

Community and Membership

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Date: 18 October 2015

Preacher: Eric Scott

[0 : 00] Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Eric. I'm one of the guys on staff here at Watermark Church. It's great to be here with you today.

And if you've been here the past few weeks, you're probably wondering, why are we not in 1 Corinthians still? And basically what's going on is we've spent the past couple months looking at the book of 1 Corinthians, and it was a really messed up church.

They had lots of issues, and Paul was writing this letter to them, saying, like, you're doing this wrong, you're doing this wrong, you're doing this wrong. And we figured it would be a good idea to actually look at, from the positive side, what is a healthy church?

Because we've been talking about it from the negative side for so long that we figured it would be worthwhile to take a couple weeks to talk about, from the positive side, like, not just what shouldn't we be doing, but what should we be doing as a church if we're going to be a healthy church.

So today we're looking at the concept of community and membership. And the big question I want us to ask ourselves today is what does the cross have to do with our community?

[1 : 07] What does the cross have to do with our community? And I think we live in a very individualistic society, a very me-focused world.

And the church, in many ways, has gone along with this and said, you know, my walk with God is about me and God. And it's all about me trusting in Jesus, me becoming a Christian, me going to church, me reading my Bible.

But if we look at the Bible and what it says, what we'll notice is that actually, it's about us as well. That God doesn't just save us as individuals, but God saves us to form us into a community that is his people.

And that as we are shaped into this community, that our community must be shaped by the cross. And that just as Jesus loved us and showed us his love sacrificially on the cross, that he calls us, if we are his people, to live life in a sacrificial community together, loving one another as he has loved us.

And so to see that, we're going to look at the book of Ephesians, chapter 2. Ephesians is another letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a church in a city called Ephesus. And one of his big goals in writing this letter is to help them see the importance of community in life as a church.

[2 : 33] And in today's passage, he's going to have them remember their past circumstances, recognize their present condition, and then re-evaluate their projected course based on what they've remembered and recognized about where they are now.

And so the first step is to remember their past circumstances. Paul starts out this passage pretty bleak, right?

He says, They had three really big problems.

Problem number one, they were separated from God. If you follow the storyline of the Bible, basically, God created man to live in a relationship with him.

This is supposed to be the ultimate power source for our life, this relationship with God. And if you follow the storyline of the Bible a little further, it tells us that all of us have rebelled against God.

[3 : 55] All of us have cut ourselves off from that relationship that we were created to have. And all of us, in doing that, have cut ourselves off from that power source of that relationship with God that's supposed to give us the strength to go throughout life.

And he's saying, this is the past condition of the people in this church. And not just of them, but also, if we're Christians, of us here today.

That this is our past reality. Not only are they separated from God, they're also, he says, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.

Now, back in the day, Israel was God's chosen people. They were the special ones who had God's revelation and no one else did. They had received messages from God about what it means to follow him and how he wants us to follow him.

And they were special. They were privileged. And they kind of let everyone else know it. And everyone else didn't really appreciate that.

[5 : 02] Everyone else fought back against that. And there were some ethnic tensions going on in the world. And what Paul is saying is the people he's writing to were not Jews.

They were not part of that special people that God had called as his own. They had no special standing that could help them get to this relationship with God. And so, there was a separation that they were not only separated from God, but they were separated from God's people.

And ethnic tensions, you know, it's not just something from the world then, but it's something that we see in the world all the time today. If you follow the news at all, you've probably heard stories the past few months about black versus white tensions in the States and all the violence that's going on with that.

But it's also something that happens here on this side of the world as well. About a month and a half ago, I think, we had a holiday. The rest of the world calls it the anniversary of the end of World War II.

The Chinese government decides to call it the anniversary of the Chinese people's war of rebellion against Japanese aggression. Ignore the fact that the whole rest of the world was also involved in this war.

[6 : 17] Ignore the fact that, you know, the Communist Party could never have gotten into power in China in the first place if that hadn't happened. But they want to take all this aggression and point it against the Japanese people.

They want to take this ethnic division and push it onto their people. We live in a broken world where there are ethnic tensions around us all the time.

Also, if you think back about a year ago, there was a lot of tension between Hong Kong and the mainland. I know it's all Chinese, but there was still a tension between different groups of Chinese people.

There was a professor in the mainland who called the Hong Kong people dogs of the British. And so a group of Hong Kongers went out and hired a page in the front page of a local newspaper depicting a locust overlooking the city and basically said, if you are a mainlander, this is what you do to our city.

You come in, you wreck it, you destroy it, we want nothing to do with you. And there were protests and clashes of people who just did not get along.

