

Gospel Fellowship

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[0 : 00] There are some people who are just intimidatingly great at whatever, and there's some people who are embarrassingly hopeless and just make you feel good about yourself. And more often than not, we stick ourselves somewhere in the middle. And maybe you even do it in a group like this.

You walk into church on a Sunday, and there are some people that you are just like so overwhelmed by how holy they seem, how godly they are, how impressive their Bible looks. And you're just intimidated to even be around them, and you sit there and think, I'm in a different category. Or maybe it's the other extreme, and you walk into church, and you see someone else walking near you, and you think, how can they call themselves a Christian and do that? Peter is doing his version of holiness appraisals in the passage that Jimmy just read out for us. And he's not actually doing it intentionally. He's not maliciously trying to rank people so that he can judge them, but he's going through the process of putting some people in the category of good and some people in the category of bad.

What he's doing is he's cutting himself off from Gentile converts who haven't adhered to Jewish laws that he just agreed aren't important. So what's happened is just before this passage that was read out, you've got Paul the Apostle goes and meets with Peter and James and the other apostles in Jerusalem, and they have a conversation to the effect of, for somebody who's not a Jew, that's not one of God's chosen people, to be a legitimate Christian, what's required of them?

[1 : 29] And they all agree that the only thing that matters is that they trust Jesus. And then here, just a couple of verses later, Peter is sitting in a room having food with Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, both of which have put their faith in Jesus.

And what he's doing is not completely ignoring the Gentile converts, but just kind of separating himself out enough so that he's not getting tainted by their badness.

So it's like after church, going out to supper and just making sure you're only with the good people, only with the people who are kind of like you. And Paul is furious about this.

He's absolutely fuming to the point where he doesn't kind of pull Peter aside and have a quiet conversation. He goes for the public, you know, you've got to fix this, the loud and obvious rebuke. And the reason he's so angry is because just a few moments ago, they agreed on what the gospel was. They agreed on what the good news of Jesus was. And that good news comes from the beginning of Galatians chapter 1.

[2 : 30] I'll read to you just five verses. This is Paul's opening summary of the gospel. He says, Galatians 1 verse 1. So the gospel is Jesus died for sin.

God raised him from the dead and grace and peace is on offer to those who trust him and follow him. That gospel, which Paul makes really clear is the only gospel. There's no other version. There's no substitute.

That gospel doesn't leave room for the rankings. It doesn't leave room for someone like Peter to kind of show up and start pretending that one group is holier than another group.

One group is more valid than another group because the gospel crushes pride in us. When we understand what the gospel means, it actually takes away the possibility of being proud of who we are as a Christian.

See, the danger for us when we do these rankings is that we always see the sin of others as worse than our own. Whenever you hear about other people's sin, the response is shock and maybe a bit of gossip.

[4 : 00] It's sensational. But you don't notice it in yourself. Even Paul here, when he's challenging Peter, there in verse 15, he says, We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.

See, he's showing Peter that even by calling them Gentile sinners, it's like he's taking himself out of that category. It's like Peter's treating himself like he's not a sinner, like he doesn't need Jesus. And Paul is saying that's ridiculous. He's saying because Peter's busy looking at the inadequacy of the Gentiles. And let's be clear. The Gentiles are inadequate.

They are not good enough. But the issue for Peter is because he's busy looking at them, he doesn't recognize that he's inadequate as well. That being a Jew actually makes no difference.

It's not exciting for God. It's not exciting for God. And so we need to be careful that when we go into that automatic mode of ranking the good and bad people around us, whatever our motivation is, we need to be careful because as soon as we start looking down on the mistakes of other people, we lose the ability to see our own.

[5 : 16] We lose the ability to see our own issues. One of the things that frustrates me quite intensely in community life, and there's lots of things because I'm an introvert and community life is just challenging, but one of the things that I find particularly difficult about community life is selfish people.

Like I hate seeing people who will just tread on everyone else to make sure they get what they want. It makes me just anger. But I don't even notice that in that moment I'm really annoyed because they're not doing what I think they should do.

It doesn't for a second occur to me that my frustration is really about my own selfish desires and has nothing to do with the injustice being done to other people. When we're busy focusing on the sins of other people, we fail to see that we've got our own issues.

