

# ***The Great Life***

## ***4. Great Together***

**October 10, 2021**

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Meg is a life coach from Atlanta Georgia. She was engaged to be married on Halloween of last year. But four months before the big day, she and her boyfriend broke up. Meg was heartbroken.

After the initial shock wore off, she decided to go ahead with her wedding and get married --- *to herself*. The ceremony took place in Denver, Colorado, as what she called an 'act of self-love.'

Like many brides, Meg went all out in her preparation for the ceremony and spent months getting ready for her big day. She ordered a custom-made wedding cake, chose the perfect dress, and picked out a diamond ring for herself. On the day itself, she walked down the aisle to a version of 'Here Comes the Bride' played on kazoos by her flower girls while her guests blew bubbles and drank champagne. Meg then read out vows she had written, accepted her own wedding ring, and kissed herself in the mirror. After the ceremony, each of Meg's friends and family fed her wedding cake, followed by dancing and ordering Thai food.

And Meg is not the only one marrying herself; it is becoming something of a mini trend. It's even got a name now: solo gamy. Sophie Tanner got married to herself back in 2015. Then, a few years later, she cheated on herself by dating a guy.

But wait, it gets even more complicated. The pair dated for five bliss-filled months and the guy decided that he wanted to marry himself, too. So, he did. But they were still seeing each other; so, technically, Sophie and the guy are each cheating on themselves with each other. Let's just say this marrying yourself thing is --- different.

And it is just as -- different -- to try to follow Christ all by yourself. Perhaps you've talked with people who say they are Christians, but they don't feel the need to be part of a church community.

Maybe they were hurt by a church, and they don't want to risk that again. Or maybe they were part of a church, and they didn't see how it helped their spiritual development.

Now, I don't want to minimize the reality of being hurt or promise that every church will help you grow strong spiritually. I am saying that the Bible teaches that going it alone is not how God designed and wired us to live and grow. You and I were created to live a great life, and to do that we need to connect with other followers.

In this message series we've seen that greatness comes from fulfilling:

- the Great Commandment: which is to love God and love others;
- and also fulfilling the Great Commission to go make disciples.

We consider the disciples great not because they earned a certain amount of money or achieved earthly power and popularity; they were great because they fulfilled the Great Commandment and Great Commission. And so can we.

And today I hope you hear that *no one becomes great alone* – we need each other in order to become all that God calls us to be. That's because the Great Commandment and the Great Commission require the Great Collaboration.

We need others in order to love God passionately, and to love others authentically, and we reach out and make disciples best when we work with others. We humans flourish in community, but we struggle when we're not.

Our Covid experience has reminded us that. After being confined during Covid, some of us became like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*. Even if we didn't look like that, we *felt* like that. Maybe some of us *still* feel like that.

We humans don't do well in isolation. That's why solitary confinement is the worst punishment there is. If we are deprived of connection with others, our mental and physical health deteriorates.

And we also need community in order to thrive spiritually. That's because we are created by a God who IS community. God exists as the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Our minds can't fully grasp how God can be three yet one – but think of it this way: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in such perfect relationship that they are three persons existing as one person.

It is inconceivable that this divine community would be broken, that Jesus and the Spirit would say to the Father “we don't need you,” or that the Father and Jesus would work separately from the Spirit. God is three in one – illustrating perfect relational harmony. And this God who *is* community created us in his relational image.

Jesus prays for us in John 17:11, *Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.*

That we be one as the Father and Son are one. That's a lofty goal: that we live with each other in such healthy community that we are to reflect the community of the Trinity. We may never achieve that level of community, but Jesus' prayer reflects God's intent.

And 1 Corinthians 10 reminds us that “we, who are many, are one body.” That is why we need others to be spiritually healthy and growing. Relationship is hard wired into the universe.

If we're going to live a great life, we need to connect with other believers. We can believe that God exists all by ourselves, but to love God, others, and a broken world, we need a community – but not just *any* kind of community – a particular type of community.

### **Christ-followers thrive in UP, IN, and OUT communities**

Here's what I mean by UP, IN, and OUT:

- By “UP” we mean our connection with God – so the community *experiences God* together.
- “IN” refers to the relationship we have with other believers – so the community relates to *each other* like a family.
- “OUT” is the evangelistic angle – so we mean that our community *reaches out* to pre-Christians with the love and good news of Jesus.

Being part of a community that hits all three of those marks will help us live the great life if fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

- Great Commandment: “Love God with your whole being” = UP
- “Love others as yourself” = IN
- Great Commission: “Go make disciples” = OUT

The Great Commandment says to love God with your whole being. That is UP; and it says to and love others as yourself; that is IN. The Great Commission says to “Go make disciples” and that is OUT.

So, when you are part of a community that is doing UP, IN, and OUT; that will help you live the great life. That's why our weekly group guide incorporates UP, IN, and OUT – following that will lead to transformation. We call a group that does UP, IN, and OUT a holistic community. And that is what we see in the early church.

The Church was born out of community and become a growing community. The Holy Spirit descended on 120 people as they were praying *together* in an upstairs room. They weren't each in their own individual homes praying silently by themselves – they were praying TOGETHER.

