

# COMMUNITY BARRIERS AND GOSPEL FREEDOM

In the last lesson, we saw that community exposes our sin and pushes us to trust more deeply in the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring needed change to our lives. In this lesson, we want to explore how the gospel propels us into deeper community. By "deeper" community we mean community in which relationships are increasingly shaped by the good things that come from trusting Jesus and the promises of the gospel: things like a growing trust, openness, humility, service, teachability, and accountability in ways that reflect God's character and his intentions for human relationships. (We're still working out the same concepts, just coming at them from a different angle.)

Our goal is to apply the promises of the gospel to our lives as we read. So, as a starting point, pause and ask yourself this question: "What keeps me from experiencing deeper community?" Which of the following answers is closest to the truth?

- I'm too busy; I can't invest the time it requires.
- I'm happy with the relationships I have; I'm not looking for new ones.
- I have boundaries; don't push me.
- These people aren't like me; there's a limit to how "deep" we can go.
- Relationships overwhelm me; I don't have the capacity right now.

- If these people really knew me, I'm not sure they'd accept me.
  - I don't want to inconvenience others by asking more of them.
  - Something else; write it here. \_\_\_\_\_
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Most of us have justified these barriers to community for so long that we don't see anything wrong with them. What's the big deal? The big deal is that, as we saw in Lesson 1, we are God's image bearers. So the depth of our community says something about God and his gospel! If we are content with shallow community, we are content to reflect a shallow and superficial image of who God is. Consider Jesus' words in Luke 6:32-33:

"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?  
For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do  
good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?  
For even sinners do the same."

Jesus is saying that there is a "lowest common denominator" kind of community that's natural to humanity. Everyone loves people who are just like them. That's not surprising. That's not different. That's not God-exalting. But when Jesus binds a diverse people together in deep community, that is provocative. It elicits questions from the watching world. It testifies to something powerful (God and his gospel) at the core of our communal life. Our longing, then, is to form communities that entice the world to believe in Jesus: "May they all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

In pursuit of that sort of community, let's go back to the barrier you identified a few paragraphs back and ask one simple question: What's underneath that?

Don't think "underneath" as in Sigmund Freud—we're not urging you to uncover some repressed memory from your childhood (unless you need to). Rather, think "underneath" as in a medical diagnosis: What's underneath that symptom? What's causing it? What core issues of unbelief does it reveal? Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth

speaks" (Luke 6:45 NIV). So these "barrier statements"—these objections to community—reveal even deeper barriers below the surface, in our hearts. Here are two categories to think through.

- **False Beliefs.** What false ideas (lies) about God, myself, and others am I believing as true?
- **False Sources of Hope/Trust.** What "false gods" am I hoping in, trusting in, relying on? What am I really counting on to make me happy, content, satisfied? (Here's a short list of common cultural gods: power, approval, control, comfort, respect, success, security.)

Here are two possible examples.

**1. Community Barrier: "I have boundaries; don't push me."**

- What's underneath that?
- False Beliefs:
  - About God: God's ways are overwhelming and difficult. I'll be more content if I do things my way instead of his way.
  - About myself: I always know what's best for me.
  - About others: They want something from me. They aren't out for my good.
- False Sources of Hope/Trust:
  - I'll be happy if I can prevent people from making demands on my time and energy. I'm trusting in the false god of control.

**2. Community Barrier: "I don't want to inconvenience others."**

- What's underneath that?
- False Beliefs:
  - About God: I'm probably an inconvenience to him too.
  - About myself: I'm not worth people's time and attention.
  - About others: They would probably reject or resent me if I "needed" them. I've really been burned before and I don't want to experience that sort of pain again.
- False Sources of Hope/Trust:
  - I'll be happy if people never see me as an inconvenience or feel like I'm making demands on them. I'm trusting in

the false god of *approval*. (I don't want to be perceived as a needy person.)

These are only two possible examples. They aren't exhaustive, and the lies and longings beneath your particular barrier might be completely different from the ones given here. The point is to help you see that the barriers and excuses that sabotage our attempts at community are actually gospel issues. They are symptoms of deeply held beliefs, objections, and longings that need to be changed by Jesus and what he has done for us.

So how do we build deeper community that reflects God more fully and displays his glory to the world more clearly? By believing the gospel more deeply. Here's a simple, biblical, four-step process to help you do that.

- **REPENT.** Turn *from* the lies and false gods you've identified. Ask God to show you how you've turned your back on him. Acknowledge that the sin and selfishness driving your unbelief are really a relational rejection of your heavenly Father, who loves you and wants the best for you.
- **BELIEVE.** Turn *to* Jesus and the good news of his gospel. Believe first of all that Jesus died for your sin and unbelief and receive his forgiveness anew. Believe secondly all the freeing truth of the gospel: that Jesus redeemed you *for* community and calls you *to* community, that he frees you to worship him (not yourself or others), that he gives you his Spirit to empower you for obedience. Remember that "belief" in the Bible is not just a cognitive word; it speaks of an intentional "dwelling on" all that is true of us in Christ and an ongoing dependence on him as we live in joyful obedience.
- **WORSHIP GOD.** Rejoice in the goodness, grace, and glory of God. Do this in prayer. Do this in community. Do this out loud. The more you treasure God, the more your soul will relax its grip on false gods. Worship is not just something you do on Sundays. It is an all-the-time, moment-by-moment response of your heart to who God is and what he has done for you.
- **LOVE OTHERS.** Now, by faith, start moving toward others to love them as you have been loved! The gospel frees you to love.

Gospel change is not an interior, navel-gazing sort of change; it is "faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6 NIV). Pursue deeper community. Enjoy people who are unlike you. Love those who are hard to love. And as you fail (which will happen a lot), start this process all over again!

This repentance and faith—this turning back to God and moving out in love—is not a one-time event. It's more like the basic step in a dance, a foundational pattern repeated over and over again, that creates a joyful, beautiful movement. This is how the gospel builds a deeper, more vibrant community.

The Scriptures call me to community. As I try to obey that call and move toward others, I encounter barriers that keep me from loving others as God has loved me. Those barriers reveal that I'm more needy, broken, and sinful than I thought! My natural response is to ignore, avoid, or excuse my brokenness. But Jesus invites me instead to acknowledge my sin and turn to him in repentance, faith, and worship. As I do this, I am changed. I begin to see how desperately I need to depend on God moment by moment (and this starts to feel good!). I start to trust that my Father loves me and wants the best for me. And I'm freed to love other people—my faith expresses itself in love for others.

Still, all this "I" and "me" talk is misleading. This isn't a process that happens alone as I pursue Jesus by myself. The whole thing happens in community. I need others to help me see my sin and point me to the gospel. And they need me to do the same for them. Being in community shines a light on my need for change. I'll need to repent, believe, worship, and love many, many, many more times in community than I would if I could just be left alone to pursue "Jesus and me."

So what does a healthy, vibrant Christian community look like? How does it avoid being shallow and superficial? It's honest. Struggling. Loving. Failing. Clinging to Jesus. Repenting to each other. Forgiving each other. Placing others ahead of ourselves. Helping point each other to the cross. This is the beautiful mess of gospel-centered community.