

Devoted to Community and Fellowship / Jeff Kennedy

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Galatians 1:3–5 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. ⁵ To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Story: A man who was stranded on an island in the middle of the ocean was finally rescued. The rescuer noticed he had built 3 structures on the Island, and he asked the castaway, “What are those structures?” He said, “Well the one in the middle is my house. The one on the right is my church.” “And what about the one on the left?” The rescuer asked, “Oh” said the castaway, “That’s the church I used to go to.”

Even in isolation, we invent ways of dividing ourselves. But it turns out that isolation itself is largely the culprit for so much of what ails us spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.

In a 2018 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 60 million adults in the U.S. responded that they are often or always lonely. This problem is intensified the older we get. It turns out that isolation is bad for our health—the mortality risk associated with chronic loneliness is higher than obesity—and was shown to be equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Now, imagine if you’re lonely, smoke two packs a day, and you’re obese—triple whamy.

Big Idea: God did not intend us to waste away in isolation—he intended us to live in an embodied community. And the church of Jesus is nothing if it is not society of holy, like-minded believers who have been bonded together by the wondrous glory of the cross. Who have been forever transformed by the Holy Spirit in resurrection power in and for community.

I want to take some time this morning to talk about what it means for us to be a saved, sanctified joyous community of saints in the Lord...

1. We are a fellowship of rescued sinners. I think the first thing we should think about when we hear the word “Church” or “Body of Christ” or “Believers/Saints” is this idea that we are a diverse group of people—drawn from every conceivable background, region, ethnicity, language etc.—we gather in unity at the cross as a fellowship of rescued sinners.

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Let’s break that down.

v. 3: **Tells us about the object of God’s grace (us) and its source (him):** Grace and peace with God comes from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn’t come from us, we didn’t ask for it, we weren’t looking for it, nor were we seeking it—but out of his own loving-kindness he sought us, he chose us, he graced us with his salvation and reconciled us to God. Grace and peace comes from him.

v.4a: **Tells us about the means:** Jesus gave himself for our sins—Jesus willingly embraced the cross taking the punishment that would have been ours, dying in our place and on our behalf. There is no greater expression of love than this—that one would choose to give their life for another.

v.4b: **Tells us about the result:** He rescued us from this present evil age. No doubt the age we live in is becoming increasingly darkened by sin and self-worship. This age is characterized by idolatry, atheism, moral debauchery—unmoored from an authority outside ourselves, we have become an authority unto ourselves—*we are now the decisive arbiters of all that is true about us*. This has led to mass confusion about what a human being is and a sharp increase in depression, suicide, and self-loathing among those groups who are most confused about who and what they are.

Illus: The word “Miasma” was invented in the early 1800’s—it is one of those obsolete medical theories about how diseases actually spread (now supplanted, fortunately, by the germ theory of disease). It was thought that pathogens and diseases like cholera, or the Black Death—were caused by “miasma” or toxic air. Ironically, what it caused people to do is take shelter and hunker indoors and away from dead bodies, or polluted streets or to avoid walks in nature and dead animal carcasses. But they misdiagnosed the problem—they thought they were fighting an enemy that didn’t exist all the while increasing their exposure to the real enemy indoors. And today in our culture, people are suffering greatly because they think their real enemy to their flourishing is any challenge to their absolute and supreme personal sovereignty.

Not realizing that the very remedies they've turned to are fast-tracking their mental illness, enabling their worst instincts leaving **them in a state of misery, permanent regret—it is a self-made hell of self-rule and the consequences that come with it.**

And Jesus wants to liberate us from the tyranny being our own self-gods; Jesus came to release the captive, to rescue men and women trapped in sin. And he doesn't do it by merely providing a forensic diagnosis of our problem. He doesn't do it by merely giving a sharp analysis of our dilemma—no. He rescues us by becoming one of us—who being in very nature God, was found in appearance as a man.

Illus. A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out...

A Buddhist said: "Your pit is only in your mind."

A Hindu said: "Regardless of how hard you try, you'll have to repeat this pit."

A Professor said: "Everything about this pit will be on the final."

An Empathetic person said: "I feel your pit."

A Pharisee said: "You've got a lot of work to do to get out of that pit."

A Calvinist said: "You were predestined to fall in that pit."

A Wesleyan said: "You can leave that pit of your own free will."

A Narcissist said: "That's nothing, you should see my pit."

A Realist said: "Yep, that's a pit alright."

An Idealist said: "The world shouldn't have any pits."

An Optimist said: "Things could be worse."

A Pessimist said: "Things will get worse."

But Jesus seeing the man trapped, climbed down, threw him on his back, and hauled him out of the pit.

