

Fellowship and the Church

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Date: 11 September 2016

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[0:00] And this morning as we look at fellowship and as we think about small groups and really the purpose for why we have a small group ministry and the purpose of fellowship and what does fellowship do for us as a people?

I want to begin to answer the question for us this morning. The question is, what's the big deal about fellowship? I mean, who cares about fellowship anyway? Why is it really important?

And so this morning, that's the question I want to try to answer is, what is the big deal about fellowship? One writer has put it this way. He says, when we depend upon organizations, we get what organizations can do.

When we depend upon education, we get what education can do. When we depend upon man, we get what man can do. But when we depend upon prayer, we get what God can do.

I think a correlation can be made to fellowship. When we depend upon superficiality, we get what superficiality brings.

[1:13] But when we nurture and develop the kind of strategy for biblical fellowship that God desires for His people, we'll get what God has designed fellowship to nurture.

We'll get what God has designed fellowship to accomplish. And this morning, as we look into the Word, I want to help us get just a new look at what fellowship does.

And I want us to see that fellowship isn't just another tangential program or tangential ministry of the church. That fellowship is something that we do because it is the heart and soul of who we are as a church.

It is the heart and soul of who God has made us to be. And anything good that will happen as a result of the ministry here, we'll find as a basis, we'll find as a starting point, true biblical fellowship.

Now, certainly we understand that fellowship has to begin with a relationship with God. The Apostle John, we've been looking through the gospel of John, but John, in one of his letters to the church of Ephesus, writes this in 1 John 1.

[2:29] He says, That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life. And we all know that he's talking about Jesus there.

What does that relationship with Jesus do? He says, That which we have seen and heard we have proclaimed to you. So that you may have fellowship with us.

And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. God has placed us into relationship. The initial and primary supreme relationship that we enjoy is a relationship with God.

And because of that common relationship that those who are in Christ can experience, it means that we can have relationship with one another. It means we must have relationship with each other because of the primary relationship we have with God the Father.

What does that relationship look like? How did that relationship begin? Many of you may be able to recount just the beginnings of that spiritual legacy that God created in your life.

[3 : 47] Now, we can chart our own family ancestry, but we can also begin to chart a little bit of our spiritual legacy. What is that spiritual family tree that God has given to us?

And how did that all come about? I had a chance in Sunday school class just to hear some testimonies of people who came to faith in Christ. It was remarkable to hear and refreshing for me to hear how God has worked in specific lives of individuals to bring them to Christ.

What is your own experience? My guess is that as we were to take an inventory here in our own fellowship, we would find a diversity of experiences and how God brought us to saving faith in Him.

Maybe through a parent or a grandparent. Maybe through a Sunday school teacher who was instrumental in your life. Maybe through an Awana leader. Or maybe a neighbor who was living down the street.

Or maybe a sermon that you heard one Sunday morning. Or an evangelist that came to your house. Maybe it was something that you read. An article. Or something online.

[4 : 55] Perhaps it was a sermon or a lesson you heard even over the internet. Or something you watched on the TV. But through the mouthpiece of individuals or through the pen of a person, God brought the word to you.

Paul says in Romans chapter 10, he says, Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

God has chosen through the instrumentation of individuals for us to hear the message of the gospel. And as we begin to understand and appreciate how God brought us to saving faith, we understand that God used an individual, we'll call them maybe a spiritual mom or dad, to help lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus.

A fellowship that you may have had with them was in your introduction of fellowship with God the Father. A fellowship that was nurtured through other individuals, through a church setting, through a small group, through a Bible study, maybe even through some people in a workplace.

But God used relationships in your life not only to initiate the gospel, initiate a relationship with him, but also to advance his objective in your life in helping you to grow spiritually, in helping you to have a spiritual life.

[6 : 25] One person has said that the depth of our personal relationship with God determines the degree of fellowship possible with each other.

