

Fellowship

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[0 : 0 0] Morning, my name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. I also work part-time for a church down in Peebles. My wife and I, you'll hear a little bit more about this as I go through, but we're sort of on our way down there at the moment to be there full-time eventually.

And we're going to be thinking about fellowship this morning. And I wonder as we do that, if you could just think, when was the last time you joined a club? And maybe you're a university student, and maybe you're one of those, I guess we're almost a month in now, and maybe you're one of those who's already a member of like 20 different societies. And maybe you knew before you came to university exactly what club you were going to join, and you're all in already. If you're in either of those categories, you're totally bucking the trend. Because you know in the UK, membership of all sorts of clubs has been on the decline for decades now. I was at a wedding a couple of weeks ago. It was my cousin's wedding. And I was there at my cousin's wedding. I was speaking to my uncle, and he had played at the same rugby club as me back in the 80s, Edinburgh Ackies. And I joined there five years ago.

And we had three teams every single week, no problem at all. And now five years later, and every single week, we're messaging guys on a Friday night trying to persuade them to play for our third 15, having to cancel games because sometimes we can't field a team. I told my uncle that, and he couldn't believe it.

When he was there in the 80s, he'd played for the sixth 15. You know, I don't think there's a single rugby club in Scotland now that has six teams. And that's not just true in rugby, but it is true across the board. Golf clubs, social clubs, school councils, political parties, workers unions, all of them report a massive fall in membership. And that seems to have been accelerated by COVID, but the trend was already there. And we've seen 40 years of declining membership all over the place.

And that's a really strange thing, because social connection is so important. Right? That's what made COVID hard, especially, right, for those who were isolated and lonely. Social connection is really important. And we all desire it, don't we? We all want good community, somewhere to belong. And yet we seem to be running away from it, retreating into our homes and into our Netflix subscriptions.

[2 : 2 8] And it's really strange, because being part of something bigger is also, it's not just something we want, it is objectively good for us. Whether that's a sports club or a book club or a political party or a society at university, there are kind of obvious tangible benefits to all of those, whether that's learning new skills or participating in something, making friends. But most fundamentally, according to psychologist Samantha Stein, club societies and communities are so important because a sense of belonging is actually vital to our psychological well-being. And that is no less true with church.

In fact, there's really good evidence to suggest that belonging to a church is especially good for you. Do you know, people who regularly attend church apparently live longer, are happier, are healthier, are less likely to suffer from depression, less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, more likely to volunteer in their local communities, and more generous with their money? Belonging to a church is just good for you. It just is.

But it is a much deeper thing than belonging to any old club or society. And we're in this series, we've talked about it a bit already, we've called it DNA, and this week thinking about fellowship, which, let's be honest, that's a slightly strange word, not a word that you'd use outside of church, maybe at all, if ever. But it is part of our DNA here at Brunfield. And if you've been here over the last couple of weeks, we've talked about prayer, we've looked at God's word, this week fellowship. And we read Colossians chapter 3 just now. Thanks, Tasha, for reading that so brilliantly for us. And we're going to dip in and out of that passage a bit.

It is worth keeping it open in front of you. But we're going to focus especially on this concept of fellowship. We're really not going to do Colossians chapter 3 justice this week. And just to say, if you're new here, what we've done over the last three weeks, maybe especially if all you've seen of us is the last three weeks, and this isn't our normal practice on a Sunday morning. Most of the time we just systematically take books of the Bible and preach through those. But we just wanted to take these three weeks to spend some time thinking about who we are as a church and these three kind of core elements of prayer, God's word and fellowship. And quite soon we'll be back to what we do ordinarily. And with all of that said, why don't we just come before the Lord in prayer one last time and before we get stuck into this topic together. Heavenly Father, I pray that as I speak this morning, you would be at work in amongst us and in each of us by your Holy Spirit, helping us to come together as your people, encouraging those of us who call this church home to go deeper into fellowship with one another as we understand more the fellowship that we have with you through your son. We pray in his precious name. Amen.