[7 : 24] In HKU, there was a student who posted on their democracy wall. He said, to, what's the exact quote, to you brainwashed, commie-loving mainlanders, we despise you.

We live in a world that is full of alienation from God. We live in a world that is full of alienation from each other. And it makes sense because when we cut ourselves off from this relationship with God, the next logical step is to cut ourselves off from people who are made in God's image.

One person summarized, he said, the attitude of the world in our fallen state is best expressed in the phrase, you're different from me and I resent you for that. You're different from me and I resent you from that.

And so, the past condition of this church that Paul is saying they had, they're separated from God, they're cut off from the power source that they're supposed to have for life, they're separated from God's people, they're alienated, they're estranged, and there's this sense of isolation.

Something has gone horribly, horribly wrong. And not only that, but he says that they were strangers to the covenants of promise.

[8 : 48] This is that God had appeared and he had told people about a promise that he would restore people to himself, that he would come and he would rescue us. And yet, these promises had come only to the Israelites.

And so, Paul's people who were receiving this letter didn't have these promises. They were broken in their relationship with God. They were broken in their relationship with others and they had no way to fix it.

And he says that these three problems led to two devastating effects. They were without hope and they were without God in the world.

They were hopeless and they had no way to fix their situation. And Paul wants them to remember this because Paul has amazing good news for them.

But this good news looks far more beautiful when seen against the bad news that it contrasts with. And so, he says, take a minute, step back, remember who you used to be.

[9 : 59] remember what God has saved you from because when you see what God has saved you from, what he has saved you to will look far more beautiful. And for us today, if we're Christians, this is our past as well, separated from God, alienated from others, without any way to fix ourselves, without hope, and without God in the world.

We need to see this and recognize this if we're going to appreciate what God calls us to in terms of our life and community. Now, the good news is the story doesn't end there.

If you look at verse 13, it says, but now, something is different, something has changed. The past condition is no longer our present condition.

Once we've remembered our past condition, he wants us to move on and recognize our current circumstances and realize that they are totally night and day opposite. If you look at verses 1 through 10 of this chapter, he's talking about our relationship with God, and he talks about how desperate our relationship with God was.

He says we were dead in our trespasses and sins. He said that we were basically the enemies of God, that we were children of wrath, that everything was going wrong for us.

[11 : 20] But then, he says, but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive in Christ Jesus.

He says that when everything was wrong in our relationship with God, God stepped in and God rescued us and God changed us and God made us alive and gave us a relationship with God. And now, he's looking not at our relationship with God primarily, but our relationship with each other. And he says, in the same way, you were alienated, you were cut off, things were going wrong, but now, something has changed.

Just as your relationship with God has been transformed by what Jesus did on the cross, your relationship with others and in this community needs to be transformed by what Jesus has done on the cross.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace, who has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

[12 : 42] He's saying that Jesus came not just to create peace between us and God, but between us and each other as well. If you were alive in that day and you had ever been to the temple in Jerusalem, there was this wall called the Gentiles wall.

And basically, there was a courtyard area outside that where any Gentile, any non-Jew who worshipped God could go to worship God, and then there was a wall. And the only people allowed beyond that wall were the Jewish people.

And there were signs along the wall. And they said, if you are a Gentile and you cross this wall, you are responsible for your own death. There was hatred and strife between these two ethnic groups, and Paul is saying that no longer has a place among God's people, because Jesus has come, Jesus has torn down the wall that divides us, and Jesus has taken the two groups and made us one in him.

And so the old things that used to divide us have no place among us anymore. If you are a Christian, then Jesus died to unite you to every other Christian who has ever lived.

That God cares desperately about our life as a community. Here at Watermark, we talk about community all the time. We have it on the stage written every week, gospel, community, mission.

[14 : 12] And most of us, I hope, like hanging out with each other, but that's not the primary reason why we emphasize community. We emphasize it because God emphasizes it.

We emphasize living together and serving one another because the Bible says that if we are Christians, that is vitally important to our lives. That God wants us to be a people who reflect his love to the world.

And so we cannot separate our salvation and our relationship with God from our life in community as a part of his body. He says that Christ's work is so extreme that he takes the two different groups and makes one new man out of the two.

You can think of it as sort of like a third race. You've got the Jews, you've got the Gentiles, and then you've got something different. You've got Christians. And Paul's saying in the early church, you could be a Jew and you could become a Jewish Christian.