Fellowship is important. And this morning I want to answer this question, what is the big deal about fellowship? fellowship. Now maybe you're looking at your notes this morning and you see four pages and you're wondering in the next 30 minutes how in the world we're going to get through all of this material.

And I just want to rest assured that my intention of putting it here is not that we're going to cover it all, it's that you can take it home and I don't have to talk about it, okay? So my desire is not only to initiate this process of understanding, but give you the resources that you need to be able to take this home, to be able to look at the scriptures, and to be encouraged throughout the week in what God has said from his word about this very important subject, the subject about fellowship.

Now as God has used individuals in your life to lead you to the gospel, God has done the same for the individuals who were your spiritual mom or dad.

And on and on and on through history, various situations and circumstances and interactions with individuals will eventually lead us back to where it all began.

[7 : 58] Back to what we're going to look at this morning. This Christian movement, the new church era that began in Acts chapter 1 and 2, where the gospel rocketed out of Jerusalem and affected Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world.

It all began with this small band of 11 men that we call disciples. And this small group of individuals, 120 people who in chapter 1 of Acts are praying together and encouraging one another.

And the power of God falls on that group of individuals. And there is electricity in the air, and there is conversion, and there is the work of the Spirit in working in the hearts of individuals to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ.

Our spiritual legacy can be traced back to that movement of individuals that God used instrumentally to propel the gospel out of Jerusalem into the uttermost parts of the earth.

But in order to understand how that all began, in order for us to recognize the significance of fellowship, and how does that play into our discussion today, I want to encourage us to open our Bibles to Mark chapter 3.

[9 : 24] We're going to look at how this fellowship, discipleship movement began. We're going to see how things broke loose in Jerusalem, and then how eventually it erupted in Antioch some 15 to 20 years later.

And how has each subsequent generation benefited from the strategy that Jesus laid down early on in his ministry with the disciples, disciples, and then was picked up and carried along, and to this point, we still participate in the benefits of this strategy that we're going to look at this morning.

Now, as you can tell, this is just going to be a flyby. Okay? My desire this morning is not to dig in and to dig deep. We don't have time for that, but I just want to provide some exposure.

I want to give us an opportunity to look into the Scripture to see three key aspects of fellowship from Mark chapter 3, and then the continuing legacy that fellowship brings through the Gospel of Acts, and we're going to have to hit it rapid fire, but I'm sure you can stick along with us, and I hope this will be a blessing to you.

So, what is the big deal about fellowship? Well, first of all, from Mark chapter 3, 13 to 15, fellowship is the starting point of discipleship.

[10 : 55] Fellowship is the starting point for discipleship. Let me read these verses for us, and then we'll dig in a little bit. It says, And he went up, of course, that's speaking of Jesus, on the mountain, and called to him those whom he desired.

And they came to him, and he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons.

Now, if I were to ask you the question, why did Jesus call the apostles? What was the main objective? How would we tend to answer that question?

Well, if you're anything like me, your answer would be, well, Jesus called the apostles to himself, so they could make disciples of the world. And certainly, that is true. But we have to back up a little bit, and we have to see that the starting point of discipleship is something else.

What do you see there in verse 14? How does it all begin? What is the first strategy of Jesus from this text?

[12 : 09] What does it say? That they might do what? Be with him. Have you ever seen that before? This was brought to my attention a couple of years ago, and I'm like, how did I miss that?

How did I miss something as important as that? Discipleship must begin in fellowshipping relationships.

Discipleship begins as we are involved in community. Fellowship begins as we are coming to understand and to know and to love Jesus Christ.

Fellowship begins as that relationship with him is nurtured and developed in us so that then we can move outward and reach the world.

Now, believe it or not, here in Mark chapter 3, a lot has taken place already in the ministry of Jesus. He's already been baptized. He's already gone into the wilderness and been tempted.

[13:14] The initial call to Peter and Andrew and James and John have already happened, and they've been following him for months. There's been an initial call to Matthew and an initial call to Nathaniel and to Philip, so many of his disciples had already been following him.

