

In his book, *The Broken Heart* (**picture**), Dr. James Lynch cites statistics showing that adults without deep relationships have a death rate twice as high as those who enjoy regular caring interaction with others. Think of this. Ironically, we live in a culture in which many people scrupulously monitor their cholesterol intake and calorie consumption, yet at the same time blithely ignore their relational life, which according to scientists has just as much impact on their physical health as smoking, high blood pressure and a lack of exercise.

The Bible commands us, the Church to be a place where people can come and have this relational need met. Churches like ours are to be known for getting relationships right, to be a place where fellowship is healthy and strong—like it was described in Scripture in the early church. It's one way we believers are to let our light shine!

Relational admonitions are all over the New Testament. It's in texts like the benediction which says, *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as one body you are called to peace”* (Colossians 3). Ephesians 4:3, *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.”* And so on...

We're observing the Lord's Supper today. It's a celebration of the fellowship and family life that we share. As we prepare our hearts for Communion, we should remember the quality of our fellowship. What makes the fellowship of a church unique? The quality of any given fellowship is only as strong as its underlying bond. Two examples help clarify this truth.

For example, I have almost no connection to the stranger I rode with on an elevator (**picture**). Sure, we may have nodded at each other and gave a wry smile when I stepped on the elevator, but when he gets off on his own floor, there are no tearful goodbyes. I've said my fair share of “Have a nice day”-s in the past, but there's no desire to meet up again sometime or have coffee together. On those rare occasions when I've gotten into conversation with a fellow elevator passenger and spoke further, it's because the bond of fellowship is no longer the elevator ride but rather a new, common topic of interest, whether it's the weather or the construction in the building. An elevator makes for a very weak bond of fellowship.

My family is a different matter. I love them and not in the general way that I'd love every person made in God's image. No, I specifically love each of them in a very special way. I care about their needs, their thoughts, and their future. When they have a problem, I want to know. When I ask them how they are, I want to know the truth. I want to celebrate the special moments in their lives, like birthdays and promotions. I want to invest time, energy, and money into their well-being above my own. *Why?* Our underlying bond is one of the strongest. We're family! We love each other unconditionally.

Have you ever given thought to the bond of fellowship that we enjoy here at Grace Church as Christians? After we celebrate with the Lord's Supper, will you leave here feeling like a family member or just another elevator passenger? Being a Christian means that we have strong connections with others who are also Christ-followers. Like the old song, *“we are family...”*

Ephesians 1:15-23 reminds us that our fellowship is strongest when we remember its source. Turn back to Ephesians 1. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was a circular letter that went to several churches. It's brimming over with reminders of our fellowship as believers. We're going to read a few select passages in the book during our time together.

My son, Aaron, loves Sriracha Sauce. The creator of Sriracha Sauce, David Tran (**pictures**), arrived in Los Angeles from Vietnam in 1980. He quickly discovered that there was no source for the hot sauce he loved, so he made it his mission to develop a sauce that he and others could enjoy and began distributing it in markets around the city. From those humble beginnings grew a hot sauce empire grossing some \$60 million dollars annually.

What makes all this even more remarkable is that David Tran claims his goal was never to strike it rich. Instead, he says his was always to only “make enough fresh chili sauce so that everyone who wants it can have it. Nothing more.” His company, Huy Fong Foods spends no money on advertising and doesn't employ salespeople. They've never raised the wholesale price, even though food costs have tripled over the past few decades. David Tran doesn't even know what stores or countries carry his product. That doesn't stop him from using 100 million pounds of chilies every year for his sauce, all ground into paste within 2 hours of harvesting.

Sriracha became a household name and gets word-of-mouth advertising. In fact, a movement has sprung up around this sauce to increase demand and build a line of products around it.

Some people try to dismiss the Church as just another movement, not too unlike Sriracha sauce. Yet, it's a movement with much more longevity, but they consider it a movement, nonetheless. Our passage in Ephesians shows that Christianity is so much more than a movement. The fellowship that Christ-followers enjoy is on a different plane than any fan club. It far exceeds the camaraderie that tailgaters experience outside a stadium. It's one of the reasons why we

stress that it's so vital to be part of a small group study and meeting to worship with each other should be prioritized above other commitments.