You could be a Gentile and become a Gentile Christian. But whether you're a Jewish Christian or a Gentile Christian, the most important thing is that you're a Christian, not that you're a Jew or Gentile. Today we might think you can be a Chinese Christian or an American Christian.

[15 : 29] The most important thing is that you're a Christian, not that you're Chinese or American, because Christ has died to make one new group out of all the other groups that existed beforehand.

It doesn't mean that our previous identities are totally wiped out, but it means that the identity that we now have as a Christian is far, far, far more foundational than any identity that we otherwise could hold.

I was listening to a pastor from Washington, D.C. do a talk here in Hong Kong this week, and he said, you know, someone who's a Christian living in Washington, D.C.

has far more in common with a Christian living in Nigeria than they do with their non-Christian neighbor in D.C., because the things that unite us in Christ are far more important to who we are than being American or than having the same background culture.

If you are a Christian, the Bible says your most foundational identity is your identity as a person in God's family.

[16 : 42] family. I have two stories to sort of illustrate this from opposite angles. I have one friend, he's Chinese, his parents are Christians, he's a Christian, and he told me one time that his parents one time sat him down, and they had a talk with him, and they said, son, if you honor us in the way that the Bible says to honor your father and mother, you will marry an Asian girl.

not a joke. But here's the thing, Paul is saying that has no place in the church. Paul is saying that attitude has no place in light of what Christ has done for us because Christ came to tear down our divisions and to make us one new people.

That your identity as a Christian is far more important than the color of your skin or the country that you were born in. The other story, I have a friend who's Japanese.

He has a son, I think the son is older than me, but obviously the son is also Japanese. And the son, when he was in his 20s, went out and he met this girl, this Korean girl, they started dating, they fell in love.

The Korean girl went home and she told her parents, I have met this boy, he's wonderful, he's amazing, I love him, I think I want to marry him, and oh by the way, he's Japanese. And her dad's response was, do you know what his people did to our people?

[18 : 17] They have attacked us, they have hurt us, they have destroyed us, but you love Jesus, and he loves Jesus.

And there's something about your core identity that has changed so that we cannot define this boy by what his nation has done to our nation. And her parents said, we approve of you marrying this boy, even though we as Koreans have been so hurt by the Japanese people in the past.

There is a new identity that's a part of you and a new identity that is part of him. And because you are both Christians, the things that unite you are so much stronger than the things that would divide you as Koreans and Japanese.

And my Japanese friend's son married this Korean girl with the blessing of her parents. And that is what Paul is saying Jesus came to accomplish. Something beautiful, something that in the world's eyes is different and crazy, but something that shows a radical, radical transformative power at work in our lives.

And why is this transformation happening? Well, Paul says that what's happened is that in Christ all of us are being brought near to God. So if we look over there and we see like Bernard sitting over in the corner, hi.

[19 : 48] And we look over there and we see like David sitting in the corner, hi. What Paul is saying is that previously all of us are far away from each other. But in Christ, God is drawing us near to himself.

So if God was like here and the Jews were way over where David is and the Gentiles were way over where Bernard is and each of them stood up and took five steps towards God, not only are each of them five steps closer to God, they're also ten steps closer to each other.

And Paul is saying the closer we get to God, the closer we as his people will get to each other. Because if we are all drawing near to God, then the proximity that we have to God will bring us close to one another as well.

And as we come close to one another as God's people, we need to interact with love. We need to interact sacrificially. We need to have our interaction be shaped and marked by the cross.

Paul goes on and he continues to say that God is building us into a temple for himself. Now a temple is a place where God lives.

[21 : 00] What Paul is saying is that God wants to live among us, not just within us as individuals, but among us as a group as a whole. It's God's temple, not ours, so he gets to decide who's in it and what it looks like.

What he says is that God wants to join us together so that as we come together, there is a beautiful, beautiful place for him to dwell in our midst.

And this has huge, huge implications for our life in community. You know, it's one thing to say that we're equal and I'm no better than you and you're no better than me.

It means that I can't mistreat you. It means that I can't really look down on you, but it doesn't force me to be nice to you. I can just stay neutral towards you if we're equal.

But if we're joined together, then something different is going on there. Right? Justine and I, we're married. We're joined together for life. And so that means that the way that I treat her has much bigger implications than they would if we were just equals.

[22 : 11] That if I serve her and love her and she feels loved, then that's going to have an impact on the way that she treats me. And if I ignore her and neglect her and she doesn't feel loved, that also is going to have a reciprocal effect.

Back on me. When we are joined together, then our actions towards one another impact much further down the road than just that one relationship.

