

“I need my space...I need some ME time.” When was the last time that you made a statement like that? How often do you make statements like that? While we all periodically need time alone, for most of us, the Me Generation has contaminated us. Worse, it’s contaminated the church.

Wayne Brouwer (**picture**) said, *“The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter’s night. The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth’s winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness. Christ has given us an alternative: to forgive each other for the pokes we receive. That allows us to stay together and stay warm.”* We need each other. We’re in serious trouble when it’s me, not we.

Spurgeon (**picture**) said, *“Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude. But believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect that they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks and so do God’s people.”*

God’s purpose for us is that we at Grace, in this local church family, we’re to be **We Not Me**. And it’s clear from Scripture that Christianity is essentially relational.

The two greatest commandments call us to be right related to God and to each other: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”* and, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Though we all desire close relationships, because of the Fall, we tend to act in ways that put distance between us.

When sin entered this world, Adam and Eve lost the intimacy they’d formerly known. They covered their nakedness and started what continues to this day, hiding who they are and blaming others for the problem. Their family life was permanently shattered when Cain murdered his brother, Abel. So the human race that longs for fellowship is fractured by a breakdown of it. True fellowship doesn’t just happen; it’s a God thing.

We draw on His grace but we have to work at it constantly, both in our families and the church. If you get involved in the life of our church, I can guarantee that you’ll be offended at some point. As someone insightfully wrote: *“To dwell above with the saints we love, O that will be glory! But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that’s a different story!”*

A favorite book in the New Testament is Philippians. As we read our text, it’s obvious that Paul had relationships and close fellowship with this church family. It wasn’t what’s labeled “fellowship” in American Churchianity, some superficial chatting about sports or the weather over coffee and donuts. Though they were miles apart, Paul’s heart was intertwined with these people and their hearts were with him. There was no natural explanation for this closeness between this Asian Jew who was now in prison in Rome, and these European people who themselves were no homogeneous group. What knit them together was true Christian fellowship. Please open your Bible to Philippians 4:21-23 (p. 982).

Paul closes his letter to the Philippians with a few words of greeting and a brief benediction. We tend to skip over verses like these, yet they show us Paul’s theology in shoe leather. His theology wasn’t obtuse, intellectual stuff for theologians to debate. It’s written to common people to show them how to live godly lives. Here at the end of this letter we see that his theology wasn’t divorced from real people for whom he cared. These verses remind us it’s vital, not optional, that we be committed to the fellowship of the saints, to our local church family.

Someone wrote of the early church: *“What that first century world saw was the phenomenon of people of all walks of life loving one another, serving one another, caring for one another, praying for one another.”*

Slaves and free men were in that community. Rich and poor were in the fellowship; Roman citizens and non-Roman citizens were in that community. Members of the establishment and those violently opposed to the establishment were part of that community. The intelligencia and the illiterate were members of that community. To the utter amazement of the world outside they were bound together in an unexplainable love and unity.” These three verses bring out **Seven Marks** of a healthy church. It’s God’s plan that we have close community. We’re to strive for that as we seek to grow in love. So if you’re taking notes...

1. The local church fellowship is an inclusive fellowship where every person matters. Notice the phrase, *“Greet every saint.”* In the original Greek Paul uses the singular meaning, *“Greet each one individually.”* It’s not generic. No one is to be excluded. Earlier in this chapter, we find a few troublemakers in this church, yet Paul wants to greet Euodia and those who may have sided with her, and he also wants to greet Syntyche and those who may have sided with her (4:2-3). He wants to greet each of the church leaders, but also each of the slaves who’ve come to know Christ. Each person counts; none are to be excluded.

Saints aren't saved en masse, but one by one. There's no family or group plan to come into the true Church, the company of those whose sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. Your parents may be godly people who raised you in the church. That's a wonderful advantage, but it won't get you into heaven. God doesn't have any grandchildren. Each of us must come to God individually and acknowledge our sin and need for the Savior. We must realize that Christ shed His blood as the only way that our sins can be forgiven.

