

## Fruitful & Free: Abiding in Community

In his book, *A Resilient Life*, Gordon McDonald says this:

The faith taught to so many of us is a faith of individualism. It centers heavily on the transaction between Jesus and me. It rarely focuses on the idea of Jesus and *us*. . . It was some of my Asian Christian friends who began to convince me that there was an entirely different way to understand the Bible: through the lens of *community*, God doing His work in our lives through one another. In other words, I cannot grow into what God wants me to be (and do) unless I am in tight formation with some others (*A Resilient Life*, 212-13).

MacDonald is right when he says that we cannot grow into what God wants us to be or do if we are not living in community. We cannot experience the fruitfulness nor the freedom that God has for us if we think our faith is just a “transaction between Jesus and me.” There are so many things that we need from God to grow spiritually, but in many cases God doesn’t give those things directly; rather He gives us those things through His people.

Today, we continue our series on being fruitful and free. A life of growing fruitfulness and freedom is only found as we abide in Jesus. And so we’ve been looking at various aspect of how we do this. We’ve looked at abiding with faith; we looked at abiding through repentance. Today, we are looking at abiding through community.

**A Picture of Community:** To start, I want us to look at a passage in the book of Acts that gives us a picture of what community looked like in the early church. In chapter 2, Luke gives us a kind of summery statement of how the early church was interacting with each other. Starting in verse 42 we read:

*<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

This is a picture a church living in community. In community, they were devoting themselves to several things. They were devoted to the apostle’s teachings. Together they sought to understand God’s word to them.

They were also devoted to fellowship. This is the word, *koinonia*. It literally means a sharing or holding all things in common. An aspect of this that Luke describes here is a sharing of material

resources with those who had needs. But it also is a sharing in love and care for one another, which is really what prompted the generosity that was displayed with each other.

They were devoted to the breaking of bread. In verse 46 it says that they shared meals in each other's homes, but in verse 42 what Luke is likely talking about there is a celebration of the Lord's Table. Together, they remembered Jesus in communion, just as we will do later today.

And finally, they were devoted to prayer. They gathered together to express their dependence on God through prayer (see Acts 4:23-31; 13:1-3).

If you are going to grow in fruitfulness and freedom, you need to establish personal rhythms of reading the scriptures and prayer and other such disciplines. This is one of the things Rooted is designed to help you do. But if you ONLY seek God alone and not in community, you are missing out on so much that God has for you. The early church sought God in community and because of this they experienced fruitfulness. It says that they experienced the fruit of *glad and sincere hearts* (v. 46), but also the fruit of impacting their world. Look again at verse 47:

*<sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Their life in community was so winsome, so attractive, so powerful that many people believed in Jesus Christ and were drawn to join in with this community. God added new believers to their community daily. Talk about fruitfulness!

And so that's a picture of what community looked like in the early church. It's a descriptive, not prescriptive passage. In other words, how we gather together as a church today may look different and that's okay. But the big picture that we see here of a church living in community is a model that we want to emulate.

**'One Anothers':** Now, the Bible does more than just describe community; it prescribes things that we must pursue together. One of the ways we see this is by looking at something called the 'one anothers' of scripture. Over fifty times in the New Testament we are told to do something or to have certain attitudes towards 'one another' in the body of Christ. I want to mention just a couple that specifically relate to growing in freedom and fruitfulness.

**Freedom.** In terms of freedom look at Hebrews 3:13. It says:

*But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*

*Encourage one another.* That's a command! *Encourage* can mean comforting and consoling someone who is in sorrow, or it can be a stronger kind of exhorting to action. When we encourage one another it is with the view to helping another person live a certain way. We remind them of Scripture; we exhort them to believe, and to do what is right.

And we see here one of the results of such encouragement. It protects someone from being *hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*. If we are going to grow freedom, we need this kind of encouragement. We need people speaking into our lives in this way.

Or consider Galatians 6. It says:

*<sup>1</sup> Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.*

Verse one gives instructions for how the body of Christ is to deal with a person who is not walking in freedom because he or she is caught in sin. Spiritually minded people are to seek to restore such person in a spirit of gentleness. This is one example of what verse 2 is talking about; of *bear[ing] one another's burdens*. In the context here, *burden*, probably refers to the burdens of temptation that verse one speaks of.

Now, there are other passages we could look at, but you get the point. The danger of being enslaved to sin is far greater if we are not in community. But in community, we help each other walk in freedom. We encourage one another. We bear one another's burdens.