And up to this point, there was this massive crowd that was following Jesus wherever he went. Not to mention the fact there was already significant opposition in Jesus' ministry.

The scribes and the Pharisees all the way down in Jerusalem, all the way up to the highest regions of Galilee, were beginning to congregate and to evaluate the ministry of Jesus.

What will he say next? Who is this teacher and preacher who has taken Galilee by storm? Some commentators have suggested that Jesus may have actually already finished his first year of ministry before this event actually took place.

And not that the disciples weren't already following him and already engaged in the ministry, but now was a time for something definitive to happen. Now was a time for Jesus to set apart a group of individuals who would be selected to do something important, something significant.

[14:32] Christ initiates this discipleship movement through the means of fellowship. Jesus is interested in setting apart this group of individuals to have exclusive access to have exclusive access to him, to have exclusive privilege and power, to have exclusive mission of being the mouthpiece of Christ in the word of God and helping to lay the foundation for the church.

But it would happen through the context of this fellowship with Jesus. This strategy that Christ used would help to develop these men to carry on this monumental vision that he had for reaching the world for himself.

Interestingly, this was so important to Christ. We find from Luke's account that Jesus went to the mountain to pray and all night he continued in prayer to God.

And then when day came he called his disciples and chose from them twelve whom he named apostles. Jesus was interested in making sure that the right men were selected for this fellowshipping relationship with him so they could then be turned loose to accomplish the objectives that he had for the world.

We call this discipling process, we refer to this as partnership. The disciples were in true community with Jesus. They were in relationship with him.

[16:07] Last year when we had this startup for small groups Pastor Knoyer used this statement he says fellowship is essential for spiritual life and growth.

Another commentator says that God has chosen fellowship to be the primary channel of life in his body. If we want big things to happen at Maranatha if we want big things to happen in Grove City in Hilliard in Columbus in whatever town God has placed you it will happen as you are grounding yourself in a community of individuals and fellowshipping with them.

Now that raises another question. What is biblical fellowship? What does it mean? And the reason why we need to go there is because society and the world has hijacked this term.

So it's important for us to understand what does the Bible mean when it talks about fellowship. When we hear the term fellowship we often think of food and fun.

We think of activities. We think of things that stimulate conversation. We think of things that help to initiate some sort of interaction with one another and relationship.

[17 : 27] And we kind of hope that is we're together enough that fellowship will just happen. But fellowship in the scripture goes much deeper.

Fellowship in the scripture involves things that go much, much deeper than just the superficial aspects of what we would call community or fun or relationship.

When the Bible talks about fellowship it has something deeper in view. It has unity in view. It has partnership. in view. It has participation in one's lives in view.

Commitment to one another. Accountability. Sharpening. Sharing. Edification. And there are 19 times throughout the New Testament where the Bible uses this word koinonia which is the word fellowship.

And I've put them here in your insert for your own edification. But all 19 verses are listed there and my this is not authoritative but just my shot at what each verse does and how to categorize what fellowship accomplishes.

[18 : 38] You'll see here that there are intimate relationships that happen among believers. You'll see that there are financial contributions that are taking place and caring for one another. You'll see that it describes the intimate relationship we have with God that partnering relationship union we have with the Godhead.

And because of that partnership there must be purity and holiness and righteousness in our life. A testimony for Christ in our world. And then a joining together in ministry.

It is our fellowship that leads to service. Fellowship isn't just about having good relationships with individuals.

if fellowship ends there then fellowship that is taking place in your life is not biblical fellowship. Fellowship that just has community in view and interactions in view and conversations in view and sharing common interests in view is a delinquent form of fellowship.

It is not as deep as God would have it to go. Not that it doesn't include those things but it's got to go deeper. There's got to be more. There is a goal in mind to fellowship and that takes us to our next point.

[19 : 58] Fellowship is a platform for service and sending. Fellowship is a platform for service and sending. Let me again read verse 14 of chapter 3.

Mark 3 14. Here's what it says. And he appointed the twelve so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.

