



BIG IDEA

Community is something we all want.

Community is something we all want. Every human being longs for meaningful relationships—a context in which they can know and be known. Theologically, this longing for community is rooted in God himself: God is a relational being (three persons in one as the Trinity), and we are made in his image. This lesson explores the theme of community through the grid of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. How does being created in God's image provide the foundation for meaningful community? How does the fall destroy community? How does redemption in Jesus renew our capacity for community? And how does community provide the context for our ongoing transformation? This lesson lays the foundation for a biblical understanding of the gospel and community.

ARTICLE 1: CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

Community is something we all want.

No matter how you're wired—introvert, extrovert, socially adept or socially awkward—something in your soul longs for meaningful relationships with other humans. We long to know others and be known by them. We treasure friendships that allow us to truly “be ourselves.” Though some of us have never found this sort of community and though others have been deeply wounded by relationships, all of us still long for deep, authentic, real community.

How did we get this way? How did this craving, this longing, get hard-wired into us? The Bible answers that question by explaining that we are created in the image of God. **God created us for community.**

CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

One of the oldest and most cherished doctrines of historic Christian theology is the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed (c. AD 325) summarizes the Trinity this way:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. . . . And I



believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified.

The Trinity means that God himself is in community. More accurately, God *is* community: one God, three persons. “Before all worlds”—before any sort of human community existed—there was God, dwelling in perfect, loving harmony in his threefold being.

In the biblical account of creation, this Triune God says: “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). Human beings are made to *image* God, to reflect his likeness. That’s why our longing for community seems so deep and primal. It’s how we’re made as God’s image bearers.

So if deep community is something we all want, if it’s part of being made in God’s image, then what makes it so hard to attain? What keeps us from achieving the type of meaningful human relationships that God wired us for?

THE FALL: BROKEN COMMUNITY

If you think for a moment about the nature of your relationships, you’ll quickly identify another tendency that’s present—something darker and more sinister than your God-given desire for community. It’s the tendency to use people to meet your own needs first. It’s not hard to see how often we are self-focused, pursuing our own interests and protecting ourselves from people and relationships that will demand too much of us. For example, think of the times you’ve intentionally avoided someone who bothers you. Or the times you’ve said what people wanted to hear in order to avoid offending them. Or the times you’ve stopped pursuing certain friends because they were no longer useful to you. Or the times you’ve clung to bad or unhealthy relationships just to escape the feeling of being alone.

These selfish tendencies reveal that something has gone deeply wrong in our pursuit of community. Though made in God’s image, we have fallen from our original glory. We have devolved into something less than what we were made to be. There’s something selfish and self-absorbed about us that prevents us from imaging God the way we were designed to.

Our inherent selfishness is evidence of what the Bible calls “sin.” When we hear the word *sin*, we tend to think of bad behavior. But sin is deeper than external actions. The Bible often talks about sin in terms of **unbelief**. In other words, rather than believing what is true, we believe lies, which obviously leads to bad behavior and negative emotions. Unbelief was at the root of the first sin. Eve believed the Serpent’s lie about God and his intentions toward them: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and



you will be like God” (Genesis 3:4–5). Unbelief is a failure to see and believe what’s true about God, the world, and ourselves. It’s not taking God at his word, not believing his promises, not trusting in his goodness.

And sin’s impact is not just that we *don’t* believe, it’s that apart from Christ we’re *unable* to believe. Sin has turned us in on ourselves and warped our relationships with others. We need Someone who can deliver us from our unbelief and selfishness and restore our capacity for true, deep, lasting community.

REDEEMED FOR COMMUNITY

This is where the good news of the **gospel** meets us. The word *gospel* literally means “good news”—a message, a proclamation, an announcement. One of the paradoxes of this message is that before it can be good news, it must start with bad news: we are sinful, broken people. We are rebels against God. We are mired in lies and self-worship, and we look to things other than God to give us identity and significance. We can’t free ourselves, make God happy with us, or do enough good works to make up for our sins. But God, rich in mercy, sent Jesus to earth as our substitute. Jesus took our place in his life as he obeyed God fully and worshiped him totally, things we failed to do. He substituted himself for us in his death, as he paid the penalty we owed to God for our sin and unbelief. If we humble ourselves, acknowledge our need, and turn to him, God the Holy Spirit will apply Jesus’ substitutionary work to us by faith. The Bible calls this *redemption*, a word that means “to be delivered, ransomed, or set free.”

What does Jesus redeem us *from*? Sin and all its effects. What does Jesus redeem us *for*? A life that images God and reflects his goodness to the world. In other words, one of the chief things that Jesus accomplishes when he redeems us is to restore our capacity for community. Not for a community of people who look and act just like us, but a community made up of people from every tribe and tongue and nation on earth (Revelation 7:9). God has created us for community, and Jesus has redeemed us for community. In doing so, he has made us into his very own body (1 Corinthians 12:27) that is able to live, love, and make known his “good news” to our friends and neighbors.