We fail to see that the gospel is something that we desperately need as well. Now, that doesn't mean there's no place for rebuke or correction because, you know, selfishness is still an issue for that person that's making me angry, but the point is it's my issue as well.

And if all I worry about is them, then I'm going to miss my issue. But it doesn't mean there can't be rebuke. That's what Paul is doing here. And he even gives us a good model of what it might look like to correct one another.

[6 : 32] So he reminds him in verse 16. I'll start from verse 15. Now, Paul's reminding him.

He doesn't just say, Peter, you're being an idiot and you need to do this thing. He actually takes him back to the gospel. He reminds him that it was by faith for Peter, by faith for Paul.

It's by faith for the Jews. It's by faith for the Gentiles. And so because of that, there's no distinction between them. There's no room for one to feel more worthy or less worthy because that kind of pride is just delusional.

That kind of pride is based on a warped perception of what's reality anyway. Because if you ever find yourself looking at someone else and thinking, man, I'm doing much better than them, you've got to understand you're not doing that well anyway.

Even if you are doing better than them, your reality is you still need Jesus to die for you if you're going to be acceptable to God. When I spent time in hospital last year with my broken legs, I spent the first three or four days just stuck in my room, needing to ring the buzzer if I wanted to go to the toilet, ring the buzzer if I had an itch down the bottom of my legs, ring the buzzer if I wanted a shower.

[8 : 06] Basically, absolutely dependent, absolutely contained, imprisoned in my hospital room. And it wasn't until about day three or four that they really generously got me a wheelchair, let me get into that wheelchair, and start wheeling down the halls.

I was pretty excited about that freedom. And so as I'm kind of cruising down the hallways of the hospital, feeling pretty happy with myself, I'm just glancing into the doors of each hospital room and these poor suckers, you know, covered in plaster and in traction and stuck in positions and can't get out and roam the halls like I can.

And so I was feeling pretty good about my situation. And on one level, doing better than everyone else. But I was still stuck in a wheelchair. I still couldn't get down a set of stairs.

I still couldn't dance or shower or stand up for that matter. I still had some serious issues that I had to deal with. I was still going to spend the next seven weeks being an absolutely disgraceful excuse for a husband and father, or at least having a reason why I was going to be a disgraceful excuse for a husband and father.

I still was in a bad situation. But because I was so busy looking at everyone else, it's like I tricked myself into thinking my situation was better than it actually was. And see, we do that when all we do is measure ourselves against other people.

[9 : 23] The gospel impacts our relationships. But first and foremost, the gospel is a transaction between us and God. The gospel is the answer to the question, how can I possibly be loved by a God who is holy when I'm clearly not?

And if we're giving ourselves a premature tick of approval because we're not as bad as someone else, we've missed the point. The gospel message that Jesus dies for sins has in brackets the harsh reality that he had to die because of your sins.

And so we need to be careful that even when it comes to rebuking someone who is around us, who is in sin, that we don't do it from this elevated position where we just tell them that they're wrong. But like Paul, gospel rebuke is pointing to the gospel. Because when you point to the gospel, it's not possible to be prideful. Because as you point somebody to the reality that they need to trust Jesus and they're not good enough, in the process of doing that, you're pointing to the fact that you need to trust Jesus because you're not good enough.

And so it's not possible for you to suddenly feel like you're better than someone or more deserving. When you point to the gospel, you proclaim that you are someone who is sinful, who is not worthy of God's love, but who God loves anyway in Jesus.

[10 : 45] And it protects us from pride. There are no perfect Christians, just forgiven sinners. You, me and everyone else.

And so there's no possibility of looking down on someone. When you look to the gospel, you realize we are all imperfect. We all need Jesus.

The thing that drove Peter to be prideful in the way he was treating these people was actually fear. Have a look at verse 12. Before certain men came from James, and James is kind of representative of the official church in Jerusalem.

So before people came down from there, he, Peter, used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

So he was eating with them. He was treating them like equal. But then he shifts his behavior because he's scared of what a particular group of people will think of him. See, not only is there a group for Peter that are clearly lower than him, there's also a group that are higher than him.

[11 : 57] There's also the legitimate Christians, you know, the hardcore ones who know memory verses and, you know, just carry their Bibles all the time so that you know just how godly they are. And when they turn up, he wants to make sure he's ticking their boxes.

