

57 - The Joyful Community

John 10:16

You and I were not designed to live alone. When God created the very first human being, He said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Ge 2:18). And it's not! He placed within each one of us the need to be part of a community of people. That's where we are happiest. That's where we are the most productive. And that's where we are subjected to refining fires that burn away many of the impurities in our attitudes. That's where God trains us to cooperate with others. It's in community that we learn to be patient, kind and generous. It's in community that we learn to put away bitterness and truly love. When we're alone too much, thinking only our own thoughts, hearing only our own voice, forming attitudes that are allowed to go unchallenged, our personality turns sour. We grow increasingly selfish.

Now no one who has actually tried it says living in community is easy. It always brings friction. People are forced to live with people who are different, and our “flesh” does not want to be with people who are different. We clash with them; our feelings get hurt, and we hurt the feelings of others. And every time that happens we are faced with two options: either we withdraw and end that relationship, or we take very uncomfortable steps to restore it. The process is almost always emotionally draining. It exposes our own failures and requires us to apologize. It forces us to wrestle into submission the desire to punish those who've hurt us. Yet those who courageously overcome these obstacles rather than try to escape them, those who learn to set aside their own needs in order to care for the needs of others, those who fight to preserve a relationship rather than fight to win the argument, end up surprisingly happy, at peace with themselves and others.

We've all met such people. Maybe you are one. They're covered with “scars” from past battles, but somehow those battles left them stronger, not weaker, more flexible. They aren't easily offended, and people love to be around them. What's their secret? Before we answer that question let's eliminate one myth: It isn't that they were born with a nice personality. They may have been, but life on this planet can turn anyone mean. Their secret is that they chose to pay the price to stay in relationship; they refused to escape the friction of living with people who are different.

Today we will hear Jesus, the Good Shepherd, declare that it is His plan to bring together people who are very different, from all over the world, and to teach them how to become one. That means this Shepherd's sheep must learn to live together harmoniously. There will be only one flock with one Shepherd.

Whether we realize it or not, His commitment to teach us to love each other is one of the greatest promises He has given us. Thankfully He is determined to restore the human relationships that our sin has ruined. Beginning the moment we meet Him and carrying on into eternity, He draws us back into God's original plan: a loving family, a joyful community.

One flock, one Shepherd (Jn 10:16)

God sent the Great Shepherd first of all to the sheep who lived in Israel, but He never intended for Him to stop there. The plan was always to reach the whole world. We hear that great inclusive heart being expressed when Jesus said, “And I have other sheep (more sheep besides these) which are not from out of this sheepfold; and it is necessary for Me to lead those also and they will hear My voice, and they will become (there will come into being) one (single) flock of sheep [with] one shepherd” (literal). The group He calls “other sheep” certainly included believing Jews who lived in distant lands (Dt 30:4; Isa 60), but Jesus was also prophetically seeing the evangelization of the Gentiles. Later on in this gospel, John will make that distinction very clear by explaining that Jesus died not only for the nation of Israel “but in order that He might also gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn 11:52).

The plan

God created us so that He could love us. His plan has always been to form a big family. He made us in His image, so we could know Him. And He gave us the freedom to choose, so we could become like Him. But we misused that freedom, and it has required a long, difficult process to repair the damage. Our sin meant that God would have to form His family another way. And He would have nothing to start with except rebellious humans who had become enslaved to the passions and impulses that surged through their bodies, misled by confused minds and deceived by demonic spirits. We were a mess! How could He ever produce children who are like Him out of broken people like that? And not only did these humans defy Him, but they also hated each other. They constantly offended each other and separated. And as the centuries passed, the barriers that divided them only grew deeper.

God's original intention was for a growing, sinless, human family to rule the earth on His behalf. Certainly He knew what we would do if He gave humans the freedom to choose; still He allowed us to rebel against Him. Yet God never changes His mind. Even before we sinned He committed Himself to bring those who would repent back into one great family. They would become “children of God” (Jn 1:12-13).



