This is our sixth week in our series “Maturing in Christ.” Over a year ago the elders appointed a team to evaluate the mission and vision of this church. Our team is called the Ministry Map Team. Our team believes we have been given a map by the Lord; we don’t get to draw our own! The church has been given a mission, and that mission is to make disciples. The Ministry Map team has articulated the mission of the church in language we hope will help put flesh on the bones of this mission. **We exist to make disciples who glorify God as the grace of the gospel grows deep in God’s people and goes wide to all peoples.** We hope the key words in this mission will be memorable and motivational: Glory-Grace-Go; Deep and Wide.

If we are called to make disciples who grow deep and go wide, we feel that it is necessary to talk about what growing deep looks like and what going wide looks like. These are the marks we’ve identified as essential: Maturing disciples who are **growing deep** in the grace of the gospel will grow in their love for God’s Word (Bible), will be devoted to prayer, and will be committed to Christ’s church (Membership), which includes commitment to corporate worship (Gathering), to relationships with other believers (Fellowship), and to service. Maturing disciples who are **going wide** will show Christ-like compassion toward those in need and they will make disciples who make disciples (Multiplication), which involves three key elements: evangelism, ongoing discipleship, and a zeal for missions.

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Now as we began our work, our team was aware of the dangers of a list like this. It could sound legalistic for one. It could lead some to despair as they measure their lives against this list. It could lead some to pride. And so let me take a couple of minutes to clarify what we believe
about growth and maturity in Christ. We believe that salvation is by faith alone, through grace alone and in Christ alone! God takes the initiative and does the work in the entire process of salvation. We want to put the emphasis in all we do on the work of Christ.

These marks of maturity are not describing what is required to be saved; they are describing what one’s life looks like after they are saved, as they mature in Christ.

We believe, that while salvation is by faith alone, faith is never alone; faith without deeds is dead (Jas. 2:26). We’re not calling for perfection in this series. None of us have arrived and none of us will be perfect until Christ returns (Rom. 8:30). But we do eagerly expect growth because God promises he’ll cause growth in our lives (1 Cor. 3:6). The one who began a good work in us will carry it on until completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). There will be fruit in the lives of those who are in Christ (Jn. 15). Therefore we’re looking for the growth which God causes and we’re actively seeking to grow in Christ-likeness. I love Philippians 2:12-13 here: “...work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to his good pleasure.”

God works in; man works out.

I hope these clarifications about growth and maturity will help as we continue in this series.

Begin with the end in mind.

Please open your Bibles to Psalm 133. Our topic this morning is fellowship. At the end of my sermon it is my prayer that we as a church would be motivated to cultivate fellowship with one another. The so called “experts” on goal setting say that in order to achieve our goals we need to begin with the end in mind; we need to have a picture of what success looks like. Psalm 133 gives us a great picture of what it looks like when the people of God live in fellowship with one another.

Psalm 133 (ESV)

1 Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!

3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

We won’t spend a lot of time in this Psalm this morning. We will explore what is meant by the word “fellowship” a little later, but for now I simply want to focus on the picture, this Psalm paints, of abundant blessing that accompanies the people of God gathered in fellowship.

Psalm 133 pictures God’s people gathered together for one of the three annual feasts. They were gathered together as the people of God, with one major thing in common and one major purpose; they gathered as the redeemed people of God to remember God’s work in redemption.
And the Psalmist says this is a really good thing, in verse 1. “It is good and pleasant when brothers dwell in unity.” In other words, God’s people are blessed when they fellowship together. And in order to drive this point home the Psalmist offers us two word-pictures of the blessing of fellowship.

First, “It is like precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!” (v. 2).

Aaron and the oil on his head represented the anointed priesthood. One of the main things the priests did when the Israelites gathered was to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. They were able to live in the presence of God because of the death of a sacrifice. This was a good thing! The fellowship of the people of God was also a good thing – a picture of abundant life, like Aaron’s anointing represented life for the people of God.

The second picture the Psalmist paints is in verse 3; the fellowship of God’s people “…is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!”

Mt. Hermon is North of Israel, near Damascus. It stands 9,000 feet above sea level. Therefore it receives more rain than Mt. Zion, where Jerusalem sits. Hermon is known for its lush greenery even during the summer months. Mt. Zion is not known for its lush greenery. But as the people of God gather in fellowship around their common redemption, it is as if Zion were Mt. Hermon; it’s a picture of abundant blessing. “For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life for evermore.” Regardless of how harsh the conditions of the life of the pilgrims, the fellowship of the people of God was refreshing.¹

This is the picture I want us to keep in mind as we think about fellowship – it is a really good thing – a picture of flourishing.