He wants to make sure they think he's legitimate. He's become so distracted by worrying about what they think that he's stopped remembering that the only opinion that's actually important anyway is God.

That the whole point of the gospel and being a Christian is not to impress people, but to get your relationship with God fixed up. He's had his perspective skewed.

And I wonder if it's possible that maybe that's happened for you as well. If you're somebody who walks in here to church each week and does just kind of gasp at the halo that's, you know, above some people's heads, the ones who are just extra nice and just always serving and just always knowing the answers in the small groups and you do just feel insecure around them because they just must be more impressive to God.

See, the danger is when you get in that position, the way we respond to insecurity is with judgment. Because we're worried and we're putting in extra effort to try and tick the boxes, we demand that extra effort from other people as well.

[13 : 22] So instead of saying, all you need to do is trust Jesus, we say, all you need to do is trust Jesus and learn these verses and be at church every week and serve in at least three ministries that require a minimum of six hours of your personal time each week and give this amount of your money.

We just project our own insecurity and demand the equivalent of other people. And so I want to ask you, have you added to the gospel's demands for yourself?

Are you actually holding yourself accountable to standards that God doesn't? Are you feeling guilty about things that God is not forcing you to feel guilty about?

And I guess the second question is, are you doing that for other people? The gospel message that Jesus died for sins and rose again and that grace and peace is on offer for those who put their faith in him is not an abstract truth.

It's something that changes our lives practically. It changes the way that we view ourselves. It changes the way that we understand our relationship with God and it changes the way we understand our relationships with one another.

[14 : 33] See, Paul's issue with Peter in this whole passage is there in verse 14. He says, When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile, not like a Jew.

How is it then that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? He says, What Peter's doing, adding standards that are required, adding requirements for these people, is not in line with the gospel.

It's not part of the message that Jesus died for sinners. The gospel changes the way we view ourselves in our relationship with God and it must change the way that we view the people around us as well, both Christian and unchristian.

The gospel doesn't leave us any room for rankings. It doesn't leave room for better and worse when it comes to following Jesus. Here, Paul and Peter's issue is that the Jew and the Gentile division is gone.

The Jews who are God's people and then the Gentiles who weren't quite God's people, that's gone. In Jesus, God's people are those who trust what He has done to offer forgiveness. And so for us, we need to let go of the things that maybe we think are really important.

[15 : 51] So if you've been grown up in a Christian family, that's fantastic, but it makes no difference when it comes to the way God views you. If you know stacks of memory verses, if you're the smartest Bible person in this whole room, that's fantastic, but it makes no difference to how much God loves you.

If you are serving in every ministry that we do in this church, that's great, but it makes no difference to how much God loves you. the only thing that matters, the clear message of the gospel, is that we know a person is justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law.

We know that we are only forgiven because of Jesus, because we've tasted that grace in our lives. We've experienced what it's like to actually say. Maybe you only remember just one time in your life where you said, God, I know I'm not good enough, but I need your forgiveness, and you felt what it was to have the weight lifted.

You felt what it was to be loved unconditionally. Maybe you've doubted it, maybe you've been distracted by other things, but you have at some point, if you're a Christian, experienced grace, and you know that you did nothing to earn it.

We know that a person can only be made acceptable to God by trusting in Jesus. And so there's no room for ranking. We're all trusting the same thing.

[17 : 25] We're all depending on Jesus just as much as the next person. And so we need to ask ourselves the question, how are we doing at this? How are we doing in our relationships with one another?

Are we letting insecurity and intimidation by the super holy ones mean that we're not honest about how we're going or who we really are? Are we letting pride and this sense of looking down on the less godly affect who it is we're willing to spend time with at church or during supper?

Because the gospel doesn't leave room for that. Where you struggle with that pride, Jesus brings humility because he says, no, no, no, you need me just as much as that person that you're looking at now.

Where you struggle with insecurity, Jesus gives you confidence and security because he says, no, no, no, that person that's impressive over there needs me just as much as you do.

What Jesus does in his death and resurrection is give us a rich unity and a fellowship. He gives us the opportunity to have deep relationships far richer than what anyone else in the world can enjoy because we don't have to have relationships that are dictated by what can I get?

[18 : 45] How much will this person love me? What does this person think of me? We can have relationships that start at the point of saying, regardless of what this person thinks of me, how they treat me, God loves me unconditionally.