Jesus gave himself willingly for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age that is leading us to the pit of hell—a pit out of which no philosophy will be able to deliver us.

And we are a fellowship of saved sinners, now declared to be saints, holy and righteous in the blood of Christ.

2. We are a devout fellowship. Acts 2:42 “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.”

Luke described the early church’s devotion in terms of four priorities.

v. 42a: The Apostles’ teaching: This is why all true expressions of the Christian Faith are biblical. Biblical Christianity began right here. No sooner is the Holy Spirit poured out on the masses in Solomon’s temple, then they have to figure out what to do with all these new Christians. So they break up into homes, or house-churches. Some homes can accommodate 10 people, some 100, or more. The church’s first priority is to learn the Scriptures (the OT) according to the Apostles’ teaching about Christ.

v. 42b: To the Fellowship and the breaking of bread: The word fellowship is the Greek term *koinonia* and it means “voluntary association.” In the first century they had lots of voluntary associations that a person could join.

- You could join a **burial association** and plan the many funerals that occupied much of their time due to the high mortality rate back then.
- You could join a **marketplace association**, planning business and commerce in the local marketplace with your fellow shop owners.
- You could join a **philosophical association** planning public debates and discourses on philosophy.
- You could join a house or **homeowners association**—planning dinners, festivals, speeches, and various celebrations in the suburbs or urban city blocks where you lived. These meetings almost always had some type of dinner, which was called “breaking of bread” and idiom we still use today to describe social acceptance. This is why Jesus’ dining with notorious sinners like Zacchaeus and Matthew and his friends (Luke 15) is such a scandal to the Pharisees.

Being a member of any of these voluntary *koinonias* gave you legal cover—technically it was against the law to persecute these associations.

The Church identified almost immediately under the cover of the house-association. Meeting in homes gave them the cover of legitimacy, while also serving the practical function of providing for the social needs of the group.

Christianity was born into a highly social, group-oriented world—and this was by God’s design. That world signaled their public acceptance of individuals through table fellowship.

Illus. My son Hayden and I visited a frontier house in Montana. A homesteading family moved out west and with some means, had a little farm there. The gentleman built a very adequate two-story home with a living room, full kitchen, a parlor room, and bedrooms up and downstairs. The home was surrounded by a meadow and garden, and behind the home was a deep underground cellar, which was their system of refrigeration. Then there were the pictures. The faces in the pictures on the wall said everything about austere souls who lived out their days in extreme isolation. Ghostly and haunted looks of desperate isolation on their faces.

Pioneer families once built their homes in the middle of their acreage for solitude, but after a while they moved those properties to the corners next to their neighbors so that they could have some semblance of community. The reason for this was because they came to recognize that sustained periods of isolation from others made them a bit bonkers.

God designed our lives to be lived in table fellowship—the breaking of bread and to enjoy.

v.42c: And prayer—notice that they devoted themselves to the public prayer in these fellowship meetings. Now in defense of personal, private devotions I want to say—Yes and Amen—you absolutely should have personal and private devotions. Meaning, spending daily time being disciplined by God’s Word (the Bible) and crying out to God your praises, gratitude, and petitions. Yes and amen. But I want to make this very clear—the accelerant to a blazing hot passion for Christ in prayer is **corporate** prayer.

If you spend enough time isolated, alone, cut off from the life that is only found in the community of faith the flame of your passion for God and your prayer life will become anemic. You just won’t care.

Illus: My friends Mitch and Jacki asked my wife and me to house-sit for them while they went out of town. While I was there, I noticed a small blue flame in their fireplace. I had never used gas heat before, and so I didn’t know what a pilot flame was. I figured they had accidentally left their fireplace on. My wife watched in amusement as I spent the better part of the next hour huffing and puffing and blowing on the pilot flame. I finally got the flame out and then called the owners to let them know there was nothing to fear, old Jeff was here. They responded, “Dufus. You’re not supposed to blow out the pilot flame. It’s supposed to stay lit.”

Listen, if we want to stay lit—maintaining a passion for God’s glory and his greatness, walking with him—a fervent walk with God is best nourished and fueled in fervent community prayer. With and for the body of Christ.

1 John 1:6 “If we say, “We have **fellowship** with him,” and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have **fellowship** with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

We are a fellowship of broken people who’ve been healed from our sin which brought wanton destruction; we are reconciled from being enemies of God and his cross. Rescued from the darkness and death of sin, and healed from our estrangement.

And as a saved, rescued fellowship—we are made saints, holy and righteous before God. And we have fellowship with him—evidenced by no longer walking in the darkness. Instead, we are devoted to this sure Word, to the fellowship around the table he has prepared for us, in fervent personal and corporate prayer.