The New Testament teaches that we believers collectively have a hope to which we look forward. Paul mentions a glorious inheritance reserved for and within believers. He speaks of incomparable power for believers – the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

Jesus is the source of the fellowship we share. Our fellowship with each other can only grow stronger as we know Jesus better. Our fellowship is strongest when we remember its Source, the Lord Jesus. A hundred million pounds of chili sauce unifies Sriracha fans. The shed blood of Christ pays for all of our sin and unifies believers both now and forever. It's because...

1. Our fellowship celebrates our new life without forgetting our past life. The more we focus on Christ and His work, and how it impacts us, the more we understand the strength of our fellowship. Our fellowship in Christ celebrates our new life without forgetting our past life.

Look at the way Ephesians describes the way of life that formerly applied to the believers. We find these phrases in chapter 2. Verse 1 says, *“you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”* Verse 2, *“you followed the ways of this world.”* We're told that all of us used to live among the disobedient. That's what used to describe us. Our goal, according to verse 3, was to satisfy our fleshly cravings. It says that *“we were by nature deserving of wrath.”* We could keep going and find phrases like *“we were dead in transgressions,”* again, or that we were *“separate from Christ,”* or we *“once were far away.”* These phrases reiterate over and over that prior to trusting Christ as our personal Savior, we didn't have a lot going for us. That's a cosmically massive understatement because in reality we had everything going against us.

Aren't you glad that for Christians all of those verbs are in the past tense? They don't apply to Christ-followers, instead they highlight the amazing life we have now. Ephesians 2:13 tells us, *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* Verse 19 says we're *“no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household.”*

Understanding our new life is incredibly powerful when we understand how it used to be. Central to our fellowship is the fact that all of us who have placed our faith in Christ for salvation have been reconciled back to God. The Bible describes this act in different ways. In Colossians we're told that we went from being God's enemies to God's friends. Galatians tells us that we went from being abandoned orphans to adopted children.

Christianity Today (**picture**) had an article about a mom whose daughter had just returned from college. The daughter's demeanor and glazed eyes told her mom something was wrong. She soon realized her daughter had begun doing drugs. The daughter's new habit caused her grades to slip dramatically, changed her entire outlook on life, and began to destroy her family relationships – especially with her mother, who did all she could to fix the problem. She took her to counseling, but the girl chose not to participate and finally cut all ties with her Mom.

That Mom began to wait by the phone for months, worrying about her daughter and still trying to do what she could to fix the problem. Only after meeting with a friend who'd gone through the same pain and by joining an Al-Anon group where others who were also worried about the addictions of family members, did this mother learn to let go of her worry and put the control back into God's hands. Though always praying for her daughter and remaining concerned, she was able to function in her own life.

Two years later her daughter got back in touch with her Mom. She explained that it wasn't until she didn't have her mom attempting to fix her problem that she finally realized how big her problem was. She returned to the counselor to get the help she needed. She showed her mom her bank account ledger that actually had money in it. She also showed her a report card with A's, adding that it was a lot easier to study now that she wasn't high anymore.

This mother and daughter learned that their problems – the struggle with addiction and the need to worry and fix it – couldn't be solved on their own. Their relationship with each other became so much greater when they realized where they once were compared to where they now are.

And it's the same with us. Each of us as Christians was so mired and entangled in our sin that we could never get out of it on our own. Our situation was hopeless, our problem God-sized, and our solution found nowhere but in Christ Himself. When we greet each other or share prayer requests or put up with our less-than-Christ-like moments, we do it as fellow Christians who've been saved by grace. As someone said, *“I'm not what I should be, but thank God I'm not what I used to be.”*

When one of us describes our life before Christ and our need for Christ, the rest of us can join in and say, “I was there, too. That describes me.” Our fellowship celebrates our new life while remembering our former life.

2. Our fellowship overcomes all other differences. The common ground we share puts us all on level ground. Our new family life overcomes all other differences. What we share in common is so powerful – so strong – that no other supposed difference can divide us. When we participate in Communion together, we acknowledge this. We admit that each of us is a sinner who deserved the worst punishment but received the greatest pardon at the greatest price. That’s the gospel. It tramples all other barriers.

In the 1st century, the gospel first landed on the rocky terrain of racism, of political, economic and class divisions but that terrain was immediately leveled. In Acts 2, the first astonishing aspect of the gospel was that the scattered Jews of different cultures were immediately united beyond language barriers as the Apostles spoke in tongues. Then Samaritans (half-breeds) were introduced to the gospel, followed by Gentiles, and then the rest of the nations. What was once incorrectly thought to be for one people turned out to be for everyone.