So you know, those three topics, and I think we probably could have done a series on each of them, actually, and quite easily. There's lots to learn about prayer and God's word and fellowship and how each of those is the heartbeat of the church. But just to see how central this concept of fellowship was to the early church's understanding of itself, right? As the church was born in the wake of Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit came on the church in Acts chapter 2, there Luke describes what life was like together for the early church. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Now the word translated fellowship there is the Greek word *koinonia*. And it is a much, much richer word than the English word fellowship does justice to. We're going to come back to that. But just for now, just see that right at the heart of the early church, right there as the church began, that concept of *koinonia*, of common sharing, of life lived together, it was right there at the start. And before we come back to that, we generally think of fellowship as our relationship to each other, don't we, as a church. That might be how you've heard the word used before. And it is that. But before we have fellowship with each other, we have fellowship with God. And I really want to start there because it's so important. Let me illustrate. This is a familiar story to almost all of us, I'm sure, as Kate Middleton. And as she rocks up at university in

[7:12] St. Andrew, she was a fairly normal fresher back in 2001. She'd had quite a privileged upbringing. She wasn't an aristocrat or anything like that. No family lands or titles, no connections to the royal family. And so when she got to university, especially in a place like St. Andrew's, she was really quite an ordinary first year. But then she met William. And William could not have been less ordinary, not only a royal, but a prince. And third in line to the throne. All being well, he was due to be king one day. And of course, we know the story. They met, they fell in love. Imagine what that must have been like for Kate. Imagine meeting her new boyfriend's dad for the first time.

And learning all the little bits of etiquette that the royal family kind of followed. But not being an insider, not being part of the family. And then of course, that all changed when Will and Kate got married and her identity was completely transformed. She's now part of the royal family. I mean, just look at her. She couldn't look more like a queen if she tried. Her name changed. She's now Catherine, her royal highness, the Duchess of Cambridge. One day she really will be our queen. This is who she is now.

And so all those strange bits of etiquette, they're now hers. She belongs because of her relationship to Prince William. Because of one identity-shifting relationship, she now belongs in a whole new family. And you see, for us, before we have fellowship with each other, before Kate was part of the royal family, we have fellowship with God. She had to marry Will. And that's precisely the kind of shape of Colossians chapter 3 this morning. And it starts here. Paul wants to make it very clear, if you're a Christian, then who you are has been totally transformed because you have fellowship with God.

So have a look again at the first few verses of Colossians chapter 3 with me. See who the Christian has become in fellowship with God. First of all, see how your past has been forgiven. Paul says, verse 3, you have died. That is, the old you died with Jesus on the cross. We read in Colossians chapter 2 that your sin was nailed there with him. You have been forgiven. Christian, all the guilt and shame of sin have been done away with. And so this is who you are now. Your past has been forgiven. Your present reality has been elevated. Verse 1, you have been raised with Christ. In his resurrection from death to life, in his ascension, as he is now seated at the right hand of the Father, reigning in heaven, Paul says, you too are raised with him. You have been raised to new life. And more than that, you're seated there in the throne room of heaven with him. Of course, there is a sense in which that is a hidden reality. Paul acknowledges that in verse 3. Life doesn't always feel heavenly, does it? It can look very earthly. But this is a spiritual reality. It's a substantial truth that this is where you are if you're a Christian. And where you are is who you are. Your present reality has been elevated and wonderfully your future has been transformed. Verse 4, when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. One day Jesus will return. And for the Christian, the promise is that on that day, you will be transformed. You will become like him as you see him as he is. A glorious new body. All the aches and pains of this life gone forever.

Paul says, this is who you are. Your future has been transformed. And all of this is rooted in that fellowship with God. And this is how Paul starts this chapter. Because fellowship with God, who we are in him is foundational for all of those instructions about fellowship with each other that are going to follow it. And we'll come back to those. But before we continue in chapter 3, I just wanted to take a quick excursus to think about this word *koinonia*. Because as we said, it's a rich concept. And as we'll see, what we're talking about this morning, our ideas of fellowship just don't really do it justice. In fact, it isn't always translated as fellowship in the New Testament. It might be translated depending on the context, like sharing or community or participation, partnership, contribution, generosity, communion. It's this incredibly rich concept. And you might have noticed in all of those words that I've just used, it kind of has this root of sharing in common.

[12:18] And so we're going to spend a bit of time thinking about how the various, how the New Testament writers use this word. Again, we won't do it justice, but hopefully just a helpful sidebar before we come back to Colossians chapter 3 and really apply it to our life together as a church. We're just going to look at two key examples of the *koinonia* concept. The first is really sharing.