What is the goal of fellowship? Where does fellowship lead us? Where does it take us? How do we know that true biblical fellowship is happening?

because it says that they might be with him and he might send them where?

Out to preach. The focus of biblical fellowship is outward. It's others. the goal of biblical fellowship is outside of you.

[21 : 02] Now that is just counterintuitive wouldn't you think? That's just not what we think of when we think of fellowship. We think of strengthening the group. We think of nurturing one another and meeting needs and fixing problems and certainly that is part of what fellowship accomplishes.

But fellowship is strengthening of self so there can be a going out and strengthening of others. There is this growing concentric circles of community that continues to draw more and more people into the mix as you are enjoying relationship with God and seeing the benefits of relationship with others that you will understand that everywhere God has placed you there will be a desire to draw more and more people into that community.

Understanding that that community only happens through the context of the gospel. It only happens through relationship with Christ. And so in your workplace there is this enthusiasm and excitement for the fellowship that you have with God that seeks to draw others in and to include them in to the joy and the enthusiasm that you are experiencing for yourself.

You see the purpose of strengthening life is for the purpose of strengthening others. Pouring into one's life leads to pouring out.

Sowing leads to reaping. Receiving leads to giving. Building up leads to building out. And that's what fellowship does. Fellowship is intended not to have this community that is so introspective that it only considers the needs of one another.

[22:51] But it is the kind of community that looks for ways to share the joy to the people around you. So if that's not happening in your life then I would challenge you to think is biblical fellowship really taking place for you?

After all they were called apostles. Apostles were sent ones we are sent to speak his words. We are sent to show his works.

God shows up in our life through words and actions through fellowship in communities. And our union with Christ shapes our relationships with others.

I like how John Piper puts it. He says you cannot commend what you do not cherish. I'll say that one more time. You cannot commend what you do not cherish.

You're not going to talk about Jesus if he's not the sweetest thing that has ever happened in your life. But as he becomes supreme and ultimate for you as you begin to cherish him you cannot help but commend him to others.

[24:09] And that's what fellowship is intended to do. It's to nurture that loving relationship with God. Nurture the loving relationships we have with others so that we have something to talk about in our world.

It will be attractive to those in our communities in our workplace wherever God may place us as they see the sweetness of Jesus and the sweetness of relationship that you're enjoying with God's people.

people. So the focus of biblical fellowship is others then how is that expressed? How do we get to the business of showing that to other people?

Well the expression this is the next point the expression of biblical fellowship is through one another commands. And I put them here in your notes as just kind of a sampling of all of the one another commands that God gives to us as a church.

All those things that God tells us to do to express that fellowshipping relationship that we have with one another. There are some 60 one another commands throughout the New Testament.

[25:20] Some are repeated but they show up in so many different ways. And like I said this is just a sampling of what you can expect. Things like loving one another, praying for one another, bearing one another's burdens, singing to one another, comforting one another, confessing your faults to one another, being kindly affectionate to one another, preferring one another, stirring one another up to love and good deeds.

All of the things that we can only do when we are in community. You cannot obey God's commands unless you are with God's people.

You cannot carry out the things that God has called you to do. You cannot grow in your Christian life unless you are expressing the wonder of these one another commands that God has set up, not only in giving but also in receiving the beauty of what fellowship is designed to do.

The significance of fellowship in terms of being a platform for service and for sending. So what is the big deal about fellowship?

discipleship? Well, it's the starting point for discipleship. It's the platform for service and sending. And thirdly, it is the channel of divine strength.

[26 : 42] The channel of divine strength. Notice again, coming back to our text in chapter 3 of Mark, it says, He appointed the twelve, whom He also named apostles, so they might be with Him and He might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

This word for authority is the word, the Greek word *exousia*. It's the word for jurisdiction or control or authority to rule. It's the word for supernatural power or the right to judge.

It's the same word that we find in Matthew 28, 19 or 18 through 20 where Jesus says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, so go and make disciples.