With that picture in our minds, I’d like to spend the rest of our time exploring two things: first how fellowship with God’s people is possible and secondly what it looks like.

**FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHERS IS BASED ON FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD.**

Like the Israelites, as Christians our redemption is the one major thing we have in common. In 1 John 1:3 we learn that those who believe Jesus is the Christ and who believe that his sacrificial blood cleanses us from all sin, have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (cf. 1:6). And because of our fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, we also have fellowship with one another (1:7); those who are in Christ have fellowship with everybody else that is in Christ. Our fellowship with God’s people is based on our fellowship with God. 1 John goes on to say that those who have fellowship with God will in fact prove that by their fellowship with other believers. And that fellowship works itself out in love for other believers.

1 John 3:1 says, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” And in verse 16; “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” Then in 1 John 4:11 it says, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” And in verse 19, “We love

¹ Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms.*
because he first loved us.” And in verse 21: “And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Our fellowship with other believers is based on our fellowship with God through Christ. And our love for other believers – the outworking of this fellowship – is based on the love of God for us in Christ.

Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is one of the most famous stories of all time. Even if you’ve not read Dickens’ original version, you likely know the story of Ebenezer Scrooge’s transformation through children’s books or movies. Scrooge’s conversion from killjoy to a philanthropist is, in the words of pastor Mike McKinley, “heartwarming, engaging, and relentlessly entertaining…”

I’d like to read two paragraphs from Dickens’ original to remind you of the transformation.

> Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice...He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas.

This first description makes the description of his transformation all the more stunning.

> Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim...he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them...His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

The reason *A Christmas Carol* has remained a perennial favorite, according to McKinley, is that everyone loves a story of redemption and reclamation. “Still, we all know that things like this do not happen in real life. Leopards don’t change their spots. People don’t learn to love after a lifetime of wickedness. The Ebenezer Scrooges of the world do not suddenly become Mother Theresas. Right? Or do they?”

The Bible seems to think that is “exactly the kind of change that occurs among Christians. One of the most important changes that always accompanies true repentance and faith,” says McKinley, “is a growth in genuine love for other people. In fact, if this kind of change has not accompanied your conversion, there’s reason to ask whether you are really a Christian.”

Those who have fellowship with God have fellowship with other believers and they will show that fellowship in love for other believers. 1 John 4:7-8 says, “Beloved, let us love one another,

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3 Quoted in McKinley, *Am I Really a Christian?*, p. 93.
4 Quoted in McKinley, *Am I Really a Christian?*, pp. 93-94.
5 McKinley, *Am I Really a Christian?*, p. 94.
for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” Or put even more bluntly in verse 20: If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. Our love for other believers shows we are God’s beloved. And if we don’t have love for other believers, it is an indication that we have not received the love of God.

Sermon in a sentence: Because we have fellowship with God through Christ, we should cultivate fellowship with one another.

Koinōnia

We’ve looked at how fellowship is possible. But we’ve yet to answer the question, what is fellowship? What does it look like in real life? The word “fellowship” comes from the Greek word koinōnia. And according to Jerry Bridges, this word has four meanings in the New Testament. I’d like to explore each of these meanings together.

1. Fellowship is a relational reality.

What first comes to mind when you think of the word fellowship? I think, for a lot of people, socializing with other Christians comes to mind; pot-lucks, ice-cream socials, hanging out, and the like. And while eating together is a good way to share our lives together (cf. Acts 2:42-46), in the first instance, fellowship is a relational reality; it is not primarily an activity. And it is a relational reality that is based on our relationship with Christ. Fellowship is sharing a common life – eternal life in Jesus Christ.

That’s what John means when he says those who have fellowship with God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ have fellowship with other believers (1 Jn. 1:3, 7). If we walk in the light (of life), as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another (1 Jn. 1:7). So, fellowship is not primarily an activity, it is a relational reality. But while fellowship is primarily a relational reality and not an activity, we can cultivate the fellowship we have. Keeping the relational reality first in our minds will inform what is involved in cultivating fellowship.

J.I. Packer lists a number of obstacles to Christian fellowship; one is cliques. If fellowship is a relational reality based solely on our common bond in Christ, then we have fellowship with all believers. Christ is the common and dominate denominator in true Christian fellowship. Cliques are generally formed when something other than Christ is the common and dominate denominator between people. It could be socio-economic status, activities, education, vocation, tenure in the church, etc. And while there is nothing wrong with affinity between people who share other things in common besides Christ, when these things keep others out we are preventing true Christian fellowship.

