

Ephesians 3:17-19 "A Relational Community"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We're thinking this morning as we've already begun celebrating God's love about relationships in the family of God. And as we get started this morning, I want us to look briefly at a passage in Ephesians 3 that orients this topic in the broader conversation that we've been having about our core commitments, about being a church that God would use to bring revival and renewal.

See, it's really easy to think that relationships within the church are about this inwardly focused, self-serving idea, but they're actually at the heart of the others-focused, outwardly focused mission that God has called us to.

We see that in Ephesians where Paul's writing to a church and he's telling its members about God's grace that has come and rescued each of them. That's where it starts.

But very quickly he moves to say God's grace hasn't just come to each of you individually, but to a whole community of you. That actually Jesus in the cross has rescued Jew and Gentile and brought them into one family.

[1 : 29] That's chapter 2. It's the work of Christ on the cross, the bond of His love that unites. And that group that's united, he then says this is where the remarkable power of God is at work, to do things that they couldn't even imagine doing.

He says the way you plug in to that power that He's going to show through you is through knowing more and more of His love. This is what we've been saying the last three weeks, that the church must be focused on Jesus.

That when we are, God promises to do amazing things, to build His kingdom, to storm the gates of hell through us. And that of course we are utterly dependent upon Him, His power that is going to be working if that's going to happen.

So as we figure out what does it look like together to depend on Him today, one little phrase in the midst of this conversation in Ephesians, says the necessity of vital relationships within the church.

This love of God is what we must grasp more and more for His power to flow through us. And it is experienced, this one phrase says, together with all the saints.

[3 : 03] In other words, what Paul's saying in one sentence, a church prayerfully dependent on God for its Christ-centered mission must lock arms in meaningful relationships.

Locking arms with each other to move outward. Listen to this glorious passage in that light. Ephesians 3 verse 17, this is God's holy word.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

To know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen. Let's pray together. Father, all glory is Yours. May there be glory to You in this place, in this community, as we know and love and reflect our Savior more.

[4 : 28] May they know You because they see Your love in us. Through that we ask for the glory of Jesus.

Amen. It's been a long time since I agreed to participate in a three-legged race. You may have been in one before.

If you're at all like me, it's fraught with danger. If you're like me, a person who is very competitive and who believes that everything should be done at full speed, all the time, no matter what, three-legged race is.

It's not where you should start. The idea, of course, is to move in sync with your partner across the finish line, right? Seems fairly simple. The catch, of course, is that you each have a leg tied together.

If you've never been to a field day before, you know how disastrous these can be. And if you haven't seen it, let me tell you the secret. The key is that bond that is connecting the two legs.

[5 : 35] It has to be tied really tightly to keep you together. Working with your teammate to move at the same pace, to support each other, to cross the finish line and win the race together.

If that bond gets loose or you try to win the race alone, no matter how good an athlete you are, it will get ugly very fast.

This is usually the way it ends, and the finish line is far in the distance. It's simply not a race that you can win on your own. We've said that the same is true for the mission God has called us to as His people in this world.

We're designed to lean on each other. It's together with all the saints that our vision of God's love grows. We say that, but we love to try on our own, don't we?

And we often end up face down in the grass. We've bought into the lie that me and Jesus is enough, really. That surface relationships and social media connections is really deep community and all that I'll ever need.

[6 : 54] That having a busy schedule where I see lots of people, that that qualifies as true community. That's one I believe a lot. We like the perceived safety of anonymity, don't we?

We fear being exposed if we move out of our isolation and we're truly known by someone. We've been hiding behind fig leaves since the very first sin in the garden, haven't we?

We all do it differently, but do you feel that reality in your life? That you have that tendency to do that? Let me ask you a couple of questions. Is there anyone at all with whom you have shared your secret sin struggle?

Who has a hunting license in your heart and life to ask you hard questions? Do you ever feel like no one at church or maybe no one at all truly understands you?

Have you had friends from church get divorced and you didn't even have any idea they were struggling or having any trouble at all? When was the last time you redirected plans you had made based on input from a brother or sister?

[8 : 15] See, all too often we try to run on our own, don't we? We think, I got this. I can win this race. I'm strong. I'm fast. Plus, it's risky to involve anybody else.

All too often the church is sprawled face down across the grass with legs loosely dangling from each other rather than running in sync towards our neighbors bound tightly together.

