

# Fellowship with Believers

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We've just repeated a statement to the Lord that it's his breath in our lungs that allows us to pour out or to demonstrate praise. I've got news for all of us, that's not just a 30 minute excursion on a Sunday morning. That means that his breath in our lives empowers us to live a life for him whether we're singing or not, whether we're on this campus or not, whether we're among friends or foes, that when we talk about displaying and singing his praise, can I just declare today that's more than just "being at church," that's being the church wherever we find ourselves. And today the Lord is going to challenge us, he's going to challenge us to be the "church" wherever we find ourselves.

Let's pray.

*Lord, as we come to this time of challenge, Lord, I do pray that you would convict our hearts with your Holy Spirit through your word. Show us, O God, not just the greatness of this hour together but show us what our lives need to look like off this campus. Show us what our lives need to look like in our home and in the office and at school and just in the community at large. Lord, show us, O God, the power that comes when we allow you to dictate and determine our behaviors and our actions and our words and not our own selfish desires. O God, we know you're going to speak, give us the ears and the heart to listen. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

This morning, I'm going to encourage you to open your Bibles to two very specific places, the Gospel of John 13 and the book of Leviticus 19. Now, you probably saw the Gospel of John coming, probably not so much Leviticus 19, but today as we continue our study and if you're a first time guest or visitor with us, one of the things that we've been doing over these last few weeks and months is we're answering a very what appears to be simple question but it's profound: what does a disciple, what does a follower, what does a believer in Jesus Christ, what does their life really look like? What does it look like to be a believer in Jesus? What does it sound like? What are the aspects of that?

We began in John 15:5 where Jesus made this incredible statement, he said, "I'm the vine and you're the branches. He that abides in me and I in him shall bear much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing." In other words, Jesus Christ is to be the center of everything in our life. Then we talked about that it is the word of God that gives us

stability. It is the Bible itself that grounds us and keeps us from being swayed with every idea and concept and philosophy that comes our way.

Last week, we talked about the power that comes with prayer, the guidance and direction for everyday decisions in long term life. And today, we kind of move from those vertical strata from being grounded in the word and reaching up in prayer, today we're going to talk about what it means to fellowship with believers. What does it mean to be the body of Christ. Now if you're like me and you grew up in a Baptist church, you hear the word "fellowship" and you think dinner on the grounds, potluck dinner. It's more than food. It's more than a table. It's more than gathering, though that is critical. We're going to read from the words of Jesus today the impact and the power that is in our lives when we truly live out and we are the body of Christ that he has called us to be.

John 13, beginning in verse 34, Jesus says,

34 A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.

Now again, I want to thank our children's ministry that's been coming alongside of us as we journey in this study. Very apropos this week that the sketch that we have regarding our love for one another, our fellowship with one another on what we know as Valentine's week, and so we want to thank our children's ministry for coming alongside of us today, but three very simple constructs that I want to talk about from John 13 and the first one is this. We're just going to unpack it phrase by phrase. It's the peculiarity of this statement.

Notice what Jesus says, "A new commandment that I give unto you." Lest you think he's adding to the famous ten commandments or lest you think somehow he's coming up with something new, no, in fact what Jesus is doing here is what he did all throughout the Gospels. How many times have you read this statement: it has been written, but I say unto you? Now, Jesus was not voiding out what the old precedence was. He was not saying ignore that. In fact, what Jesus was doing for our sake was kind of like what we see in a football game. You know, if you're watching a game on television or listening on the radio, there are typically two individuals that are commentating that game. You have the analyst and you have the color commentator. The analyst is the person who tells you what was the name of the person, how many yards did they gain, who made the tackle. The color commentator is the one who comes alongside and gives you the backstory or tells you the why or why it was effective or the reason for doing something or the strategy behind, and that's what Jesus Christ is doing here. The disciples, they're gathered together in the Upper Room. They are hours away from Jesus being betrayed and eventually placed upon a cross, and after he has washed their feet, Jesus says, "You are going to be a peculiar people."

He says, "A new commandment that I give to you, that you ought to love one another as I have loved you." Now in the next chapter of the Gospel of John he says very clearly that

these men, these individuals will have a distinction, a peculiarity that nobody in the world had ever experienced. He said in fact there is coming a day where the Holy Spirit, the presence of God, is going to dwell within you. He is sharing with them that they are to be different. They are to be distinct. They have the privilege, they have the opportunity to live life like no one's ever lived before empowered by the presence of God, the Holy Spirit in their life. These are the same men, and we'll talk about this in a moment, who were messed up and had all kinds of issues yet they saw according to Acts 17, they saw the world turned upside down because of the power of God moving in their lives.