All authority has been given to Christ. Christ has been given to the church and so the church can enjoy the power of God because of Christ and fellowshipping with Him and express that power in this world.

There is divine strength that comes to the believer, that comes to the church because of our position in Christ Jesus. He has authority and because of being in Christ, we have authority and power.

[28 : 09] A few years ago when I was working through the letters of Paul to the churches, this continued to just come home to my heart. Listen to a sampling of what Paul says in Ephesians 1.

He says, I'm praying for you that you would know the immeasurable greatness of His power towards us who believe. Later on in chapter 3, he says, I'm praying on my knees to the Father for you that you would be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being.

And in chapter 6, he says, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. in Philippians chapter 3, verse 10, he says, I am praying for myself that I would know Him in the power of His resurrection.

In Colossians chapter 1, he's praying for the church again. He says, I haven't ceased to pray for you that you would be strengthened with power according to His glorious might.

Would you characterize your life as one of power? maybe the reason why you feel so powerless in this life is because we have not dialed in to the kind of fellowship that God has called us to have.

[29 : 33] Fellowshipping relationships that are channels of divine strength and power. And throughout the gospel of Acts, or throughout the book of Acts, you see how that power shows up corporately for the church.

Really, as you look through the New Testament, anywhere that power is used, it really is used in conjunction with the church at large, not to individuals. If you want to recognize and experience the power of God in your life, it has to happen through relationships with God's people.

Okay, so drawing this to a close, you're asking yourself the question, I know you are. He says, okay, we've seen how fellowship is important to the church.

We see how Christ kind of initiated this fellowshipping relationships, but come on now, is this really the strategy for the future? Is this really how God intends for this to happen in his church?

And I'd like to just quickly run through some examples in Acts and show you that fellowship is God's enduring strategy. fellowship is God's enduring strategy.

[30 : 48] So in Acts chapter 1, and I'm just going to summarize this for sake of time. Acts chapter 1, the disciples find themselves having just said goodbye to Jesus.

Jesus has just ascended to heaven and he's given them instructions. He says, go and wait in Jerusalem. Wait in Jerusalem for my power to show up.

And when it does, you will be my witnesses everywhere. So they do. In beginning in verse 12, we find them obeying the instructions of Christ.

Acts chapter 1, verse 12. If you're following along, it's on page 909. It says, they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

And when they had entered, they went to the upper room where they were staying. Now, this is important. I want you to recognize that they didn't all go to their own individual places.

[31 : 48] They went together to a house in Jerusalem. They were there together. And they understood that waiting did not just mean sitting on the couch watching a football game, as great as that might be.

Waiting meant praying. If they had learned anything from Jesus, they understood that waiting and praying went hand in hand. So that's what they're doing.

They entered the upper room, and there they are together. And it says in verse 14, all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.

together with the women and the Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers. This word, one accord, is used 11 times in the New Testament, and 10 of them show up in Acts.

That's how significant it was for this early church to express their oneness, their like-mindedness, their singular vision and focus for ministry was collaborative.

[33 : 02] And there they are together, and when they are together, God's power shows up. See that in chapter 2, verse 1, it says, when the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place, there it is again, and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind.

We find all the same hallmarks of fellowship taking place here. Singular devotion, togetherness, unity, and partnership, and praying together, and we didn't have time to look at this, but the word of God being taught in their midst.

And then the power of God comes through the channel of this fellowshipping relationship. Turn to the page of chapter 2. Acts chapter 2, verses 42 to 47.

This is a familiar verse to you, and I just want to point out some specific words. First, in verse 42, it says, and, what's that word, that next word? They, this group of 2,000 believers, this brand new church era had begun, and they are all together.

Every single one of them together, fellowshipping, it says. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship. And throughout the rest of this passage, you're going to find how that community, how that community partnered with each other to distribute for each other's needs, to be interested in care.

