

Living Holy Lives

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[0 : 00] When I was at university, I was in a hall with about ten or twelve bedrooms and we were amongst! some other halls as well, similar size, and we got a real community between us. We were! all on different courses, we had sports, science, physiology, related arts, all sorts, but somehow we formed this great sense of friendship and we would do a lot together, we'd support each other from the highs and lows of university life and relationships starting and failing and it just was a really kind of harmonious group and one of the group was less integrated.

His friends were elsewhere and he'd usually be away and not so much around with us as a little community. And one time he went out and he left his music on with his massive stereo pumping out at really high volume so none of us could sleep. So I broke into his room and turned it off and we went to sleep and said the next day, hey can you not do that? It's a bit irritating. So he did it again.

So I broke into his room and stole the fuses out of his stereo. And so we had about five days of quiet until he worked out what was wrong and got some new fuses. And he did it again and wasn't back until you know very very late in the morning and we couldn't get into his room or you know he had another key or something. So what we did the next time was we broke in when he was out and we removed his whole room. We put it on the roof. And now all credit to him is that when we came out in the morning we got up to go to lectures he was in bed on the roof which I thought was pretty impressive. Which is better than a friend who had a friend whose story was this that at university in Birmingham I think it's Aston there's a bit of a tower block quite a few floors a few stories. And when one of their friends came back incredibly drunk that they decided to put him in a room on the ground floor when his room is on the sixth floor put some of his things around him and in the morning rushed in woke him up when he was confused and threw him out the window. That's quite a prank. Anyway so we had this community and it was a really key part of our time through those four years of college. And there's something of that story here in Ephesians about community and the importance of community and being the body of Christ together.

So it's a book widely viewed to be the apostle Paul writing to the church in Ephesus and this is once a Greek colony but now the capital of Rome in the region of Asia. And it's often thought to be sometimes described as the gospel of the church. It's a almost an intercessory book and there's an incredibly high view of what it means to be church to be the body of Christ. And essentially there are four themes throughout the book. One, a new life in relationship with Jesus Christ. A new community as those together as the body of Christ, the church. A new way of living and behaving that's really required an expression of being the body of Christ as you heard Catherine just reading. And a new relation that's in harmony with God and is hostile to the devil. And we're going to look through those first three.

An encounter with Jesus. What does it mean to be community? And what does it mean to then have the fruit of the spirit in our lives? Now I've read a paper in which there's a theme of people who have coronary heart disease, have had a heart bypass operation, who are then told by the medics, if you don't change your lifestyle, you will be dead certainly within five years and probably two.

[4:30] But if you can change your lifestyle, you could live for 10 years or longer, certainly over five. So if you were told this by your medic, do you think you'll change? Yeah, we think we would. However, it turns out that this particular paper written by the CEO of John Hopkins University and the Dean of the medical school said one of their biggest challenges was 90% of people don't change. The threat of death is not enough to change behavior.

So here in this reading today, we have quite a lot of do not, do this, you must. And the issue is, being told this doesn't really tend to change our behavior.

And the psychology of this is that most of our behavior is driven unconsciously, really established by patterns from the early years of our life that become unconscious, unconscious, like an unconscious operating model that just spins. And so it's not enough to say, do this or don't do that. More must be required if we're actually going to change our behavior, not just a list of instructions. It's very hard to move away from don't do this, from a set of behaviors, unless we know what we're moving towards.

And there's a really helpful psychological pattern, which is understanding the routines and some of these unconscious drivers of our behavior. One of these is called away from or towards. And we are at different places on that continuum, depending on the early years. If we're a towards person, we really know what we want and we go after it in a very focused way. If we're an away from, we typically try and avoid and create circumstances that that doesn't happen. You'll notice it in marketing. The marketing for sports car is adventure, passion, beauty, drama, thrill, adventure, and it costs you a lot. But you don't worry about the money because you're going to get this incredible experience. Marketing for a Kia car is away from, typically, seven-year warranty, all service included in the price. And so which one appeals to you more might be a reflection of that meta program that's running for you. What I think this means for us is it's really important to know what is it we're moving towards that might make it possible then to think about how our behavior could flow out of that. And at the start of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul is writing about what are we moving towards about life in Jesus Christ, in the acceptance of the love and grace of God, and then the miracle of forgiveness and the capacity to be reconnected to the living God.