LIFE LESSONS

WITH DR. STEVE SCHELL

Teaching the Bible
practically & understandably
and seeing lives changed by
the truth of the Gospel

Diversity

God's plan has always been to form His family from all the peoples of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles. Yet surprisingly, God is the One who divided us into different groups. The Bible reveals that He was forced to do that for a reason, and understanding that reason will help us understand what Jesus was announcing when He said He would form one flock with one Shepherd.

First, let's establish a very important fact: There is only one human race. We have not evolved from different sources. All humans are descended from Adam and Eve. Listen to Paul's declaration in Athens:

"He made from one [man] every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined [their] appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (Ac 17:26-27).

Second, God is the One who initially divided the human race into diverse groups. The reason He did this may seem odd, but it is actually very important. Very early in human history the "antichrist" spirit rose up and threatened to control the earth. There will be a terrible antichrist at the end of the age, but antichrists have sprung up all through history. They combine governmental power with the hatred of the true God and seek to crush God's people. They always become violent. That's what was happening when we read about the Tower of Babel (Ge 11:1-9). The entire human race was being united to oppose God. So the Lord divided them by changing their languages. His goal was to drive people apart, so there would be opposing nations. Then when an antichrist arose somewhere on the earth there would always be a place to flee and other nations to oppose him. No one could dominate the entire planet. In that way God postponed that terrible moment until the end of the age. Meanwhile the earth is full of people who are different, with different languages, cultures and appearances. But the important fact for us to see here is this: God divided us because of sin. It wasn't His original plan, so when the power of sin is broken He brings us back together again.

The new covenant

In order to bring us back together again God would have to perform a miracle. He would have to take out of us the old "heart of stone" and put in us a "heart of flesh," and He promised that He would do that when the Messiah came. Listen:

"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Eze 36:26).

Above all else, that promise means we will be able to love again: We can love God as He deserves to be loved and love people as if they were our closest family members. Old prejudices fall away, and we love others because God loves them.

The assignment

There was no doubt in Jesus' mind that bringing people back together again was a central part of His assignment and that this included people from all over the earth. Listen:

- Matthew 8:10-11 (about a Roman centurion) "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline [at the table] with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."
- Luke 24:46-47 "And He said to them, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."
- Acts 1:8 "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

The apostle Paul also heard that same assignment. Listen:

- Ephesians 3:2-6 "You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you (Ephesians); that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit, [to be specific], that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."
- 1 Corinthians 12:13 "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."



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Response

It's one thing to see divisive forces at work in the human race in general, but it's another to recognize them in ourselves. Attitudes we might easily condemn when we see them in someone else don't appear to be as bad when we find them in us. We usually develop excuses and explanations for our own behavior. The problem is, becoming a believer doesn't automatically make a person loving or kind; it makes it possible for a person to be loving or kind. Though our heart has changed, our flesh hasn't. We still have to choose. We must:

- 1) Recognize that we need to be in community. We must see it as God's will, not as an option.
- 2) Recognize the forces in our flesh that will try to drive us apart.
- 3) Learn the skills of relationship and practice them diligently: We must learn to reconcile our differences, humbly cooperate with others as a part of a team, initiate relationships with people who are different from ourselves and open our heart wider to love more people as if they were our own flesh and blood.

The joy (Heb 12:2)

The author of Hebrews says Jesus went to the cross joyfully. I believe He realized the gift He was giving to His Father. He was rescuing His lost children, so that He would have the family He longed for. Listen:

“Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross” (Heb 12:2).

We too give the Father joy when we become one flock with one Shepherd.

Questions

- 1) Do you have a close community of godly friends? People who know you, pray for you, and walk with you through the challenges of life? Who are they? How often do you meet?
- 2) When someone offends you, what are some of the steps you take to restore that relationship? Maybe without using the person's name, can you describe a time when you reconciled with someone?