They were a peculiar people. He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you." But it's also peculiar process. In fact, later on in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 12, it describes that we as believers, those who have come to an understanding that we are sinful at our core and only Jesus can save us, that we are described as the body of Christ. Now when that illustration is used in Scripture, let me unpack that twofold. 1. Here's what that means: that means you and I according to verse 27 of 1 Corinthians 12, we are one body but we're many members. In other words, your body physically, our body spiritually, is composed of a variety and a difference of but yet with one purpose.

Allow me to use a very simple illustration. Your body is not composed of nothing but knees. I mean, I'm not a real knee guy but can you imagine that? It just wouldn't be pretty, would it? And your body is not composed all of elbows. And I don't know what it is and I'm not just a real big fan of feet. I'll never show my feet. Those of you that wear flip-flops, God bless you, but can you imagine a whole body made of feet? Just ugh. But yet the feet have a distinct purpose and the knees have a distinct purpose and the elbows have a distinct purpose, and the list can go on and on, and what we see as a peculiar people empowered by the Holy Spirit with an opportunity like no one has ever seen before, that we have the privilege of operating in unison yet with variety.

Here's what's critical, though: Jesus said this new commandment that we ought to love each other as he has loved us, that never would you ever do what I'm about to illustrate. You would never look down at your knee and say, "Do you know what, that knee, I just don't like it. I'm just not a big fan of it." You would never go to the garage, you would never go and grab a hammer and just beat the knee to oblivion. You would never do that but how many times do we, the body of Christ, just do that very thing? Somebody who has different interests than our own, somebody who maybe is just cut a little different out of the fabric of life than ourselves, and one of the big struggles we have is we say, "Well, everybody ought to be an elbow because I think elbows are the best." Can you imagine life without a knee? Or how about a pinkie toe? You poor pinkie toes, you always get overlooked but you'll fall down without it, and what we need to grasp and understand, the peculiarity of what Jesus is sharing is that we not only operate as the body of Christ in unison with variety, but when he says we ought to love one another as he loved us, what we need to understand is Jesus has set the precedence here.

He says, "Love each other as I have loved you." I want you to think about the person of Jesus for just a moment. When it comes to relationships, when it comes to dealing with

what we know as the body of Christ, Jesus did something that we need to learn from today. He did not burn bridges, he built bridges. Let me give you some illustrations. How about Peter? Boy, did he open his mouth a couple of times he shouldn't have. Did Jesus just cut him off? Did Jesus just say, "Enough of you, get outta here"? How about James and John who vied for a certain position that wasn't theirs to have? He didn't say, "Well, that's strike three. See ya, guys." Even Judas who Jesus referred to as a devil in John 6, when he comes into the garden of Gethsemane to betray him, Jesus asked this question, "Do you betray a friend with a kiss?"

Jesus was the example. He set the precedence for us that when it comes, even with situations that are difficult and relationships that are difficult, that we're not to cut off, we're not to eliminate, we're not to eradicate, we are to build a bridge. He gave Peter a second chance. He gave James and John a second chance. He came to them and said, "Hey, guys, you're not where you need to be. Allow me to help you get where you should be rather than just cutting you off because of what I see."

It was a precedence that's displayed by the person of Jesus, but I want you to see the process of how this can be implemented in our lives. I want you to go back to Leviticus 19. Now, I know most of us don't spend a whole lot of time in the book of Leviticus, in fact it's really a book in the Bible that was the daily guide for the Israelites that were going into the Promised Land. How were they to live their life? What was it supposed to look like? Not only how they related to the Lord through the sacrifices and the feasts but how did they relate to each other? And here in Leviticus 19, we're going to have the first mention of what we know as the Golden Rule. You know the Golden Rule. It's there all throughout the Gospels, "Do unto others as you would do unto yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself." You know, Jesus has kind of given us the color commentary there of what we know as the Golden Rule. When he says, "Love one another as I have loved you," he's taken what we know as the Golden Rule and he's put it on spiritual steroids here. He's saying, "Don't just love each other as you want to be loved, but love each other as I have demonstrated a love for you."