Throwing off all trust in our own good works or self worth, each of us must trust in Jesus Christ as the One who by His perfectly righteous life and substitutionary death provided all that is needed to make us right before God...then you join the fellowship of the saints.

At the moment you trust in Christ, the Holy Spirit baptizes you into the one Body of Christ, made up of every person from Pentecost and worldwide who believes in Him (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit sovereignly places you in Christ's body as a member with a vital function to perform.

Some have more visible gifts, such as preaching or leadership. Others have less noticed gifts, like helps or encouragement. But as Paul spells out so beautifully (1 Cor. 12:12-31), no member is unnecessary. Just as in the human body, so in the church – those members we may tend to look down on are essential for the proper functioning of the body. You probably haven't thought much this past week about your pancreas (unless you're having problems with them), but you can't live if they stop working. That's the way it is in the church, each member is vital for its proper functioning.

2. The local church fellowship is set apart from the world. "*Saints*" means "*holy ones.*" Because of some unbiblical teaching, some think of saints as super-Christians who've distinguished themselves by their super spirituality. "But me? I'm just your average, run-of-the-mill Christian."

The New Testament is clear that every believer is a saint. Paul even addressed the carnal Corinthians as "*saints by calling*" (1 Cor. 1:2). It's important that we view ourselves as such. It means that God has set us apart from the world unto Himself. We're to be in the world, having contact with worldly people, yet we're to be distinct from the world, bearing witness by our godly behavior, attitude and words to the good news of Jesus Christ. We should be different in our language, our behavior, our ethics, our relationships...even our tweets and Facebook posts.

A little boy used to attend a church which had beautiful stained-glass windows picturing St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, St. John, St. Paul, and others. One day he was asked, "What's a saint?" He replied, "A saint is a person whom the light shines through." Not bad!

Being a saint is a *position* that's to result in appropriate *practice*. Our position is in Christ, set apart unto God. Our practice is to grow in godly behavior. Of course, the church is both a fellowship of sinners in need of constant grace (4:23) and of saints. We must hold both truths in tension, that we're saints set apart unto God who are to grow in holiness. And, sinners who must receive God's grace and show it to others.

3. The local church fellowship is a Christ-centered fellowship. "*Greet every saint in Christ Jesus...*" We're set apart unto God through our being in union with Christ Jesus. His righteousness is imputed to us when we believe. At salvation, we're placed in Him so that all that's true of Him is true of us. Apart from Him we wouldn't be saints at all. He's our Lord, our everything, our all in all. Everything we do must be centered on the Lord Jesus. Jesus Christ was central to Paul. He must be central to us.

Just in the book of Philippians, the mere number of mentions of the Jesus' name is remarkable. More than forty times in this short book. Jesus' name occurs, amidst all the variety of subjects. That averages out to about once every two or three verses. That's perfectly characteristic, not just of Philippians, but of the whole New Testament. What the Apostles preached was not a thing but a **Person**: Christ, Christ Jesus, Christ Jesus the Lord.

The local church isn't a social club, where we chit-chat about the same type of things pagans talk about. Our supreme desire and goal must be to know Christ more deeply. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, "*That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death.*" When we come together, Jesus should be the focus of our fellowship. Christ should draw us together.

4. The local church fellowship is a family fellowship. "*The brothers...greet you.*" We have a common Father through the new birth. We're now members of the same family. Every person born of God through faith in Christ is a member of this family. It transcends social barriers, racial barriers, economic, political and national barriers. The saints in Philippi and the saints in Rome were brothers and sisters, though they may never have met face to face. It included slaves, free, poor and wealthy.

Human families are a place where everyone belongs just by virtue of who they are, not by what they do or what they've accomplished. The elderly are in the family. Though they can no longer work or have a career, they're valuable to the

family. They're the ones who begot us and reared us. They handed off their values and wisdom to us. Babies and young children are in the family. They make for a lot of work, constantly needing attention and care. They're the hope of the future. We marvel at each one, uniquely created in the image of God, each with a different bent right from the womb. Everyone in between, from teens trying to establish their identity to the middle-aged, who are feeling their bodies beginning to wear out, are a part of the family.