**Fruitfulness.** The 'one another's' also help us grow in fruitfulness. Let me give you just one example. Hebrews 10:24-25 says this:

*<sup>24</sup> and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.*

We are to *stimulate one another to love and good deeds*. The KJV translation, "provoke," captures the intensity of this word. We are to provoke or spur one another to love and good deeds – to a life of spiritual fruitfulness. We are to *consider how* to do this in someone else's life.

There are areas of fruitfulness in my life that are growing because of friends who do this in my life. They consider how they can spur me to love and good deeds. They speak truth to me. They encourage me. They affirm God's work in my life. They point out ways God has gifted me spiritually. I have no doubt that fruitfulness in my life would be stunted without being in community.

Gordon McDonald is right when he says that, "I cannot grow into what God wants me to be (and do) unless I am in tight formation with some others." I can't. You can't. God has designed us to live in community. If we are going to experience the freedom and fruitfulness that God has for us, we **MUST** abide in community.

And so this leads to a simple question: Are you living in community? Do you have relationships with others in the body of Christ where this mutual 'one another' ministry is happening?

I want to suggest a couple of thoughts that will help us more regularly live in this kind of biblical community. First, **reject the lie that faith is something that you do alone.** If you are really going to go for this, you need to address your thinking. Do you believe that you need other believers - that they are of value to you? And on the flip side, do you see yourself as important to the well-being of others? You are!

Part of our struggle is that we are influenced by our culture. Culturally, we tend to think we've arrived when we are self-sufficient; when we don't need anybody. This just isn't biblical. We were not designed to live like this. And so reject the lie that faith is something that you do alone.

Second, **find ways to connect more deeply in community.** One of the hardest parts of dealing with COVID-19 is how it has separated us, right? It has disrupted many of the ways that we've experienced community.

Many of us are not comfortable coming back to the church building on Sunday mornings. We understand that and we want to assure you that that is okay. But we also know that it affects your experience of community. And even for those who are coming on Sunday mornings, COVID has had an impact. Our important and necessary safety protocols make it harder. We wear masks. We keep our distance. All of this makes it harder to experience community.

COVID has affected other ways that we've experienced community. We know some of you have not been about to be with your spiritual friends in a long time. Zoom is good, but it is not the same as being together.

As well, for many COVID has made life so much harder. Just navigating the challenges of working remotely or dealing with kids and school is so draining that you find you have so little left to give to anybody. All you want is Netflix at the end of the day. I get that. I feel that.

Even though all of this is true my encouragement is still, find ways to connect more deeply in community. It is important. It is so important in these days.

And so how can you do that? You can choose to sign up for Rooted. It will help connect you to a group of people; to community. It starts this Tuesday and so today is the day to sign up!

You can choose to sign up for one of the other Life Groups. This is part of the reason that we have groups. I wanted to mention something about our group offerings this fall. Typically, in the fall there are all sorts of options. We don't have that many this fall. Again, this is a fallout of COVID. I did want to mention that if you looked early for an online group, one was just added last week that will be meeting on Wednesday nights and so that might be an option. But here's what I would suggest if you want to connect to a group at Faith, but don't see anything that works. Check the box on the connection card that says, "I'm interested in connecting to a group, but don't see any that work." I will be in touch with you and we will see if there is a way to pull a group together.

Here's one other idea. What if everyone of us came up with two other people in the church and we simply determine that we are going to make a special effort to connect with them during this COVID time? You can call or email or text regularly. You can find ways to meet safely. But let's make a special effort to care for each other as we continue to walk through these difficult days.

If we can reject the lie that faith is something we do alone and if we can find ways to connect more deeply in community, God will use that to produce freedom in your life and greater and greater fruitfulness. Let's abide through community.

Today, we are celebrating the Lord's Table. And though we may be scattered in different rooms or different locations at this time, we gather around this table as a community; as ONE family. As we do, let me encourage all of us to give thanks to God for this family. And in these moments, ask God to strengthen our resolve to truly walk in community; to be people who live out the 'one anothers' with at least a few people.

At Faith we invite all who have confessed Jesus as their Savior and Lord to join us in this celebration. In just a moment we will all take our bread and after some words from Scripture, eat together. We'll then take our cup and, again after some Scripture, drink together.

If you've joined us in-person today you've been provided with individual communion servings. The top simply tears away and contains the wafer; the juice is then in the next container down. If you're watching at home, please feel free to use whatever food and drink you have on hand.

We know that some who are joining with us today have not yet come to personal faith in Jesus. We would ask that you would simply use this time to think, mediate, or pray. We are so glad that you are with us.

Would you pray with me?