No one has ever won a three-legged race or brought revival on his own. The bond for our three-legged race, if you will, is Jesus.

He unites us to each other in a way that must produce radically different relationships from what most of us are used to. What kind of relationships develop in a Christ-centered community?

One where his influence is primary, where his word directs our relationships. What's different when the bond of Jesus unites us?

[9 : 24] Well, first, and there are a lot of these. I'm just looking at a couple this morning. We value people not because of what they offer us, but because of who they are.

Relationships in this world often form because someone helps us. We invest further in the relationship because they offer us laughter or support or advancement in some sort of way, right?

You do this all the time. They help the team succeed. It makes me look good or feel good to be with them. Value comes from something you do. In God's family, it must be different.

We value people, period. They are not a means to an end. We don't see them merely as tools. People are valuable in themselves as created in the image of God, a relational God within the Trinity who creates us to reflect that image in relationship with each other.

And then people are valuable and significant as children of God. In his family, the bond of Jesus unites us, whether you improve my social status, whether you help me get the project done, whether you have money to contribute or not.

[10 : 48] All the saints, valuable in one body, one family. We say in our core commitments, we genuinely love people and are committed to developing life-giving relationships.

These relationships where people are valued for themselves. It means that we genuinely listen to each other, that we sincerely seek to understand each other's perspective.

We even share of ourselves and of our lives with each other. Listen, we've all been in relationships where we know we're not valuable to the other person, right? They didn't really care about what I said.

They never shared vulnerably with me. They just got what they needed from me and moved on. What I had to offer was valuable. I was not.

They and I stayed safely hidden. We didn't have to know each other to get what we needed, perhaps, from each other. Jesus creates a different kind of relationship.

[11 : 57] Secondly, the bond of Jesus produces relationships where sins are regularly confessed and forgiven.

Listen to James chapter 5. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. This is to be normative in Jesus' church.

It's the way we're to relate regularly. When was the last time you sat down with someone outside your family and confessed specific sin? It seems a little scary, like something really bad must have happened, right?

God's word says this is normal. This is how we relate to each other. It's a pretty tight bond, isn't it, that Jesus creates. See, because our value comes not from our performance, but from being in His family, we're freed to be honest with each other.

See, because that's true of all of us, because I'm never the only sinner in the conversation, because we all are sinners saved by grace, I never open up and confess a sin to an innocent party who can look down on me and condemn me.

[13 : 14] I'm always confessing to a fellow sinner who has forgiveness in Jesus to extend to me. We share our sins and pray for each other, and there's healing in that kind of prayer, that kind of relationship, James says.

There is, isn't there? Have you experienced that? Healing in my relationship with God and healing in my relationship with my brother or sister because we look to Jesus together.

Our experience of that bond grows stronger, and we're pulled together to run the race better. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his classic book on Christian community, *Life Together*, in confession, the breakthrough to community takes place.

Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. Sin wants to remain unknown. Hiding, right? That's why we don't share and confess much.

Sin pulls us away and wants us to keep it to ourselves, and Bonhoeffer says there's danger there in being pulled away into isolation with our sin, but the gospel of Jesus Christ breaks in and allows confession that brings the sinner back to the fellowship of sinners saved by grace.

[14 : 39] Bonhoeffer concludes this, beautiful. If a Christian is in the fellowship of confession with a brother, he will never be alone again anywhere.

Yes. Yes, as we confess and we forgive each other. And listen, to us natural hidiers, that sounds a bit scary, doesn't it? I know it can to think about stepping out there and being exposed.

It's not really worth the risk. Why would I bother? But God is telling us in His Word, this is the kind of relationship I've created you for. To know this and to enjoy this.

I've sent my son so that you can have the safety, the ability to have this kind of honest relationship where people know and they forgive and love, and they love the real you.

the sinful version, not merely the Facebook version of you that some of them like, but they know and love and forgive the real you. One more unique thing about relationships through the bond of Jesus.

[15 : 49] We delight to carry each other's burdens. In the world, relationships are typically you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, right? Community does come.

It comes when you invest in others. You give to them. You serve them. And when you need help, they'll give back to you. They'll be there for you. They'll carry your burdens.

I remember watching this unfold at our school a few years ago when one family who seemed to lovingly and tirelessly serve everybody in every situation had a child that had surgery.

