11. Have we lied about any of the above?

**What is the goal of Community?**

The goal of community is not just accountability or encouragement. Those are just tools of community that lead us to greater Christ –likeness. **The goal of community is to help us be more like Christ and to know and understand God more fully.** (Jeremiah 9:23.24)

**Proverbs 27:17** states *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. “*

That is an inspiring quote that gives us all clear direction for how we are to live in community. However, envision iron sharpening iron, as things get red hot and sparks fly! *Open, honest, authentic community is hard.* There is no way around it. If you don’t have the proper focus and understanding of community and you do not know that your “sharpeners” love you, it is almost impossible to endure. If it seems hard and difficult at times, be encouraged, you are on the right path! Community that is easy and without conflict is not true and impactful, nor is it God honoring.

 **I Thess. 5:14** calls us to warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak but at the same time to be patient with everyone. Let me remind you that of all the “one another verses” listed above the most common verb is “love”. One must deliver truth mixed with grace. The following quotation is a great summary reminder.

***Truth, delivered without love, will not be heard. However love, given without truth, is not love.***

**II Timothy 4:2** *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage---with great patience and careful instruction*

**Titus 1:13** *rebuke them sharply so that they will be sound in the faith*

**Alternative to Community is Isolation, the Devil’s workshop**

Lack of community is isolation, which is exactly where Satan wants us to reside. In isolation, he does his best work, whispering lies and untruths into our ears. He is the father of lies.

John 8:44 “*you belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is not truth in him. When he lies, he lies in his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”,*

 Proverbs 18:1-2 “*A man who isolates himself quarrels against all sound wisdom. A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.”*

**Not all “community” is wise 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 may lead to death.

* Proverbs 14:12 There are ways that seem right to a man but in the end they lead to death.
* Proverbs 27:6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.
* **Proverbs 13:20 He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm**
* See also Proverbs 12:15, Proverbs 15: 14, Proverbs 26:12

**Biblical Examples of Bad Community**

**David** was a “man after God’s own heart”. God throughout the Old Testament honored him. He is highly regarded as the greatest King of Israel. On his throne, Christ will sit one day in ultimate authority over heaven and earth. It is through David’s line that Christ was born, as prophesied.

However, even great and Godly men like David can stumble if they fall prey to isolation. **2 Samuel 11:1** *In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the King’s men and the whole Israelite army.* David should have been with his men and his wise counsel, but by all that we know, he was back at home in isolation. His eyes wandered to Bathsheba bathing on an adjacent rooftop. Lust and selfish desires overtook him. This good man, left to his own flesh, did the unthinkable, which led him to have Uriah killed. The consequences to David were devastating, with the loss of his son and the terrible example he set to those who knew and loved him.

**Judas** shows another example of how community can fail. Community will not work unless you are able to take wise counsel. You must be humble and honest about your hurts, habits, and hang-ups or no one can help you. Judas had issues with Christ and his leadership but never really addressed them. He kept them to himself and was essentially living a lie in isolation, in the midst of the greatest community group ever assembled! Judas lost perspective of his mission and his purpose. He did not take advantage of the wisest counsel ever given and as a result has a name synonymous with evil, betrayal, and Satan himself.

**How Community Can Aid Your Prodigal Journey**

The secret to navigating the storm of life in a way that brings peace in the process, and also honors God and brings Him glory, is to simply trust in Him. The prodigal ministry is simply a discipleship ministry that grows believers to better understand and know God and their need for Christ. Good community will help us to consistently live out our God given purpose.

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.* **Ephesians 4:14-15**

**In summary, remember that our view of God, in each moment, is the most important thing about us.**

* **A proper view of God will drive us to Biblical community, which then draws us to an even deeper understanding and relationship with God.**
* **An improper view of God drives us into isolation**.

**The choice is ours and the consequences are eternal.**

**Personal Testimony: Community’s Impact On My Prodigal Journey**

 *Long before Ginny and I were led by God to start the Prodigal ministry,* *but after a few years of my prodigal son’s rebellion and chaos, we enjoined Biblical community for help. I asked Biblically wise friends and family to join me in as intervention for my son. As it turned out, I gained more insight and revelation that day than my son did. He was not ready to hear the truth, but by God’s grace****, I was****.*

 *During the intervention, they spoke truth. I heard revelations from my son that I had never heard. When the discussion came to an end after 2 hours, I felt it ended a bit early, but thought it went well. My son left with a plan to be completed, however, many in the group remained to process what we had heard. To my surprise, I was the only one who felt like progress had been achieved. They each saw clearly that my son was holding back, manipulating, and lying.*

 *I am not used to being the naïve and blind person in the discussion. Anyone having endured the prodigal journey knows those moments when large pits in your stomach form. They are hard to describe, but are unmistakable and come without warning. I examined the motives and wisdom of everyone in that room. Not a single person had any reason to cause me harm, cause my son harm, or lie. They all saw it the same way, including my wife.*

***At that point, I made a decision that changed my life****. I decided 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 Truth that I could not see.*

 *Little did I know that a short two weeks later my son would relapse. With personal doubt remaining, I followed community advice. We gave him a choice to enter rehab or live life on his own without any support. We took his vehicle and all support in trade for bus fare from Missouri to Dallas. He miraculously stepped off the bus the next day and we put him on a plane to rehab in Montana 4 hours later.*

*His journey, like any addict, is a lifelong journey. We still take life one day at a time. At the time of this writing my son’s journey has been a roller coaster and the final chapter is not written. I ask sincerely and passionately for your prayers for him.*

*The purpose of this testimony is about how community impacted* ***my*** *journey, the only journey I have any control of. In retrospect, I can think of several ways that community changed the course of my life.*

* *That first intervention made me realize that I could not trust myself but rather had to trust Godly wise counsel. I have done that consistently ever since.*
* *As my pastor was leaving the intervention, I will never forget what he said to me on my front porch. As I thanked him to take time out of his extremely busy schedule to lead the intervention, he acknowledged that he rarely had time to do such things, but 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 struggled with addiction and Prodigal chaos. Who knew? That day he saw a weak enabler blinded by his own emotions, with a pit in his stomach, and yet he encouraged me to use my pain for God’s glory.*
* *With that seed planted, a few years later, my regular community group counseled my wife and I to start the Prodigal ministry. Ginny and I have processed life with these 3 other couples since 2004 and still do today. I argued that I was too busy with my surgical practice. I plead that I was not equipped and was overwhelmed. My community saw it differently. They realized it was impossible but they also realized that with God, anything was possible. The Prodigal ministry started formally in February 2010. I have never ever been more assured that I have been in God’s will than when I have had the joy of serving in this ministry. I have seen and felt God more in these years than the rest of my life combined. God is so good and has shown me the truth of Psalms 119:71 and Romans 8:28.*

*Wherever Ginny and I are in our journey, we are more trusting, and more in love with our Savior, as a result of a loving Biblically wise community helping us process truth.*

**Questions For Closed Group Discussion**

1. **What would you describe the goal of Community to be?**
2. **What is the biggest obstacle that you have in living faithfully in community? How do you overcome those obstacles?**
3. **Community done faithfully and well is rare these days, even in faithful churches. How would you support the importance of Community, Biblically, to those questioning the effort required to live in such community?**
4. **What do you believe are the most important character traits in an individual that would allow maximum growth in community? Explain your answer fully.**
5. **Describe the pitfalls of isolation and why it is so dangerous.**
6. **Describe a situation in which someone told you something that hurt deeply, but with time, you were so thankful because with time you realized it was loving and helpful. (if you have never had such an experience it is important to tell the group)**

**Notes**