And Paul is saying that we are being joined together into a place for God to live. And that we, because we're part of God's people, have to form this building in a way that is honoring to God, not in the way necessarily that we want to do it, but in the way that God wants us to do it.

And he tells us that Jesus is the cornerstone. Now the cornerstone in ancient architecture is a huge rock. And they would cut all the angles and the sides perfectly, and they would place it in one of the corners of the foundation of the building, and all of the measurements of the building would be made based on the measurements of that rock.

So if the rock points in this way, then they would extend that line out and they would build the wall in a straight line, perfectly in line with the cornerstone. If the line goes this way, they'd point it out and build the building that way in the direction of the cornerstone.

[23 : 33] And every measurement in the building was made against the measurements of the cornerstone. So when Paul says that Jesus is the cornerstone, he says everything about the life of the church must be built on and modeled on who Jesus is for us, who Jesus is in us, how Jesus commands us to live as a community, and that is our standard.

Society's norms cannot be our standard. What we feel like in our heart might be the right thing to do cannot be our standard. We must allow Jesus himself to be our standard.

And so we have now recognized, or we've now remembered, our previous conditions. We've recognized the present state that we're in, and we must now, in light of that, re-evaluate our future. We must think, what must we do? How must our lives be different because of these truths, because of this radical change that has happened where God has brought us near not only to himself, but also to each other?

my first application point here, I think, is aimed primarily at non-Christians. You know, if you're here today and you're a non-Christian, then these past things that we're supposed to remember are still a present reality for you.

[25 : 02] Separation from God, separation from God's people without hope and without God in the world. I know that sounds harsh of me to say, but if the Bible is true, then telling you that is the most loving thing that I can do today.

because God offers you a chance for that to not be your reality anymore. God offers to come and rescue you, to give you a new relationship with himself, to give you a new relationship with his people, and he wants that to happen today.

So if you're here today and you're not a Christian, my plea to you is that you would trust in Jesus, that you would see how amazing and wonderful and beautiful the salvation he offers to us is, and that you would accept that as your own today.

If you don't quite understand all of what that implies, find one of us and talk to us after service. Turn and ask the person next to you when we're done, because this is important.

If we are a Christian today, this also has implications for our lives. The first one, I think, applies to some of us, not necessarily all of us, but an amazing first step towards living as the people of God is being willing to identify yourself as part of the people of God through baptism.

[26 : 30] You know, we're having a baptism today. It's an exciting and awesome time. It's a time for people to publicly declare that they are part of God's family. It doesn't have any special power to save them or to change them or to earn them points in heaven.

But it does have an amazing ability to declare to the world that they are part of this family. And if God calls us to live the way that we've been talking about as a family today, but we're not willing to identify ourselves publicly as part of that family, we're going to have a really tough time living properly as part of that family.

family. You know, when Justine and I got married, we gave each other these rings. I know the ring is a cultural thing, so not everyone here necessarily wears them, but in the culture that we come from, a ring is very important for signifying that you are married to one another.

And if I just went up to Justine one day and I said, hey, babe, I know we're married, but I don't want to wear this ring anymore. You know, I don't want to make too big of a deal about the fact that we're married.

If people ask me about it, I won't lie about it, but I just don't feel the need to like promote it. That would mean something was wrong with my marriage.

[27 : 51] Because although the sign has no power to make me her husband, it's a symbol to the world of the fact that I am her husband, and it shows others that I love her and that I'm married to her and that I care about her.

In the same way, baptism is a sign to the world of the fact that we are a part of God's family. It's an act of obedience to God to declare to the members of the church and the people outside the church that God has done something amazing in our lives, and God has made us a part of his family, and we want to celebrate and rejoice in that fact.

And so if you're here today and you're a Christian and you have not been baptized yet, I encourage you, get baptized. Declare to the church that you are one of us, that you're in for this thing.

Declare to the world around you that there's been a change in your life and that you are now a part of God's people. That's a vital first step to living properly in life like Paul tells us to live it here.

A second step would be getting deeply involved in each other's lives. And I know we have a tendency to like group with people who are similar to us, whether that's by age or by socioeconomic status or stage in life or however, but get deeply involved in each other's lives with people like you and with people different from you.

[29 : 21] Because Jesus died not only to unite us with people like us in the church, but also so that we would love and interact with people who we have nothing in common with except for Jesus.

Jesus wants our community to be something that the world looks at and goes, huh? Because it doesn't make sense to them. Because they look at this person and this person and this person and there is no logical reason why they should be hanging out or like each other.