And all of a sudden, out of the woodwork, everybody came out because they'd been served by this family so many times. They thought, how can we support you? How can we help? We're all in. And that's beautiful and wonderful and good in community that you respond to help someone who has helped you.

Y'all, biblical community goes far beyond that and is so much more glorious. It says something a little different. Jesus has carried all my burdens, poured himself out for me to overflowing, served me so consistently that I am delighted to do the same for all of you, whether you've personally poured into me or not, for all of you, and especially if Jesus has brought you into his family too, right?

[17 : 18] Say, come on, preacher. That's what it's like. That's what Jesus does, doesn't he? He pours himself into us so that it will overflow from us to others, not so that we'll see who we owe lately.

That's community created by God's word and his spirit. Doesn't your spirit resonate with that truth, with that reality? It's not because it's my words, it's God's word.

It's right there in James 5, the passage we looked at earlier. You're suffering, you're sick, you're struggling with sin, share those things, pray together, mourn with those who mourn, rejoice with those who rejoice.

Galatians 6, 2, carry one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. This passage in Galatians is in the context of our sin, burdens of sin, spiritual burdens.

In Acts chapter 2, the picture of the early church that we read last week says they were committed to the fellowship among other things. Carrying each other's physical burdens, sharing all they had to care for each other's physical needs, right?

[18 : 33] I love how this church family here at Southwood does this. We've experienced that. We as a church are not perfect. We want to keep growing here in this area.

But brothers and sisters helping others walk through healing from an affair. Crying and supporting each other through the loss of a loved one. Just this week showing up to help someone recover from a car accident.

And that church member that was in the accident this week said of the love that she'd received not just in that moment but over the previous months, I don't know how I could ever repay all of them.

You don't. We're family. That's what being a community of grace means. You don't repay anybody. You just look for the next person who's got a burden that you can help carry because Jesus has already carried yours, right?

Y'all, this is the kind of community God is making us if we will but lean into Him, trust Him, let His love overwhelm us together so that it overflows from us.

[19 : 52] See, Ephesians told us it was all about experiencing God's love, right? That's where the power was from. It told us we needed all the saints to grasp the height and width and breadth and depth of God's love.

All the saints. It's a pretty broad term. Involves a lot of people, some of whom you've probably never met.

With whom does the bond of Jesus put us in relationship? We're going to talk about this more in our last core commitment where we see particularly the beauty and the priority of loving the least, the lost, the littlest, the lonely, and the left out, even beyond God's family.

But for today, let's stop at what all the saints means. It means at least this. I need way more than those like me and those I like.

Way more than those like me and those I like. this is where the power of the gospel, the beauty of Christ-centered community really becomes evident because Jesus bonds together people who are otherwise different.

[21 : 17] Remember, he makes enemies family who love each other for Christ's sake, even if there's no other reason. We don't gather out of mutual admiration we like each other, but out of shared admiration we love God because he has loved us.

See, apart from Christ, the power of self-pursuit and my own preferences, it puts me in relationship with people who are like me.

It puts me in community with others that I naturally and easily click with, who root for the same football team, who vote for the same party, who like the same worship style.

Listen, Jesus doesn't need to be around for you to connect with people like that, right? That's how you naturally function, pursuing what's comfortable for you.

But Jesus puts me in different relationships. He puts me in relationship where our differences, which are usually divisive in other arenas in life and keep us apart, are actually desirable people because they show us what?

[22 : 30] Greater dimensions of God's love. Remember, that's what we need all the saints for, right? Grasping a greater vision of God's love.

Think with me for just a minute how people different from you enlarge and expand your view of God's love as you live in relationship with them, valuing them personally, confessing and forgiving sins, carrying each other's burden.

We could go on all day, but think just a few examples. When you share life with a materially poor brother or sister and you listen to them well, you might get a glimpse of depending on God to provide one meal at a time.

Like God thought was so important to teach his Old Testament people, his daily love may become sweeter to you.

love. When you engage in relationship with a married couple, you may see a broken but beautiful picture of the love of God and people bearing with one another through deep sin and offense.

[23 : 39] Forgiving as God has forgiven them and his persistent love may become more glorious in your eyes. But when those of us who are married engage in relationship with an unmarried brother or sister, you may realize afresh the reality that God's love is so great it provides fulfillment and identity apart from my family or my sexuality.

You might learn the joy of singleness that such brothers as Jesus and Paul knew. And God's love may become more satisfying to your heart than you realized it could be.

I wish you all would have the privilege I have to know former prostitutes, ex-convicts, recovering addicts who find freedom from their shame in this forgiving and cleansing love of God.

By the way, if you listen long enough to people's stories in this church, you will know them. If you confess sins to each other, you'll learn that. And your ability to comprehend the love of a God who makes you new will grow.

I wish every newlywed couple in the church could have been in my small group to watch Miss Betty love Mr. John through his last few years of life as he struggled to know where he was or what was going on.

[25 : 07] As I got to watch them together, I witnessed the patient and tender love of God in her that treasures us in our weakness. in a new way that has helped me in my marriage.

Younger people struggling to hope in God's promises as they parent. They may see in older people's stories a God whose love is faithful to his promises even when it doesn't look like it.

Older people struggling to maintain a zeal for the kingdom in their later years may see in younger people's stories a God whose love is the only hope of the next generation.

God's love is so great. I still have a purpose to testify to that love and it's a great purpose. You get the idea of how beautiful God's design for his church is?

We're a family. Same loving father, same older brother, same indwelling spirit. This is why we need to lean into these deep relationships with each other so we will experience his love more and be empowered to share that love so that my neighbors and Huntsville and the whole world will know more of his glory.

[26 : 25] Let me talk to you for just a couple minutes as we close about our new Connect communities. I really want to encourage you all to participate in these Connect communities as we pursue these kind of life-giving relationships.

relationships. To be clear, I hope you realize as we talk this morning that these kind of relationships where we're confessing sin and carrying burdens and valuing each other, they don't take place in one hour a week in a room of 30 people.

We got way too many sins and burdens for that, yes? Yep, we don't have time for mine next week. So it's not just there, but God's word is calling us, challenging us to lock arms with brothers and sisters more often than on Sundays.

Breaking bread together in each other's homes, helping each other out day by day, praying in every situation. Those relationships take time to foster, don't they? And they're well worth it.

Even our precious time that is so valuable is well worth the investment. So think of connect communities as places that we come together around God's word, not as placing you at the destination of relationship, but rather moving you down the path of relationship.

[27 : 54] They're called connect communities for a reason. You may well meet a brother or sister there with whom you develop deeper relationship beyond the group.

We will urge each other there toward meeting regularly in small groups to share and confess and forgive and pray more. So if it's a three legged race that we're on, the connect community is not the finish line, but rather the starting line where you find your partner, where you get bound together through Jesus and his word to run the race together.

together. Y'all don't go home to run alone. Lean into the relationships that God has made us for.

You know, the tightness of that bond that we have in Jesus is so vitally important. But no matter how tight you tie that bond, most of the three legged races I run in end up with people scattered on the ground.

Relationships, even in Jesus, even in the church are messy, aren't they? Yes? Can we get amen on that one? Yeah, okay. Come on, we gotta pick our spots here.

[29 : 11] That seemed like an easy one. It's messier than isolation, than hiding alone, isn't it? But that's actually another reason that relationships are worth the investment.

It's not merely that Jesus unites us in relationship. But these relationships drive us back to Jesus, don't they? Because when I get tied tightly to a brother or sister and rub up against them, my selfishness and my weakness and my insecurity become exposed.

And I see it. And I see my need for a Savior and a cross again. But guess what? I'm not the only one who sees it. This is the scary but beautiful part.

My brother or sister sees it too and is right there to point me to the Savior we both have who will never leave us. Two are better than one.

For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But pity the one who falls and has no one to help him up. Praise God for a Savior.

[30 : 25] And because of him, brothers and sisters to help us up. Let's pray. Father, we confess our need of you again.

We need your help. Father, we need your love. And we especially this morning need your spirit to acknowledge that we need each other. Father, show us that this is what you've created us for.

That we might be known and that we might be loved. And you have loved us like that. Thank you for being the one place we know we can be safe.

Father, would your love transform a community like this one that people would begin to experience more and more safety among each other that they've found in you.

Help us to love as we have been loved. Thank you, Jesus, for your love. Show it to us again this morning.

[31 : 36] It's height and width and depth and breadth that it would change our hearts. We thank you and we pray in your name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](https://yetanother sermon.host).