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6 Jerry Bridges, The Crisis of Caring, pp. 16-17.
7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his book on fellowship, “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.” Life Together, 30.
8 J.I. Packer, God’s Words, p. 199.
9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer paints a great picture of what progress will look like in this area: “The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.” Life Together, 26.
In the last year or so we have heard a number of people new to our church say, “This church is really friendly, but it’s hard to connect.” I’m not sure if cliques are the reason for this sentiment or something else. Regardless, let me encourage all of you, whether a visitor or a long-timer, to make the effort to connect with one another. If the main thing we have in common is Christ, all of us theoretically should be able to experience fellowship. But it takes initiative.

I’ll never forget, when Maggie and I moved to Wichita, her dad told us, “Nobody’s going to call you; if you want friends you need to pick up the phone.” We took his advice. I encourage you to do the same as it relates to fellowship. Take the initiative.

Another obstacle to koinōnia is conflict. If fellowship is a relational reality, then unresolved conflict with other believers is a really bad picture of this relational reality. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul is talking about the Lord’s Supper and says that the bread and cup represent participation in the body and blood of Christ. The word “participation” in this verse is koinōnia – the Lord’s Supper represents our fellowship with Christ.

Then we turn to 1 Corinthians 11 and are told that if there are divisions among us in the body we are not to take partake of the Lord’s Supper. Partaking of the Lord’s Supper when there is unresolved conflict is taking it in an unworthy manner. The picture of our fellowship with Christ is seen at the Lord’s Table. It should be seen in our relationships as well. If it is not, Jesus tells us to go and be reconciled with your brother. Because unresolved conflict calls into question our fellowship with the Lord! (cf. Mt. 5:21-26).

Let me encourage you, if you have unresolved conflict with another believer, go and be reconciled. Live at peace with one another, so far as it depends on you (Rom. 12:18). It is good and pleasant when brothers dwell together in unity! If you need help, come and talk with us. We have trained peacemakers in this church who can help you.

2. Fellowship is a practical partnership.

That’s how Paul frequently uses the word koinōnia. In Philippians 1:3-5 Paul says, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you…because of your partnership [koinōnia] in the gospel from the first day until now” (cf. Philemon 17). The idea of partnership laid out in this verse is like a business partnership. In Luke 5:10 we learn that James and John were partners with Simon in their fishing business. The word used there for partner is koinōnia.

Why do people enter into a business partnership with one another? They do so because they have a common objective such as providing a service to the public for profit. Our fellowship with one another is like a business partnership. But our objective is different; our objective is to glorify God. **We exist to make disciples who glorify God as the gospel grows deep in God’s people and goes wide to all peoples.**

The service we offer is proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit for the edification of the church and the evangelization of those outside of the church. And that service is the one thing we have to offer than nobody else has! And what is our profit? As this gospel grows deep and goes wide God is glorified!

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But this gospel proclamation shouldn’t be done alone; we’re partners in the gospel! Let’s not view our growth in Christ as a maverick enterprise; let’s partner together in this work. We all have the same goal, right? Let’s partner! Let’s not view our evangelism as merely solo work either; we can do evangelism together and encourage and equip one another for the work.

One of the most exciting things going on in our church right now is our Everyday Evangelism team. They don’t do this ministry alone; they do it together. And God is blessing this ministry. A number of people have professed faith in Christ in the last couple of months through their ministry. How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity!

3. Fellowship is committed community.

We see this picture in Acts 2:42ff. They devoted themselves to the fellowship. What did this devoted fellowship or committed community involve? I’ll list three things.

1. Committed community involves Word and prayer. They devoted themselves not only to fellowship, but to the apostle’s teaching (which became our New Testament), and to prayer. Because fellowship with other believers is based on our fellowship or relationship with God, it makes sense that fellowship with other believers will include the Word of God and prayer.

2. Committed community involves regularity. This is the picture we see in Acts 2. They met together all of the time. The New English Bible translates Acts 2:42 this way; “They met constantly to hear the apostles teach and share the common life.”

3. Committed community involves transparency. We see a hint of this in 1 John 1:7-9. “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

This passage doesn’t explicitly call us to confess our sins to one another; it calls us to confess our sins to God and to not act as though we don’t have sin when everybody knows we do! But it is interesting that our confession of our sins to God is in the context of our fellowship with other believers. And in James 5:16 we are told explicitly to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another. If fellowship involves prayer and it involves openly confessing our sins to God, I think it is fair to say that we should be open and honest with other believers about what’s going on in our hearts.