And we read this earlier in Ephesians. In 1.3, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

[7:46] For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. 1.5, In love he predestined us to be adopted as sons and daughters through Christ Jesus.

1.7, In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. And the redemption here really does mean the clearing of a debt. 1.13, And you were also included in Christ when you heard the word of truth and the gospel of salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. 1.18, I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and the incomparable great power for us who believe. And it goes on and on.

And we hear this incredible description of what is the towards, encounter with the living God. grace, which means there's forgiveness for sin, and empowering and resourcing to the Holy Spirit to live the kind of life that God is calling us to. In 2.22, and you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. I became a Christian when I was 18 and had a really profound encounter with God. And then shortly after I was baptized in the church I became a Christian.

We did a sort of full immersion, like we do here in the old paddle pool at the front. And I remember giving my story about having met with God and the sort of incredible miracle of knowing I could be forgiven and experience the love of God in a very profound way daily. I shared this and then I was baptized in the freezing cold water as it was. And then just afterwards, a friend of mine was there, who was I think a solicitor at the time, stood up and said, I want to get baptized as well.

And he was in this very fine suit with quite expensive brogues. You look like a solicitor, don't you, and dressed like that. Sorry, solicitors. Actually, I worked with quite a few and they're a bit more casual now, I think. And so when we said, do you want to take your shoes off? No, no, he said. I want all of me and every aspect of my life to go into that water and come out again and to give it all to God. It's an incredible story of he just knew what he was moving towards, an encounter with God, a sense of relationship, the experience of forgiveness and of life.

[10:34] So if we have a sense of what we are being drawn towards, this incredible truth about knowing the love and grace, life, forgiveness of God, then that's key to us beginning to think about, well, how might my behavior reflect that? So let's think a bit about church community.

For the recipients of this letter in Ephesus, they would have given their lives to Jesus on the whole, and then been baptized as well. And it was quite ceremonial. Often they would be given a white robe after being baptized. And this letter is intended to remind them and encourage them as they start to fall away from a way of life that reflects this encounter with Jesus. Actually, this is what you've been called to. This is what it means to know the love and grace and forgiveness of God. And this is what it means to be the community of Jesus in Ephesus. So if you go back to those who are facing heart disease, surgery, and then being told if you change your lifestyle, you could live for much longer.

What medics started to do in the late 90s, early 2000s, was start to create little groups, help groups of all the people who might have been through surgery or were trying to avoid surgery, but needed to change their lifestyle, that have a shared purpose, that have shared content around how to live your life and how to eat healthily, that have a little bit of support. And this profoundly changed the results. Rather than 90% failing to change and dying prematurely, it went up to 80% to 90% changed and lived a longer, healthier life. You can hear this description of the power of a community with a shared purpose and focus, meeting together with intent. And there's a really strong description here in Ephesians about being the body of Christ, about being the church, about being the society of God and meeting together with shared purpose. And what that might mean in terms of being the hands and feet of Jesus. We read it there as Catherine read, do not let any in the wholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may be a benefit to those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another. Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children.

And walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. There's a theme throughout the Bible of this, in Isaiah 35:8. And a highway will be there, it will be called the way of holiness. It will be for those who walk on that way. And in Psalm 24 as well, the one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false God. A story of in an encounter with God, then in community, actually a way of being, a fruit of that needs to be evident. So with this sort of new status of not only meeting and encountering Jesus, but then a new status of being the body of Christ, the church in a community requires some new standards of behaviour. And there's a strong metaphor from Paul here, where he talks about taking off the old and putting on the new, a bit like clothes. You can imagine you see prisoners in films often,

I don't know if they still do this in prisons, but wearing the prison clothing. And they come to the end of their term and they're released, take off that clothing and put on their own clothes. There's something here very powerful about dressing in the conduct, the way of being, the encounter with God, that reflects the new life, not the old life.

[15:18] An old friend of mine called Jim, I'm out of touch with him now, once he told me this story, he said he had a cleaner. He's a wearlot with a pretty important corporate job. He said one of his cleaner was actually a practicing witch. And he just prayed for her, wasn't particularly worried about it. And one day she said to him, look, see all these books you've got there. He said, oh, which books are those? These books about God, about Christian faith. Can I borrow one of those?