After the Holy Spirit came on them, 3,000 people were converted after Peter's sermon. Then, those 3,000 new believers didn't just go back home and say “Wow, that was a good day. Now I know I'll go to heaven.” No, they instinctively got together. They formed a community.

This is what it looked like as described in Acts 2:42-47: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

It would have been amazing to be part of that community, would it? They had UP, IN, and OUT going on! And being part of a holistic community transformed those first believers in the same way that it does us today.

### **UP Community helps us love God.**

Those first disciples grew in their love for God by being part of that community much more than if they were on their own. Verse 42 says they were taught by the apostles. Those who didn't gather together didn't get taught by the apostles. Which group do you think would be spiritually stronger?

Verse 43 says that those who were part of the community were amazed at the signs and wonders the apostles did. Members of the church community got to see people healed and witness miraculous answers to prayer. They saw both Peter and Paul be used by God to raise people from the dead! Those who chose not to gather together didn't see those things. They might not even have heard about it if they weren't in the right circles. Christ-centered community helps us connect with God.

It starts right from the beginning. Think about how you came to Christ. Others influenced you by their lives. Others shared the message of Jesus with you. Maybe parents took you to church as a kid, and you got to know people there.

Jack Kuhatschek said, "We alone make the decision to follow Christ, but few people make that decision alone." Jesus called twelve men to join a group that followed him. He didn't teach them individually, he gathered them in a small group that spend the next three years together.

We don't see Jesus doing one-on-one discipleship – he did it in group format. And we really don't see one-on-one discipling in the New Testament. It happens mostly in groups.

### **IN community helps us love others**

The members of the early church were highly committed to each other. Verse 42 says they were DEDICATED to the fellowship, and to breaking bread together. Verse 44 says that they held all things in common. They shared their financial resources.

Two hundred years later, a church leader named Tertullian explained to his pagan readers that followers of Christ shared everything with each other except their wives. That was the opposite of pagan practices, who held on to their possessions and swapped their wives. If we're going to live out the Great Commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to be in community with others.

How do we learn to accept people who are different than we are? By being around them. How can we learn to “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” if we don’t know who is rejoicing and who is weeping?

How do we learn to be forgiving? It’s not by reading a book. It is not by hearing a sermon. It is by being offended and learning to forgive the other person. When people get difficult, it is easy to think, “I don’t need this.” In fact, yes, you do. You need to learn to love those who are different or difficult. That happens in community.

### **Community helps us share Jesus**

The early church was a contagious community. They spread the love and good news of Jesus to those around them. They lived such a different life from everyone else that people listened to them when they informally spoke about Jesus through their daily routine.

Verse 47 says the Lord added to their number *daily* those who were being saved. I talked about this last week, so I won’t repeat myself except to say that sharing our faith is more effective and more fun when we do it as a team.

Community is essential to our spiritual health, but that doesn’t mean it is easy or natural for us. So, if we’re going to be part of a healthy community, we’ll need to overcome some of the barriers that are both natural and supernatural.

### **Barriers to community**

*We are wired for self-interest.* We are naturally self-focused. Every day I am told that the customer is always right, and that I can have it my way, and that I deserve it. Usually, the first person I look at in picture is me. If I don’t look too dumb, then I’ll see if everyone else is OK.

When the Apostle Paul wanted to help the Philippian believers become more unified he said in Philippians 2:2-4, *make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.*

And how do we become one in spirit and mind? Verse 3-4 says, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* Looking out for ourselves weakens community; seeking the best for others is the way of Jesus.

*Satan wants to destroy community.* We have a spiritual enemy – call it Satan, the devil, Lucifer, whatever - he hates community. He knows that it is a powerful threat to his control over people. It is a threat to Satan’s purposes and control. So, he wants to destroy it. But we don’t have to let him.

Ephesians 4:26-27 says, *“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.* We give the devil a foothold to weaken community when:

- we get hurt and don't resolve it. We tell someone else about it instead of the person who hurt us.
- we assume we know another person's motives or thoughts
- when pride or jealousy seeps into our hearts.

**To enter into Christ-centered community, select and prioritize a group.** There are different types of community:

- One happens in a large group setting --- in a group of 75 or more, like when the church gathers for worship. This is like a family reunion of the extended family of God. It is vital and important. The Holy Spirit is at work in unique ways, and there is something about hearing the voices of others, seeing their faces, and saying hello to people afterward that nourishes us spiritually.
- The other is in a small group setting – of 5-15 people. This is more like the immediate family of God talking over dinner. These people influence us. We know about each other's lives; we know others well and we are known by others. This is where we can do UP, IN, and OUT each week.

We need both levels – like we see in the early church. They committed themselves to meeting as a large group in the temple, and in small groups house to house. They formed their daily rhythms around gathering together, praying together, worshipping together, eating together. As a result, they became a force in the world. I'm not saying that we need to arrange our schedules to hang out with our group's members every day; I'm just saying that being in a group means making it a priority.

To be part of a Christ-centered community requires a conscious choice on our part to prioritize being part of the large group and small group – to prioritize it in our lives so that there is time and space for community.

So, I'll close by asking you: do you have an UP, IN, and OUT community? If so, then you are growing more than you realize. If not, then why not make the choice to commit to both large group and small group community? We can help you do that if you just let us know on the Communicator Card. We all need it, because no one can be great alone – but we are transformed in community.