Families aren't perfect. Families are messy. Everyone is in process. You hang together and care for one another because of the family bond. Families don't get together to watch programs; they just get together because they're family, to find out what's going on in each other's lives.

The church family must be the same way. Sadly, today's church is far too entertainment-oriented. You can draw a crowd if you put on a good show, but if you announce that the church family is just getting together to meet with the Lord and each another, not many show up. It ought to be enough just to gather with the brothers and sisters and share in the things of Christ.

5. The local church fellowship is a supportive fellowship. *"The brothers who are with me greet you."* Where was Paul? He's in prison, not exactly a great place to hang out. Besides that, as you'll find in Philippians 1, some Christians were criticizing Paul and using his imprisonment as a way to put him down and advance themselves. To be with Paul in his imprisonment meant to expose yourself to the criticisms of these selfishly motivated believers. But some—Timothy, Epaphroditus, and a few others—were there with Paul, standing with him in his time of need.

Paul was strong and able to stand alone for the Lord when he needed to (2 Tim. 4:16-17). But he also appreciated the ministry of those who sometimes put their reputations or even their lives on the line to minister to him. During his second imprisonment, he wrote to Timothy, *"The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me, and found me—the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day--and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus"* (2 Tim. 1:16-18). Years before Paul and Barnabas had gone their separate ways because Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance after he deserted them on their 1st missionary journey. But as he sat in prison facing the end of his life, Paul told Timothy, *"Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service"* (2 Tim. 4:11).

The point is that even though we sometimes have our differences with other believers, though sometimes we get really ticked off with each other – God has designed us so that we need each other. We're to love each other, bear each other's burdens, stand with those who are hurting and give support, just as these brothers and sisters did with the Apostle Paul.

6. The local church fellowship is a growing fellowship. *"All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household."* This term probably doesn't mean Caesar's immediate family, though it could include them. It refers to those in civil service to Caesar. Some could be in the list of Romans 16, which Paul had written a few years earlier. In this case, they'd have been Christians before Paul's arrival. Others, no doubt, were those in the Praetorian Guard and other positions who'd met Christ through Paul's witness as a prisoner. The Gospel was spreading to the most pagan corners of that culture and society. They were brightening even the corners of a prison for the Gospel. How about you? Are you brightening the corner where Jesus has placed you for the Gospel?

And this wasn't the President of a free democracy. The emperor when Paul wrote Philippians was the evil and notoriously wicked, Nero. He came to the throne at 17 after his mother poisoned her third husband, Claudius, who also happened to be her uncle. Five years later Nero had his mother executed because she was getting too pushy. Three years after that he had his wife killed so that he could marry another man's wife. He murdered many of his top officials in the military and in the Roman senate. With that kind of court intrigue going on, working for Caesar would have been an evil environment like we can't even begin to imagine in America...and yet the Gospel spread there.

Does God have you working in a wicked environment? You may be thinking, "I wish I could work in a godly, or at least, a neutral place where I wasn't surrounded by such raw paganism." But you need to view it as your mission field, a wonderful opportunity for the light of the gospel to shine into that dark place through your witness. To be an effective witness, you must live with integrity, not compromising the gospel by joining the world's ways. You can't be a whiner or complainer. You're being watched. Those in the world will try to get you to mar your testimony, because then they have an excuse for not repenting of their sins. When you get opportunities to speak up, you must not be ashamed of the Gospel, but remember that it's the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes.

A healthy church has a constant influx of baby Christians. The church nursery should always have an influx of new babes in Christ through the faithful witness of its members.

Are you sharing your faith? When was the last time that you shared the Gospel? Too many Christians are sterile. It's abnormal.

Remember, though, babies are cute, but they're also self-centered. They dirty their diapers, wake you up in the night when they think they have a need, throw up on your clean clothes, and make a total mess out of meals. But no family should be without them and no church should be without those who are coming to faith in Christ.

7. The local church fellowship is a grace-oriented fellowship. *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."* This is a closing benediction, but it's much more than just a nice way of saying, "Good-bye." The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is crucial to the entire Gospel.