Well, back in Leviticus 19, we have the first mention of loving somebody as unto the Lord and I want you to see the context beginning in verse 16 of Leviticus 19. It says, "Thou shall not go up and down as a talebearer or a slandered among your people. Neither shall you stand against the blood of thy neighbor. I am the LORD. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. Thou shalt in any wise rebuke your neighbor and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. I am the LORD."

Now let me take those three verses and kind of peel away the layers here of the process. Here is this first mention of what it looks like to love somebody unconditionally. Jesus is saying you ought to love each other as I have loved you. Notice what verse 16 says, it says that we should not be as a talebearer, we should not be as a slandered. In other words, oftentimes some of the greatest damage we do in people's lives even in the body of Christ is with the words we speak and the tongue we utilize. James 2. It says we put

bridles in the horse's mouth, we put rudders on the biggest ships, but we cannot tame the tongue.

You know, when I was a kid, there was a little saying on the playground: sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me. Y'all have figured out that's a lie, right? In fact, sticks and stones may break my bones but words oftentimes leave scars that never heal. I'm going to be honest with you so I may be very transparent, some of the ugliest meanest things that have ever been said to me have been said to me by somebody "that's a part of the body of Christ." Now I grew up with some coaches, man, I had some mean coaches. I mean, they made me run until things in my body came out of my body. I mean, they were mean and they said some ugly things to me, but the biting and the bitterness and the covetousness and some of the things that have been said, and yet how the body of Christ, do you know what that's like? That's like looking at the knee and saying, "I'm not real happy with you. I'm just gonna beat you into oblivion." You would never do that with your own physical body so why do we do it in the body of Christ?

Here it says, "Don't be a talebearer." Let me give you some news and we're going to talk more about this in just a moment. That means that if you have an issue with somebody, if there is a struggle, if there is something going on, you do not have the biblical right to go to social media. Sorry. You say, "Well, that's what our culture does." It's not what the Bible says. The Bible says if you have a struggle, go to them, and this is a revolutionary concept to our world, talk to them face-to-face. Not behind a computer screen or a cellphone or whatever it may be.

How often? I cannot tell you, I've lost count and I hate to say this, I've lost count of how many people over the years have come to me and said, "Pastor, I'm checking outta the church." What do you mean? "The things that have been said to me. The words that have been used. I'm gone." Because oftentimes words leave scars that can never heal. What does it say in Leviticus 19? If you're going to love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus said, "as I have loved you," it starts with your words.

Then you move on to verse 17 and it says that you should not only love your neighbor but you should despise the sin in their life and you shall in no wise rebuke them, and here's what it's saying: that when there is a struggle, when there's a problem in a person of the body of faith, if you're the elbow and there's a struggle with the knee, that you should be loving enough, caring enough, giving enough to them that you should be willing – this is a profound thought for our world today – you should be willing to hold them accountable. Accountable. Now we speak about the body of Christ and I'm sure you've been to wedding ceremonies where Ephesians 5 was mentioned. It talks about the role of a husband and a wife and it says that the husband is to be as Christ is to the church, and it says there in Ephesians 5 that we, the church, the body of Christ, it's this mystery that's pictured in a marital relationship, and it says that nobody hates his own body but he cherishes it and he loves it unconditionally.

You know, I want you to imagine that physical illustration of a body for just a moment and imagine if you get a cut on your leg. I mean, it happens. It's just part of life. If you

get a cut on your leg, what are you going to do? You're going to go to a medicine cabinet somewhere, you're going to find some hydrogen peroxide or some type of substance, you're going to put it on there and you're going to clean it real good, you'll put some antibacterial ointment or something on there. Can you tell I've got three teenage boys in my house? I'm almost an expert at this. Then you're going to put a bandaid of some sort, gauze, whatever it may be, and a couple of days later all is good, right? All is good. There is not a single person here who would look at a cut on your leg and go, "Eh, just don't have time to fix that one. It's just a little inconvenient for me. No, it's just messy. Every time you pull that hydrogen peroxide out, it just gets everywhere. I mean, it's just a mess." How many of us would look at a cut on our leg and say, "I'm just going to let it fester. I'm just going to let it get infected. It's not that big a deal." And pretty soon what happens? That gets worse and worse and worse and it can get to the point where it so taints the leg that gangrene sets in and the whole body's existence is at stake because one little easily addressed issue is not taken care of, yet we live in a world today that say, "Oh, but the Bible says you can't judge. You shouldn't deal with people like that." Yeah, the Bible says do not judge lest you be judged for with what judgment you give to another, you ought to hold yourself to the same level of accountability. In other words, we have the biblical right if we love them, we will be a part of their life to say, "Hey, you've got an infection. You've got an issue here and if you don't take care of this it's not just going to mess you up, it's going to mess all of us up."

