

HOW COMMUNITY SHAPES US IN THE GOSPEL

In the last lesson, we saw that we are created for community, redeemed for community, and transformed in community. We also observed that sin hinders community by making us self-centered and self-seeking. In this lesson, we want to see how community exposes our sin and unbelief, pushing us into a deeper dependence on the good news of the gospel. In other words, we want to move from a functional to a formative view of community.

As pragmatic people, we tend to have a *functional* view of community. Knowingly or unknowingly, we think of relationships in terms of what they do for *us*. Our friends give our lives meaning, keep us from being lonely and isolated, support us in hard times, celebrate with us, and help us accomplish goals. But what if our relationships had a more transcendent purpose? What if every friendship and interaction was intended by God to form us, shape us, and change us spiritually?

According to the Bible, that's exactly what God intends. Every relationship in our lives has a *formative* purpose. Consider these verses:

Acts 17:26–27: “[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God. . . .”

Romans 11:36: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever."

God has determined where we live and who lives near us. All things (including our relationships) are from him and for him. The community we're part of is not accidental. It's purposeful. God is using the people in our lives to form us, to shape us, to sanctify (purify) us. The Holy Spirit uses our struggles and failures in community to reveal our sin and show us our need for the heart and life change that Jesus' death and resurrection make possible.

Here's another way to say the same thing: On our own, we are relentlessly self-focused people. We want to be at the center of our lives and at the center of our relationships. That translates into a functional view of community that keeps ME at the center. The relationships in my life revolve around me and exist for me. But the *truth* is that God is the center of everything. "From him and through him and to him are all things." So every relationship in my life is ultimately about God. Every struggle, conflict, and broken relationship is an opportunity to worship God more deeply and be formed more fully into his image.

When I am the center:

- Every conflict leads to polarization: me vs. you. *I am the center, after all! How dare you not honor me as I deserve to be honored! We both need to change, but you need to change more.*
- I think economically about relationships: Anything I don't want to do becomes a cost, a demand, an "expense" of time and energy (because it takes me out of being the center). I may still do it because it's the "right thing to do," but I'll do it grudgingly and under compulsion, expecting repayment.
- I end up using others (both God and humans) to get what I really want (meaning, significance, security, productivity, etc.).

When God is at the center:

- Every conflict is an opportunity for gospel growth. It's not me vs. you; it's God, our heavenly Father, giving both of us an opportunity to see where we are trusting in something other than

him and to turn to him in repentance so that we can grow as his image bearers. We tend to think that if relationships are difficult, something is wrong: "This just isn't working out." But if this is all part of God's redemptive plan, conflict is actually a mark of God's love. If you are dealing with a difficult person or in an awkward situation right now, cheer up! It means God loves you!

- I learn to think *graciously* about relationships. Anything I don't want to do becomes an opportunity to rely on God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power to love my neighbor as myself. Since God has loved me so generously by sending his Son (1 John 4:10), I can "lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35).
- I can actually *love* other people instead of using them, because they're not a means to an end. God is the end. I'm satisfied in him and I'm able to reflect his grace and goodness to others.

So God graciously uses community to expose our sin and to invite us to believe the gospel and allow it to work change more deeply into our attitudes, motives, words, and actions. This week's exercise gives you an opportunity to see how this actually works by walking you through three questions:

- Identify a struggle you've had in community recently (a conflict, disagreement, misunderstanding, etc.).
- How does this struggle—or your response to it—expose your sin? What areas of unbelief, selfishness, or idolatry do you see in yourself?
- How does Jesus' death for our sins on the cross and his resurrection (redemption accomplished) speak to this struggle?
- How does the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit (redemption applied) free you to react differently in the midst of this struggle?

To help put flesh on this exercise, let me use a recent example from my life. For a few months, I've been holding a good friend at arm's length—not intentionally or consciously, but subtly and subconsciously. I thought things were fine. But he sensed the relational distance and brought it to my attention. He said I didn't seem relationally open, and he pointed to some specific conversations where I'd responded in defensive and self-protective ways.

My first response was to dismiss his concerns: "He's just upset because our relationship hasn't been working the way he wants lately." I wouldn't have said our relationship was great, but it wasn't all that bad either. It was functional, and I didn't want to spend time or energy fixing something that wasn't really that broken. I figured he would sort things out in time. But as the Holy Spirit reminded me that community is formative, I stepped back to take a more prayerful look at what God might be saying to me through my friend. Through prayer and conversation, I realized that I was acting out of deep unbelief. I was being self-protective. I was relationally distant. Other friends had abandoned me in painful ways in the past, and I was afraid of the same thing happening in this friendship. So I was remaining distant to protect myself from potential pain and hurt.

At the root, this was a gospel issue for me. My lack of trust in my friend was really a lack of trust in God. I didn't *believe* God would save me from pain or redeem whatever pain I might experience. I was really saying to God, "I'm a better Savior than Jesus. I don't trust *you* to save me, so I'll save myself."

Applying the gospel to my unbelief meant looking first to the cross to remember how Jesus actually *is* a better Savior than I am.

- At the cross, Jesus was abandoned by his closest friends and rejected by his Father so that I could be accepted. He experienced the worst and most painful rejection of all so that I have the surest and most lasting acceptance of all.
- At the cross, Jesus gave up being the center of his own world so that I could be restored to a living, breathing, growing relationship with God. I can trust him to be the center of my life now.
- At the cross, Jesus showed that he can be trusted to meet my deepest needs. I can be assured that God will love and care for me because he has already cared for me in the ultimate way, by sending his Son to die for me.

Applying the gospel to my unbelief means that I must not only look to the cross (where my redemption was *accomplished*), but also to the ongoing

work of the Holy Spirit (who *applies* Jesus' redemption to my life and helps me change to be more like him).

- The Holy Spirit, who lives within me, is more powerful than my natural tendency toward self-protection. With his help, I can trust others and move toward them instead of away from them.
- "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). The Spirit helps me to know and feel God's love (Romans 8:14–16) so that I can live out of faith and not out of fear.
- By withholding myself, I am refusing to let the Spirit use me redemptively in the lives of others. God is not just redeeming me; he is redeeming his people, and he wants me to be a part of that work. By the Spirit, I can participate in God's redemptive work in others' lives.

So, in the recent situation with my friend, I first repented vertically (toward God). I acknowledged my unbelief, speaking honestly with God in prayer: "At some level, I really *don't* trust you to save me and redeem me. I've chosen to protect myself because of my unbelief. Please forgive me and let me rest in your salvation instead of trying to save myself." This sounds simple and trite as I write it, but in real life it rang with deep emotion, brokenness, and honesty. My repentance immediately turned to faith and worship as the Holy Spirit brought to mind specific Scripture passages to counter my unbelief. After I did the vertical work of repentance toward God, I met with my friend and asked his forgiveness. I told him how God had graced me with the gift of repentance, and I invited his help in my ongoing battle with self-protection. Instead of defensiveness and protection, I felt a deep gratitude for his friendship. And in church the following Sunday, my affections for Jesus were uniquely stirred. The gospel actually *felt* like good news for *me*.

The gospel is not just good news in general—it's good news for *you* and *your* particular struggles. And community is one of God's most gracious means to show you just how good the gospel is. You need community, not just because it's *functional*, but because it's *formative*. You can't become the person God wants you to be without it.