But wait: If Jesus redeems us for community, then why is community still such hard work? Why are relationships still fraught with brokenness, even among Christians? This is the tension we live in. Even though Jesus has delivered us from the penalty and rule of sin, he has not yet eradicated sin from the world. Because of sin’s ongoing presence, we are prone to **unbelief**. We easily forget the good news of the gospel and fall back into lies and self-worship. That’s why the Bible encourages us



not just to receive the gospel, but to “stand” in it (1 Corinthians 15:1) and to “continue” in it (Colossians 1:23).

In other words, building and enjoying healthy community is going to require us to believe the gospel, to believe that what Jesus did for us has power and relevance for the way we relate to God and others. This requires an intentional focus on our part. It means identifying the unbelief in our hearts that hinders our ability to love and serve others and to receive love from them in turn. It means receiving the healing, liberating truths of the gospel in ways that allow them to soak deep into the core of our being. And guess where this work of ongoing transformation takes place? In community.

TRANSFORMED IN COMMUNITY

Did you ever notice how patient you are—as long as no one is getting on your nerves? Or how loving you are—as long as you’re surrounded by people who are easy to love? Or how humble you are—as long as you’re respected and admired by others? Every one of us is a saint in isolation! It’s in community that our real weaknesses, flaws, and sins are exposed. That’s why community is essential—not optional—for transformation. We can’t become the people God wants us to become outside of community.

You see, redemption is not the end of the story. God is preparing us for “new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). His goal is a renewed creation, where redeemed humans dwell in perfect harmony with each other and with their Creator. God is out to prepare his people for this glorious future by transforming them now, a process the Bible calls *sanctification*. The agent of sanctification is the Holy Spirit. The tool of sanctification is the truth of the gospel. And the context of sanctification is community.

Consider some of the “one another” statements in the Bible: “Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). “Comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11). “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (Ephesians 4:32). Isn’t it obvious that none of us can do these things perfectly? These commands aren’t given just so that we’ll know what we *should* do; they’re also given so that we can try, and fail, and grow in our experience of God’s grace. Trying to fulfill these “one another” commands helps to reveal our sin, drives us to Jesus in repentance and faith, and causes us to depend on the Holy Spirit for transformation. Community is the laboratory in which we learn to rely on God’s grace and experience the gospel’s transforming power.



Community is also the primary context for *mission*, our outward focus as believers. God wants to use our communities, messy and broken as they are, to draw others into his story and introduce them to Jesus, the Redeemer! It's not just about us becoming more like Jesus; it's about people who don't know Jesus coming to know him as Savior and Lord.

We sometimes treat community like the safety net under a tightrope walker: it's a good thing to have in case something bad happens. But the Bible talks about community as if it's the tightrope itself: you can't move forward without it. We are created for community. We are redeemed for community. And we are transformed in community.^{rcise}

LESSON 1 EXERCISE: FIVE INDICATORS OF INDIVIDUALISM

In Western culture, individualism is like a windshield or a pair of glasses. We're so used to "seeing through" it that we don't even see it. We need some help to recognize how our self-centeredness actually manifests itself. Below are some indicators of individualism, some ways it may express itself based on who you are and how you're wired. Choose the one or two bullet-point statements below that you see most often in your life. (You may find bullet points that apply to you under multiple headings.)

SELF-RELIANCE

- You are proud of your ability to deal with your own problems and challenges without help from others.
- You enjoy being asked for help but you rarely ask others for help.
- It's difficult for you to be vulnerable about what's really going on in your soul because "those are my issues to deal with."
- You don't honestly think you need people to grow spiritually; personal spiritual disciplines are sufficient (Bible study, prayer, theological reading).
- It's hard for you to receive gifts or help from people without wanting to pay them back somehow.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

- You may be thought of as a "good Christian" by others, but few people know you as you really are.



- You may be outgoing and extroverted, but your relationships stay on the surface.
- Very few people have full access to your life. You may disclose things to people, but only what you want them to know. You do not want them to dig deeper.
- When relationships get hard, you tend to withdraw rather than deal with the issues.
- You tend to measure spiritual growth by how much you know.

SELF-PROTECTION

- You tend to keep others at arm's length to guard against being hurt or rejected.
- You measure spiritual growth or maturity by what others say or think.
- You fear at times that if people knew "the real you," they would keep their distance.
- You avoid conflict. If people offend you or hurt your feelings, you prefer to say nothing rather than risk anger or rejection.
- You might be addicted to approval. Your sense of value rises and falls on what other people say (or do not say) about you.

SELF-IMPORTANCE

- You tend to be addicted to busyness; it's the way you fill the void of deep relationships in your life.
- You have a higher concern for respect from others (attention) than you have a sense of responsibility for others (sacrifice).
- You are more concerned about what others think of your accomplishments (importance) than what they think of your relational influence in their lives (significance).
- You tend to measure spiritual growth by what you have accomplished.

SELF-WILL

- You regularly choose work and hobbies over people.
- Your schedule and priorities always take precedence; you don't reshuffle your agenda to help or serve others.
- You like having people around, but you don't tend to take their advice or welcome their correction.
- When it comes to church, you tend to ask consumer-oriented questions like, "What do I like/not like? How does this make me feel? What do I get out of this?" Your wants and goals are functionally prioritized over the



needs of the community and the mission of the church.

Notice that the headings over all of these bullet points have to do with “self.” If your self-centeredness was transformed into a joyful God-centeredness, what would the results be for yourself and for the community around you?