We are told how dare we get in the lives of others. Let me tell you what Jesus said. In Matthew 18, he says if a brother has sinned against you, go to them, have a conversation with them. If they don't hear you, then you put it on social media. That's not what it says. Don't panic. It says if they will not hear you, take a witness and the two of you go and sit down, and if they won't hear the two of you, take it to the body. In other words, address it with others and what we see, the precedence that Jesus addressed for us, is not only was he a bridge builder, he bridged the gap, he didn't burn bridges. But he showed us in this process of how to do it, taming the tongue, holding people accountable.

Notice the third item that's mentioned there. It says do not avenge your brother. Well, it's about to get personal here. How many times have you made this statement in life, "Well, you don't know what they did to me. They did it to me and I'm going to do it to them. They cheated me, I'm going to cheat them. They lied to me, I'm going to lie to them." I've got news for you: you don't have the biblical right to make that call. That's not yours to make. In fact, in Deuteronomy 32 the Lord says, "Revenge is mine." In fact, in Romans 12 it's quoted again, "As it is written, Revenge is mine saith the Lord."

You know, that's our flesh that creeps up and we say, "Well, you don't understand what they did to me and they were so awful to me. I'm going to return the favor back to them. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." I've got some exciting news for you: did you know that the Lord can hold people even to a greater accountability than you can when they've done you wrong? He can and what I've learned throughout the years is rather than an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, how about this revolutionary concept, why don't we say, "Okay, God, they are in their sin, they're not repenting, they're not apologizing,

why don't you take care of this?" You know, the Lord can take care of it a whole lot better than we can.

It says here, "Do not avenge." So in the context of loving one another, in the context of being a neighbor, so to speak, as Jesus said, "as I have done unto you," he says, "Keep your tongue in check. Make sure that others are held accountable and it doesn't fester into a bigger problem than it should. And we don't have the ability to enact revenge on another." I will make you a promise: if just those three areas in our lives would be enacted today, verse 35 of John 13 would come true. He says, "And by this, all men will know you're my disciples." In other words, a lost and dying world would look at the body of Christ and say, "That's distinct. That's different." You do realize that we did not call ourselves Christians from day one? In fact, 18 months after Jesus rose from the dead, it was the heathens and the pagans who looked at the church and said, "They are little Christs. They are Christ's followers."

So what's the promise? Verse 35, "By this all men." Now I wasn't an English major and I'm not an English professor but last time I checked, all means all. And really, there are two ways of which people struggle with the person of Jesus. There are two ways that people harbor negativity toward what we know as the body of Christ. It's either with their head or with their heart. Now, there are lots of folks out there, they claim to be atheists or agnostics or doubters or questioners or whatever it may be and that's fine and I love having conversations with them, but let's be honest this morning: the majority of the people who do not believe or do not want to address or are not interested in the things of God, has nothing to do with archaeological digs or textual criticism, typically it's the issue that they have with what they've observed with us, the body of Christ. You know, it's been attributed to Mahatma Ghandi is, "I'd be a Christian if it weren't for Christians." The struggle isn't the evidence, the struggle and the facts. Oftentimes the struggle is us.

As I've shared with you before, some years ago supplement income I was a Bible salesman at a national Christian bookstore. It was a chain of stores, and there being in the Bible section, that was kind of my area of "expertise" and I often worked the afternoon and the evening which meant we closed down at 9 o'clock and we locked everything down. It was rare that we'd get customers after 8 o'clock. It really was and if they came in after 8:30, they were usually there just to pick up something real quick. They were in a hurry. They'd get in and they'd get out.