What the gospel does is kind of take away the needs that normally drive our relationships and releases us to be able to be generous, giving, trustworthy people. We don't have to pretend that we're more godly than we are because God says the only thing that matters when it comes to being loved by me is Jesus.

This week we are launching into Activate and we've already said it's about the opportunity to join community groups, the opportunity to serve. Community groups are more than just a box to tick when it comes to being part of a church.

Imagine what it would be like to gather with a group of people each week who were able to walk in and just be completely honest about how they were going. Were able to walk in and say, you know what, I'm having the worst week or month or term or year or decade of my Christian life so far. I just feel dry. I just feel unmotivated. Imagine what it would be like when you're feeling like to be able to walk in and just drop it and know that no one's going to go, ooh. No one's going to start texting it to their friends to say, oh, this person's doing bad.

[20 : 13] All they're going to do is remind you that God still loves you now as much as he did the day that you decided to follow him. Wouldn't it be amazing to walk into a room with a group of people and be able to say, I did this thing and it is shameful and embarrassing and wrong and know that even if people respond badly, God still loves you unconditionally.

So you don't have to fake it. You don't have to water it down. You don't have to make it sound better than it was. You can just say, I stuffed up and I'm thankful that God loves me anyway. The gift of being in Christian fellowship is not that you're surrounded by people who are like you, but that even though you're surrounded by people who are completely different to you, you have one really important thing in common.

You are loved by God because of Jesus and for no other reason. Wouldn't it be amazing to be part of a community that knew as its baseline truth, as its foundational reality, that all are justified by faith in Christ?

No matter what anyone's done, no matter what we might do, no matter what mistakes we've made, no matter what we're doing now, equally loved, equally dependent on Jesus.

Wouldn't it be amazing to be able to invite that person from school or work along to this community knowing that there is nothing about them that could make us look down on them? Knowing that when they walked in the room they would feel completely at home because they'd be surrounded by a bunch of people who were honest about the fact that we're not as good as we like to pretend we are.

[21 : 58] I mean sometimes as Christians we're known as the moral police which means not only do we rank one another but we stand in the world that we're a part of and rank ourselves against them.

But the gospel doesn't leave space for that. The gospel says God loves you in spite of who you are not because of who you are. God loves you in spite of all the things that you try and keep secret. If we want the world around us, if we want the people in our lives to know just how amazing the love of God is, then we've got to be willing to be honest about just how unworthy of that love we are. Imagine what it would be like to be part of a group like that. But don't just imagine, let me give you the challenge. Maybe tonight, maybe next week, maybe the week after, you're going to sign up for a community group, or at least I hope you are.

Why don't you be the one who initiates this sort of a community? Why don't you be the one who grabs hold of the absolute security you have in Jesus and be completely honest?

[23 : 11] Each week when you show up, say how you feel, confess the mistakes you've made, be gracious to those around you who've made mistakes, and begin to get a glimpse of just how good it is when the gospel shapes everything, shapes the way we view ourselves, shapes the confidence we have to stand before God, and shapes the way that we love and serve one another.

Let's pray. Father God, we want to come before you and admit that as amazing as this sounds, it's not easy, that we're quick to doubt, we're quick to get nervous when other people judge us, we quickly fall into the trap of looking down on other people because it seems like a quick fix to our own insecurities, things.

But God, we just ask that you would bring us back to the gospel in those moments, bring us back to our need for you, bring us back to your abundant provision, to the irreversible love and forgiveness that you have offered and purchased for us in Jesus.

God, I pray that you would mark us as a church family by that absolute humility that comes from grace. May we show grace to one another, may we show grace to people who enter this building, who don't understand how we work, who don't understand how we behave, may we just love them as they are because that's what the gospel does.

Father God, I pray that you would bless every one of our community groups over this coming semester, that they may be places of rich, deep relationships, where we do walk and share one another's burdens, where we do rejoice together, where we do confess, where we just encourage and feed the gospel security that is available for us.

[25 : 12] God, thank you for Jesus. Thank you that we don't have to pretend. Thank you that you love to bring people like us, unworthy sinners, people who it doesn't make sense to have that sort of relationship.

You love to bring us together so that the world around us might see that what you offer is better than everything else. God, please do your work in us so that others might come to know what we know.

Amen.