Some of my favorite verses in the Bible are Hebrews 3:12-14. “Take care brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”

J.I. Packer says another obstacle to fellowship is self-sufficiency; the attitude that we don’t need one another. But we do need one another!

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11 Yarbrough, I-3 John.
God uses our fellowship to keep us believing in the gospel firmly to the end (Heb. 3:14)! So, we need to call out sin and unbelief in one another’s lives. But how can we do that if we are not known by one another? We must be committed to relationships that involve transparency.

Too often our relationships with other believers involve a lot of chit chat and small talk; we talk about anything but the Word of God and sin, and we talk to one another and not God, through prayer. There is too much at stake to brush aside the type of fellowship the Bible describes.

Is there anybody in this church that really knows you? If you are not currently known well by at least one other Christian brother or sister, let me urge you, for the sake of your soul, to commit to a relationship with another believer marked by the Word and prayer, regularity, and transparency. It is so good and pleasant to dwell in unity with one another.

4. Fellowship is generous giving.

In Acts 2, after telling us that the early disciples devoted themselves to the fellowship, we also learn that they shared all things in common with one another so that nobody was in need (vv. 44-45; cf. 4:32ff).

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul speaks of the contribution the Corinthians made to other believers in Macedonia. In verse 13 the word he uses for their contribution is koinōnia. Paul grounds the generosity of believers in God’s own generosity to us in giving his own Son (cf. 8:9); he says that their generosity was because of their belief in the gospel (v. 13). The gospel unites us in Christ. The gospel is a picture of God’s extravagant generosity toward us. It only makes sense that we would show extravagant generosity toward others who are in Christ. This is part of what is meant by koinōnia, fellowship.

Earlier when we referenced Ebenezer Scrooge we said that he was transformed from a killjoy to a philanthropist. But it is important to note that giving financially to the needs in the body is not philanthropy.

My daughter Hattie has busted open her chin and needed stitches three times. Each time I was at work when she was injured. I stopped what I was doing, went home, and took her to get stitched up. Does that make me a super dad? Was that an act of charity? No, that’s family. That’s not an act of charity; that’s an act of relationship.12

Anybody can be charitable. But when believers are generous toward other believers they are simply doing what family does. Fellowship is first and foremost a relational reality. We are one body and when one member of the body suffers the whole body suffers, therefore, we seek to care for and nurture the whole body because we’re family.

I have seen this family-like generosity in this church. And it reminds me how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity! The generosity of this church is evidence of the work of God in the lives of each of you.

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If you would like to know of a practical way you can contribute to those in this church who are in need, you can give to our benevolence fund. We collect a special offering on the first Sunday of every month at the end of the service.

Our fellowship with one another is based on the fellowship we have with God through Christ. Because we have fellowship with one another we’re called to cultivate that fellowship with one another. Cultivating fellowship with one another doesn’t save us, but if we truly have fellowship with God and others we should cultivate it by loving one another in the church. This is a mark of a maturing disciple.

Hopefully you have seen that fellowship is a good and pleasant thing and are motivated to cultivate it with other believers. The main motivation for loving one another and cultivating fellowship with one another is because God first loved us by sending his Son into the world to die for sinners and to reconcile sinners to himself in perfect fellowship. The gospel motivates us.

We are called to share this gospel with the world who has not yet been brought into fellowship with God, but there is also a sense in which our lives show the gospel, or to be more precise, the truths of the gospel. We’re called to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. As we cultivate our fellowship we show something of this gospel. This too should motivate us.

When we cultivate unity with one another it is a picture of our unity in Christ.

When we put away cliques and pursue fellowship with all kinds of people in the church, we show that the gospel is for the whole world, not just the elite.

When we seek forgiveness and reconciliation with one another it is a picture of the forgiveness and reconciliation we have in Christ.

When we serve one another sacrificially it is a picture of the reality that Christ came not to be served but to serve and give his live as a ransom for many.

When we are committed to one another we show the commitment Christ has to us when he says he will never leave us or forsake us.

When we confess our sins to one another we acknowledge our belief that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

When we are generous to one another it is a picture of God’s extravagant generosity in not sparing his own Son.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

The reason it is good is it is a picture of what God has done in saving us. So when we cultivate fellowship with one another, while it is for our good, it also shows forth the glory of God in his work of redemption.

I hope this motivates us to cultivate fellowship with one another in increasing measure!
Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:11, 14 (ESV)

11 Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
References