One night we had a lady, she was probably in her mid to late 50s. She walked in a little after 8 o'clock. She went straight to the Bible section. It was my area and so I just kind of let her get comfortable back there. I said, "Well, I'll check on her in a minute." Ten, 15, 20 minutes went by. I went by and she was there in the aisle. She was sitting on the floor. She was cross-legged and she had a Bible in her lap. It looked like she was minding her own business. I just let her be but pretty soon the clock was ticking. It was getting close to closing time and I didn't want to rush her through the process but we did have to close and were part of a larger conglomerate here and we all had to do some things, so I went back to that aisle and I said, "Ma'am, is there anything I can help you with?" She looked up at me, her face was red and there were tears flowing out of her eyes. I said, "Ma'am, is

there something more than just a Bible?" And she began to share with me her story right there in the aisle of that bookstore, how that a couple of years earlier her husband had decided to walk out on her. Her husband had decided that he wanted a younger model, so to speak, and he had left her and he had left the kids and he had taken off and was gone. Then she shared with me, she said, "Do you know what the worst part about it is?" I said, "What's that?" She said, "The worst part isn't that my husband has left, the worst part isn't that my family is broken, the worst part is how the people in my own church have acted toward me." She said, "The things that have been said, the looks that have been given," and here's what she said to me, she said, "Young man, can I give you some advice?" And I'm in no position to say no. I'm like, "Sure." She said, "The church is great in the birthing room but we stink in ICU." Here's what she meant by that: we love to see people saved, right? We love to see people baptized. We love to celebrate what God is doing but people are hurting and they're down and their lives are infected with sin, what do we like to do? Let's just pretend it's not there. Let's eradicate. Let's eliminate. Let's get rid of the issue. And what do we do? We do what an old friend of mine who recently passed away said: the church is the only army in the world that shoots its own in the back.

What does Jesus say? "All men will know me if you have love one for another." You know, in our world today, we talk about the process, how does this all manifest? You know, it's real easy to point the finger, the only problem is when you point the finger, you've got three more pointed right back at you. Maybe the real issue that we, the church, have isn't "those out there" as much as it is how we act about those in here. And if we would treat each other as Jesus has treated us, the Bible says all men will know that you are my disciples.

You know, today you might be that person for whatever reason, you find yourself on our campus and you might be that person who has struggled with this whole Christianity thing, you might be that person who has struggled with this whole biblical thing and who Jesus is thing, and maybe you're here just to be nice to somebody and maybe you're here because you said, "Maybe I'll give it just one more chance." I don't know what your motivation is but can I ask you a procedural favor? Don't make a decision of your eternity based on how those around you are acting, base it on the one who was sinless. Base it on the one who never messed up. And base it on the one who was willing and gave his life on your behalf and paid for your sins. The body of Christ is not perfect but we are forgiven. The body of Christ is not perfect but we are saved and there are times that we are sick and there are times that we have illness, but don't make a decision on your eternity based on the "outward expressions" of what you see or don't see of the church but on the one who gave his life for the church, Jesus Christ.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're that person today. Here's the good news: you don't have to sign up for a course; you don't have to jump through a bunch of spiritual hoops; you don't have to be interrogated with a bunch of theological questions. You just have to do what the word of God says, whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

You say, "Jeff, how do I do that?" Well, honestly all you need to do is have a sincere conversation with the Lord. You don't have to have this conversation out loud. You don't even have to say maybe the same words that I would say, but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "Lord, today I'm done with excuses. I'm done with blaming it on others. I'm done with making all types of references and excuses. Lord, I understand today that the real problem is me. I'm the one who has sinned. I'm the one who has strayed. I'm the one who has messed up but I understand and I believe today that Jesus Christ is the only answer. I believe that Jesus loved me so much that he was born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sin on the cross and to raise three days later so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems but I do know that Jesus is the answer to my sin problem. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me and I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed. If you have that conversation with the Lord today, we'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to celebrate with you how the Lord has moved in your life. But you know, maybe today you had that conversation with the Lord years ago, maybe even decades ago, and maybe today you realize some of the deficiencies, some of the lack of love, the lack of relationship among the body of Christ, and maybe today isn't about needing to have a conversation with me or with somebody else, maybe today the need, the decision is that when this is all done, when the day is settled, maybe there is a conversation you need to have outside of this campus, maybe there is a phone call that needs to be made, maybe there's a personal visit that needs to be made. Maybe there is some healing. Maybe there is some forgiveness. Maybe there is some restitution and restoration that doesn't require having a conversation with myself or someone else, but with that party in specific.

*Lord, as we come to this time, God, thank you for second chances. God, thank you that you gave us the example of Peter and James and John and others that you didn't just send them good riddance but you built a bridge. Lord, we thank you for the bridge of the cross. It allows us the opportunity not only to be in a relationship with you but in fellowship with the entire body of Christ. Help us, O God, to love each other as you have loved us so that all men would know that we are your disciples. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*