[34 : 37] And as a result of the fellowshipping relationship they had with one another, we find the result in verse 47. It changed everything about them, praising God and having favor with all the people, and the Lord added to their number day by day, those who are being saved.

Do you want that? Do you want that as a church? Do you want God to show up in relationships that we have with one another?

This explosive work of God in the hearts of his people that is creating evidence of that work in the world? Well, maybe you'll say, that's good for the apostles.

But what about us? We don't have the same gifts. So briefly, turn to chapter 11. This is where it explodes out of Antioch. And now, 15 to 20 years later, the church era has begun, and Antioch will become the launch pad for worldwide evangelism.

It will turn the world upside down with the gospel from this city of Antioch, made up of a bunch of ragtag misfits from Jerusalem who got kicked out because of persecution.

[35 : 57] Briefly, verse 19. Those who were scattered because of persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except the Jews.

That's one group. But, verse 20, there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists and also preaching the Lord Jesus.

And what was the result? Verse 21. In the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Hallelujah. Word gets back to Jerusalem. Jerusalem. And the apostles send this no-name guy, at least at the time, the son of encouragement named Barnabas, to go and try to encourage this band of people.

He shows up in verse 22, and then he says, in verse 23, he came and saw the grace of God. He was glad and exhorted them to remain faithful.

[37 : 00] And then jumping down to the end of verse 24, before, and a great many people were added to the Lord, because an encouraging ministry of Barnabas. And now fellowship begins to really take place.

Barnabas goes and finds Saul, who is also known as Paul. The two of them team teach for the next year. We find the results of that at the end of verse 26. For a whole year, they met with the church and taught, and a great many people were instructed.

And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. And then finally, this last group of individuals known as prophets, they also show up, and they add their little giftedness to the mix.

We see five different ways the word of God is brought to this group of people. It's spoken, it's preached, it's encouraged, it's taught, and now it's prophesied. And as a result of that, we find in the remaining verses 27 to 30, that fellowship not only happens amongst the people of God there in Antioch, but it spills out to Judea, where they're now sharing gifts and care and love to the churches who will be hurting someday in the near future because of a famine.

It says in verse 29, the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. That's what happens when true biblical fellowship is taking place.

[38 : 28] It always has an outward component. It is nurturing the strength of individuals so they can be strengthened for nurturing and helping others.

Big things happen when we are about biblical fellowship. So we end where we began. The question is, what is the big deal about fellowship?

And I trust this morning as we have looked into the scriptures, we can see fellowship is a big deal. It's part of God's program to do big things in this world.

And so we as a church have designed a small group ministry for you to plug in and not just to have conversations and interaction.

We want that to take place. But we are nurturing disciples so that you can go. We're nurturing relationships that you can invite and encourage others to participate in.

[39 : 31] That's why so many of the small groups are actually in communities. It's our hope that your neighbors might benefit from that touch that small groups will have in that immediate context.

And by God's grace grace and according to his power, we'll see God show up through this small group ministry, not only for you individually, but we'll begin to see how God will nurture us and strengthen us and strengthen our children so that we can have an impact in the world around us.

I wonder if a hundred years from now, someone might say, you know, it was because of my great granddaddy in the faith who was nurtured in this fellowshipping relationship at Maranatha Baptist that I stand here today.

May God use these small group ministries to fan the flames of gospel in your life and help us be more impactful in the world around us.

Let's pray. God, we praise you this morning for the example of Jesus who got this all started. You who initiated fellowshipping relationships with these twelve men who would then become eleven.

[40 : 52] You initiated that in their lives and you fanned the flames of knowledge and love for God so they could come to cherish you and in cherishing you, they could commend you to others.

We stand here today because of the legacy of faithfulness in that first century and the legacy of faithfulness that continued on through the ages to the person who ministered the gospel to us and we praise you.

How you understood that whole process and you instrumentally put those individuals in our lives. Thank you for bringing us to faith in Christ and help us in our relationship with you to convey relationship and love and care to the community of believers around us so that we can be strengthened to reach this world for Christ.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.