Those uneducated Galileans continued to shock the elite of the day as they boldly proclaimed the truth and could not be refuted. The source of our fellowship lies in what Jesus did for all of us. That source is so strong that any other supposed differences melt away into nothingness. This understanding was evident from the beginning with 1st and 2nd century Christians, and it’s been true for most of the past two millennia.

4th century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa (**picture**), was the first to develop full critiques against slavery and sexual coercion. Slavery in England was largely fought through the efforts of a former slave trader who came to Christ, John Newton (**picture**) and British politician, William Wilberforce (**picture**). We can celebrate times like these when we Christians have gotten this idea right and for the sake of the gospel message, we also need to quickly point out where we’ve gotten it wrong.

America’s history of slavery and unequal rights is a deplorable example. Today’s news stories remind us that the work must always continue. Let’s be clear, the message that all people are equal is **our** message, not the world’s. Every single person, as the Bible teaches, is *Imago Dei*, made in God’s image. As the Church, we are united even more.

The more we declare the message of the gospel and display the fellowship of believers, the more old walls are demolished. It’s why in Ephesians 3:6, Jews and Gentiles both are described as “*members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*” And in 4:4-6, “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all...*” In the Church we have different ethnicities, personalities, abilities and gifts but they all serve to build up His Church.

As Galatians 3:28 tells us, “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” In Christ we have a fellowship that makes us one and gets rid of any other differences. It’s our message, not the world’s. As we spread the gospel, we spread this truth. We get to embody it in the here and now in how we love and care for each other. Our fellowship in the gospel overcomes race, gender, family background, education, financial status, intelligence, marital status, political leanings and employment status.

If the Lord Jesus can take care of sin’s massive mountains, society’s feeble foothills are a piece of cake. Russell Moore (**picture**) said this about the fellowship we share: “*The kingdom of God is not united around the color of our skin; the kingdom of God is united around the red blood of Jesus, who tears down the dividing walls and makes us one in Christ.*”

Or, as Napoleon (**picture**) who rightly recognized the absolute uniqueness of Jesus, said, “*I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His Empire upon love, and at this hour millions would die for Him.*” Our unity in Christ destroys all barriers and allows us to act in love to the world around us.

3. Our fellowship comes through sacrifice. But our fellowship isn’t free. Our fellowship comes through sacrifice.

What did it take to get us from where we were to where we are? An infinite price. To enjoy peace with God, we had to first be reconciled.

In his book, *The Work of Christ*, Robert Letham (**picture**) writes, “*Sacrifice on the cross brought us from enmity to friendship – restoration of fellowship Adam enjoyed with God prior to the fall...Because Christ took our place in obeying the Father and in suffering for our sins and because He appeased the wrath of God that stood against us, so He removed all barriers to a restored friendship with Him. We are now in harmony with God through the atoning work of Christ.*”

God goes even further to declare that the plan is for everything to be reconciled. One day Jesus will reconcile everything in this sin-soaked universe back to Himself. Everything that’s been corrupted will be renewed. Death replaced with life. Joy replaces strife. We who were once on the knife-edge of judgment for our sins are declared righteous by the One who took them all away and renews us to incorruptibility.

That’s reconciliation. Jesus makes all things new. Partaking of the Bread reminds us that His body was broken so we could be fixed. Drinking from the cup demonstrates the purifying blood applied to us to cleanse us from our sins.

Conclusion: Why is our fellowship so strong? Because it all hangs on the One who hung on the cross. It's the no-holds-barred declaration of what we once were and what our fate was, followed by the bold and joy-filled proclamation that it no longer describes us. Our eternal future has never been brighter. Grace Family, we all share in this. We are one in Jesus and we must live out that oneness by His grace.

And now we get to actively participate in it. As we come to the Table to partake of the Lord's Supper, we do it not as individuals, separated like elevator passengers. We do this as a local body of Christ, a community of believers who recognize who we once were while celebrating who we now are – united in fellowship together with Christ, without any barriers, because of His immeasurable sacrifice on our behalf.

That's why we stress that this is open to all believers, those who have trusted in Christ, committing to follow Him as their Savior. We restrict it to believers because it represents the fellowship we share.

If that describes you, then we invite you to participate and partake of His table with us. If you're His, this – and the life-changing fellowship it represents – is yours.