He said, yeah, sure. Help yourself. A few weeks later, he happened to be at the house when she was there. And he said, oh, how'd you get on? She said, oh yeah, really well. Thank you. And I've got it with me to give it back to you. And actually, I prayed the prayer at the back of the book. He said, what was the prayer?

He said, well, I gave my life to Jesus. He said, that's fantastic. That's so good. You'll never regret it, he said. And also, I'd really encourage you to maybe find in local church that you can share this with. And you'll be in community to help you as you find this new journey with knowing God. She said, yeah, I'll do that. Thank you.

Then she said, look, I've got all my old books on witchcraft, and I was wondering what to do with them. I mean, I was thinking about maybe giving them to a friend or giving them to someone else. He said, well, did they do you any good? She said, no, not really. He said, well, no point giving them to anyone else then. She went, that's a good point. I wonder what I should do.

And he said, oh, maybe you could burn them. She went, do you know what? That's exactly what I'll do. Paul describes this process of becoming a Christian as experiencing being a new creation, and then receiving a new mind and a constant renewal of that mind.

[17:06] So as we consider this challenge and encouragement in this book of Ephesians to encounter the love of Jesus, a new relationship, to be in a new community where we are sharing together and the new standard of behaviours that then reflect that love and grace of God.

God, I think we're helped by being really clear about what we're moving towards.

the grace of God, forgiveness, this experience of salvation, of knowing we are in a new chapter of our lives.

The old has gone and the new has come. We're into a new adventure, a new mystery to explore. And Isaiah 64, 8 says, yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay. You are the potter. We are the work of your hand.

So my question for you is, do you know the love of Jesus in that way? Have you given your heart to God and asked God to be in your life?

[18:31] Or do you need to re-engage with God and reconnect at a deeper level? If so, what will you do about it?

And when will you do it? So time just doesn't slip by. The second insight here is that we are helped by being in a community. We're called to be the body of Christ, the hands and feet of God in our community with a shared culture, with encouragement, with support, with empathy, with grace for each other.

We read in Acts 2, 42, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Not that we create some holy huddle. This is just for ourselves. But actually we strengthen each other to be an expression of God's love to those around us, our neighbours and those in Clevedon.

Those who don't yet know the love of God. So my question for you is, how could you be more a part of this community?

[20 : 19] through your home group? By investing in your relationships? By taking time to pray together?

To meet up? To support? So what will you do? And when will you do it?

So the time just doesn't slip by. And third, we're helped by being filled and led by the Holy Spirit, the presence of God on earth with us.

Throughout our series, from September to November, we explored what does it mean to be filled, equipped, and enabled by the tangible presence and love of God with us. To become a temple in which the Holy Spirit lives.

In Acts 1, we read Jesus' last words to his disciples. Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father has promised you, which you have heard me speak about.

[21 : 43] For John baptized with water, but in a few days you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and Clevedon.

So have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit? Or have you recently allowed the Spirit of God to fill you afresh?

What will you do about that? And when will you do it so time just doesn't slip by?

Okay. Now, I don't do very well being told what to do.

I'm pretty stubborn. But actually, as I think about this passage and knowing what I'm being drawn closer to, this incredible description in Ephesians about what it means to know the love of God, forgiveness, grace, involvement in our lives.

[23 : 00] when I think about actually I need you, we need each other, together we can encounter more of God's love and life and truth together.

As I think about it's not through my effort, it's through grace and through the Holy Spirit. I feel like maybe I could be a bit holier.

Maybe I could be more of a highway for the Holy Spirit to land. And as Paul wrote in chapter 2, for we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do.

So let's just pause and pray in response to that. Lord, we thank you for the miracle that as we give our lives to you, we are a new creation.

And that, Holy Spirit, you meet with us and help us spread off the old and live in the new in relationship with you. We thank you, Lord, that you designed us to work in a community, your body, each of us together.

[24 : 43] we thank you that in you we can start to be more of you to our community.

We ask, Lord, that you would lead us, stir us this week to be a very tangible expression to others. We ask, Holy Spirit, you would lead us and keep in our minds what our response might need to be from what we've heard in Ephesians today.

In your name, Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.