Grace means God's unmerited favor shown to us who deserve His judgment. Without grace, we couldn't receive the Gospel, because none of us can ever earn or deserve it. Without grace, we couldn't grow in holiness, because we're so selfish and sinful. If God gave us what we deserve, we'd all have been wiped out long ago. His grace is the motivation to deny our sinful selves and live to please and glorify Him. We stand daily, constantly in need of God's grace. Without it, we'd be quickly consumed.

I think probably my most common cry out to God is, "Lord, please give me grace." I'm just increasingly aware of how much I need His grace and I'm so thankful that He's promised that *"His grace is sufficient."*

God's grace is something we all want for ourselves, yet often don't want to extend it to others, especially to those who've offended or wronged us. You know, when I get angry, I have good cause. Besides, I'm only human...or so I claim God's grace. But when my wife or children get angry, they need to deal with it and not make excuses!

Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I'm not suggesting we take advantage of grace by being sloppy about sin. We must judge our sin and turn from it. I'm suggesting though that we're all very quick to apply grace to ourselves but still be very judgmental of others. We really need to be quick to judge ourselves and show grace to others.

Grace ministers to the spirit (4:23), or inner person, our essential being. It's in our spirit that we commune with God. So many of our troubles can be traced back to being defiled in spirit (2 Cor. 7:1), whether by bitterness, discontent, greed, lust, envy, or malice. But if the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ dwells in our spirit, so that we thankfully, joyfully live each day in the sweet awareness of His unmerited kindness toward us at the cross, then we can extend that same sweet graciousness toward others. Our homes and our church should be marked by grace-oriented fellowship.

Conclusion: Most of us take our local church family for granted, don't we? What a great privilege it is to be able to share together in the things of God! If you just attend here, yet aren't connected with other Christians here, you're missing out. You need to get plugged in with the fellowship! How can we obey the Lord and pray for each other if we don't know each other? We must all see ourselves as servants of Christ with a responsibility to reach out in true Christian fellowship to our brothers and sisters and, especially, to new people, even to those who may be different from us.

Three concluding applications and we're done:

(1) Commit yourself to this fellowship of believers by becoming involved in some type of small group. You will never experience God's will for you and biblical fellowship if you aren't connected to other Christians who know you personally and whom you know. It may just be a small group, but commit to meet and build each other up in Christ.

(2) Commit yourself to this fellowship of believers by working through relational problems. The church isn't perfect. This church isn't perfect. I know the pastor better than anyone. He can be a real jerk sometimes. But if you bail out of here without seeking to biblically problem-solve, I have news for you – your next church won't be perfect either. Usually, God brings relationship problems into our lives to help us grow. Sadly, you'll bail out with hurt feelings if you don't commit to working through problems and biblically problem-solving. Then, do you know what your Heavenly Father usually does? He's going to repeat the lesson for you.

Frequently, I meet believers who are serial church attendees. They've left church after church after church. But they can't figure out that their Heavenly Father is so committed to their spiritual growth that He keeps repeating the lesson because they're just not getting it.

(3) Commit yourself to this fellowship of believers by ministering and serving other church family members. Do you want to add meaning and fulfillment to your life – serve the Lord by serving others! The Bible teaches that every believer is gifted for service. Rather than being self-focused ("Nobody said hello to me; this is an unfriendly church"), be focused on others ("There's a person who seems to need a friend; I'll go over and reach out to him or her"). Take the initiative.

The book of Philippians tells us how to know God's joy in every situation and circumstance. We'll know joy by knowing the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through the Gospel, so that we grow in fellowship with Him. We'll know joy by getting our focus off of ourselves and onto others, so that we fellowship in God's grace with other believers. We'll know joy by bearing witness of His glorious Gospel to those who are lost, so that they can enter the same joy of fellowship with God and with His saints.

God has NOT only called us to Himself, He's called us to each other. He commands and wants us all to enjoy **We Not Me.**

At Grace, we believe in family and community. We're going to continually have more opportunities for us to grow to know each other and together. Please don't make them optional. We truly want our church to honor the Lord and be **We Not Me.**