And yet they do. And the world looks at this and they're like, what is different? What is going on here? And it gives us an amazing opportunity to show the world how Jesus has transformed our community.

Here at Watermark, we have community groups that are encouraged, that are intended to create this type of community. We try and do community groups geographically based as much as possible so that you're forced to be with people who are different than you.

Because if we didn't do it geographically based, then all the young people would go together, all the old people would go together and all the parents with teenage kids would group together. But geographically based means that in my community group, there are people old enough to be my parents.

[30 : 36] And there are people old enough to be my grandparents. And there are people with young kids and people with no kids and single people. And am I going to get in trouble for that one? Maybe.

Maybe I will. It's okay. There are people from all different walks of life. There are people who are retired, people who are just starting out, and people who are still studying.

There are people who are Western, people who are Asian, people, you name it, we've got all this variety. And if you were to look at our group gathered on a Thursday night and say, why are all these people brought together?

There is no earthly explanation that you could give other than the fact that something has changed inside of us, that there is a God who has loved us and who has transformed us and who has created us into this community who can love one another.

And the amazing thing is that coming from different backgrounds allows us when we interact to see things in each other's lives that we would never otherwise see. It allows us to give help to one another in ways that we could never help one another if we were all just a homogenous group.

[31 : 51] And so it actually does have beautiful side effects in a positive way in this world. But even if it didn't, it's a way of showing the world around us the amazing, wonderful love that God has shown to us.

And for that, it is worth it. So please, if you're not in a community group, join a community group.

And a third way that I think this should impact our lives is membership.

Now, I know Paul doesn't talk explicitly about membership in this passage or really anywhere in the New Testament. But remember, Paul lived in a different world than we do. In Paul's day, becoming a Christian and getting baptized was basically putting your life on the line.

If you were to become a Christian in the time when Paul was writing and you were to get baptized, there was a very real risk that you were going to be burned alive or have your head chopped off because of it.

And so in that world, in that situation, when you get baptized, you are committed. You are in. There are no questions about whether you're really in on this thing. In our world today, people are transient.

[32 : 58] They come and go from the city. They jump around from church to church while they're here. People, you know, who might not actually care about having a relationship with Jesus or people in the church label themselves as Christians to get networking connections.

It's a lot harder to tell whether people are committed or not today. And in a church like Watermark, where people are constantly coming and going, we have a group of men called elders who are responsible for the spiritual oversight of this church community.

And in order to oversee the spiritual life of our community, something very important for them is just knowing who is a part of that community. And so becoming a member is a great way of saying to the elders, you know, we're in.

We're committed to this church. We're with you guys. We want you to hold us accountable. And we're going to commit to holding up our friend of making this church work as well. It's not something that necessarily Paul talks about here, but I think it's right in line with what Paul is talking about.

This commitment to God's people. This willingness to sacrifice for the good of the whole. And maybe you're here today and you say, hey Eric, I'm already a Christian.

[34 : 13] I'm already baptized. I'm in a community group and I'm a member here. I've got it all. We're good. My challenge to you would be sometime this week, read through this passage again. And as you do, think to yourself, who are the people in the church that I find it hard to love?

And how would properly understanding this passage transform the way that I interact with them? Because I know for me, I'm a member. I'm baptized.

I'm in a community group. But this passage still has a lot to say to me about the way that I interact with people in the church and about the way that I see others who are different than me.

It tells me that I can't think of myself as better than anyone. I can't even think of myself as separated from anyone, separate but equal. It doesn't work in the body of Christ. Because we are joined together.

And the way that we interact with each other within the church must be marked by the same type of sacrificial love that Jesus showed to us on the cross. And so Paul wants us to remember who we used to be.

[35 : 23] He wants us to recognize what Christ has done for us. And he wants us to re-evaluate where we're going based on those truths. Are we going to be a church that lets the cross shape our community?

Or are we going to be a church that says, no, I want it to be just about me. Maybe me and God. Are we going to be a church that allows our community to be a light to the world around us of how beautiful and amazing our God's love is for us? I hope the answer is yes.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for your love for us. We thank you that when we were undeserving and we were helpless and we were unable to do anything to change our state, that you sent Jesus down to rescue us.

Now, you didn't just rescue us to give us a relationship with yourself, but you rescued us to transform us into a community of people who love you together. God, I pray that we would be willing to identify ourselves as part of your people, that we'd be willing to sacrifice for one another, that we'd be willing to do hard things for the good of others within this body.

[36 : 53] We thank you again for your love for us, for your grace towards us. We pray that you would give us the strength to live as the people that you have called us to be. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen.