

## Practicing the Way Series

# Community

By JOHN MARK COMER

## Being a Disciple of Jesus

To be a disciple of Jesus means to reorganize your entire life around these three goals:

- to be with Jesus
- to become like Jesus
- to do what Jesus did

All of these can be described as a *transformation*.

## Community is Essential

Mother Teresa once said, "Loneliness is the leprosy of the modern world." With the rise of the internet and social media, we are more connected than ever, but connectivity is not the same thing as community.

## The First Followers

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

— Matthew 4:18–22

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

— Matthew 9:9–13

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

— Matthew 10:1–4

Jesus very intentionally is not calling people to follow him as individuals; he's gathering a small group or team of disciples who will follow him in the context of community. And this is a very diverse group who would have had all sorts of strong opinions and disagreements over religion, politics and even what it meant to be a "good Jewish person" (ie. Tax Collector and Zealot and everything in between).

## The Early Church

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

— Acts 2:42–47

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

— Acts 4:32–35

This is such a remarkable portrait of what the early Jesus communities looked like, and it is very easy to idealize the early church as this community that was so much better than us and had everything figured out until we (Christians) slowly corrupted the whole thing — it's easy to just assume that all we need to do is get back to being just like the early church. But as we read the next story of Ananias and Sapphira and the large bulk of Paul's letters, we see that the early church was pretty messy and had plenty of issues that they were trying to work out.

“There is often a gap between the ideal of community and the reality of community and discipleship is what happens in the space in between.”

— John Mark Comer

“Almost everyone finds their early days in a community ideal. It all seems perfect. They feel they are surrounded by saints, heroes, or at the least, most exceptional people who are everything they want to be themselves. And then comes the letdown. The greater their idealization of the community at the start, the greater the disenchantment. If people manage to get through this second period, they come to a third phase — that of realization and of true commitment. They no longer see other members of the community as saints or devils, but as people — each with a mixture of good and bad, darkness and light, each growing and each with their own hope. The community is neither heaven nor hell, but planted firmly on earth, and they are ready to walk in it, and with it. They accept the community and the other members as they are; they are confident that together they can grow towards something more beautiful.”

— Jean Vaier

### **The 3 Phases of Experiencing Community**

- Phase 1 — We are Enchanted by the Idealization of the Community
- Phase 2 — We are Let Down by the Reality of the Community
- Crisis Moment — Abandon the Community or Press In to the Community
- Phase 3 — We Experience the Beauty of True Commitment to the Community

## **5 Thoughts on How We Can Experience the Beauty of Community**

I. Community is non-optional for discipleship to Jesus

Following Jesus and being adopted by the Father means that we now belong to a family; we have brothers and sisters.

“Part of the very essence of Christianity is to be together in a concrete community, with all the real human faults that are there and the tensions that this will bring us. Spirituality, for a Christian, can never be an individualistic quest, the pursuit of God outside of community, family, and church. The God of the incarnation tells us that anyone who says he or she loves an invisible God in heaven and is unwilling to deal with a visible neighbor on earth is a liar since no one can love a God who cannot be seen if he or she cannot love a neighbor who can be seen. Hence a Christian spirituality is always as much about dealing with each other as it is about dealing with God.”

— Ronald Rolheiser

## 2. Community is non-optional for a well-lived life

Humans are hard-wired for living in the context of relationships.

“At the core of our being is this truth — we are designed for and defined by our relationships. We were born with a relentless longing to participate in the lives of others. Fundamentally, we are relational souls. We cannot not be relational... we cannot exist well without connection and communion with another.”

— Richard Plass and James Cofield

## 3. Community is the context where we are transformed

**Community (n.)** — intentional relationships around the way of Jesus

Community does two things in our transformation:

- Exposure — it exposes our blind spots (aka. Our “shadow side”)
- Encouragement — it encourages us on toward healing and wholeness.

“Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community... Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay grow. People who leave do not grow... It is a simple but profound biblical reality that we both grow and thrive together or we do not grow much at all.”

— Christopher Smith and John Pattison

## 4. Community is not necessarily the same thing as a group of friends

It is easier than ever before to feel like you are connected to everybody but to actually be in community with nobody.

“Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities.”

— Sherry Turkle

5. Community is the by-product of commitment — it takes time and intentionality

We must make a serious commitment to a people and to a place.

Saint Benedict's definition of stability was "the spiritual skill of staying still to get somewhere."

"We vow to remain all our life with our local community. We live together, pray together, work together, relax together. We give up the temptation to move from place to place in search of an ideal situation. Ultimately there is no escape from oneself, and the idea that things would be better someplace else is usually an illusion. And when interpersonal conflicts arise, we have a great incentive to work things out and restore peace. This means learning the practices of love: acknowledging one's own offensive behavior, giving up one's preferences, forgiving."

— Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey

Experiencing the beauty of true community is going to take a good bit of time and it's going to require living with a great deal of intentionality — we have to relentlessly pursue community and to persevere in that pursuit.

"If you want to live like this with other people, you need not move somewhere special; you need only be intentional about asking them to embrace interdependence with you, and then ritualize that commitment. We often fantasize about the village growing up around us spontaneously, as if frequent reciprocity will magically appear in the cracks of our over-scheduled lives... Rather than wishing for intentional community, we have to doggedly pursue it. Make it concrete. Make a shared Google calendar. Just make it real, even if you are earnest and vulnerable. Creating communities like these, creating community at all, requires shared space and time. It requires a genuine commitment to slowing down."

— Courtney Martin