So in Philippians chapter 1, in chapter 4, verse 15, sorry, Paul says, not one church shared, that is the word koinonia, with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only. So there, Paul is encouraging the church in Philippi, encouraging them for their generosity, for their financial giving, for the sake of other churches who were in need. There's a very similar idea in Romans chapter 13, verse 13, where Paul, he exhorts the Christians to share koinonia with the Lord's people who are in need. So it can have this significantly material and financial aspect to it, a contribution in that sense. And there is a clear implication for us in this as we think of our Christian fellowship. Part of that, part of our koinonia is going to include a material sharing with one another, a generosity. That might be just offering your spare bedroom to a visiting missionary or to a student who doesn't have a flat through the summer, maybe a ministry trainee here at church who needs a room. It might just be buying biscuits or baking something for church lunch. It might be giving to another ministry or to another church because you know they're in need. But for most of us and for members here at Brunnsfield, it will simply be giving financially to the church to allow us to do all of those things together. Maybe if I can speak just directly to the students for a second, because

I remember as a student thinking that I just simply could not afford to do that, that I was kind of exempt from giving to church because I didn't have enough money. And you might be in that position and that's totally okay. But I wonder if you could consider just even the price of a coffee a month, just to start a habit, simply then committing to increasing that habit whenever your salary increases. So if you don't start doing that now, it's only going to get harder as life goes on, as responsibilities increase. No matter how much more money you start getting into your bank account, it continues to just flow out and it'll be easier if you start now. But if you really can't afford it, and to anyone here, if you find yourself in real hardship, one of the reasons we do this, this koinonia with money like this is to be able to help one another. And we actually have a specific fund, the hardship fund.

If you need access to that, we would genuinely love you to use it. And there's more info about that in the foyer. I can direct you to that afterwards. You can speak to me and I'll point you in the right direction. But first, see in koinonia this financial and material sharing. And then secondly, see this partnership language. Again in Philippians, in chapter 1 verse 5, Paul is praying for the church in Philippi and he says, in all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership, koinonia, in the gospel from the first day until now. Here it's almost like being business partners, being on the same team with a kind of common mission. And Paul later in chapter 1 says, striving side by side for the sake of the gospel. It's like a military image. On mission together to share the gospel. And again, this connects in lots of different ways for us. We partner with one another as we equip each other and spur one another on to stand firm in our daily context, whatever they are. We facilitate evenings like 3-2-1 this evening. You'll hear more about that at the end of our service. But that's to help us do exactly that. We partner as a church together in that way. We also partner with missionaries like Danny and the Galitos. That's a financial partnership as we give to them to enable them to do the gospel work that they do overseas. But it's also pastoral and prayerful as we share lives with them, as we care for them, as we give them respite when they're at home.

Similarly with Ferrywell, right? We've just heard from Pete about Ferrywell as we pray for them. But also as some of our members go and actually get stuck into that ministry, giving their time and their energy and their gifts. All of that is us as a church partnering together in the gospel. We partner with other churches. I was at an evangelism conference on Friday down at Charlotte Chapel and there were folk there from all over the city. Lots of different sorts of churches, but all there to get excited and equipped to go and share the gospel. We also partner with specific churches like, I said, People's Evangelical Church.

[17 : 23] One of our members, Erin Lockhart, is actually preaching there right now. And as Katie and I prepare to move down there, we really appreciate all of your prayers and your interest in that. We'd actually love you to come and visit. It was wonderful earlier this year for these guys and Brooke and for Johan to come down to People's with me one Sunday and just come and check it out. You'd be more than welcome to do that.

And I'm going to be preaching there next Sunday if you want to come with me. That would be great. In fact, if you'd fancy moving there, if you've ever thought about moving out of Edinburgh, People's is a lovely town and we really do need people to come and get stuck in.

There are two key broad brushstrokes on koinonia, on sharing and on partnership, just to give us a richer flavor of this concept. And notice in each of those that there is always a sense of the vertical koinonia, of fellowship with God, that kind of roots the horizontal fellowship with one another.

Those actually come together really well in 1 John 1, verse 3. John says there, We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you may also have fellowship, koinonia, with us. And our fellowship, koinonia again, is with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

There is a horizontal fellowship there between believers, but notice how it actually flows from the vertical, from fellowship with God. And like I said, that is exactly the shape of Colossians chapter 3.

[18 : 53] We thought earlier about Kate Middleton, about how who she was has completely changed as a result of her marrying into the royal family. And flowing from that identity is a whole new way of living.

And if you've seen The Crown, that Netflix series about the royal family, there's this scene where one of the senior royals is talking to one of the children. I think it was George VI, so the late queen's father, speaking to her when she was a child. And the young royal was misbehaving. I mean, they weren't really misbehaving. And you know the royals have all these rules that they live by, so they've got extremely high standards of etiquette. She probably had elbows on the table or something like that. Anyway, the king says to her, Dear girl, remember who you are.

In other words, you are a royal. You're part of this family. You're an heir to the throne. That's who you are. Remember who you are. And then you can behave like the royal that you are.

For us, the horizontal fellowship, how we live in relation to one another, it is informed and shaped by the transformation that has already taken place because of who we are in relation to God, that vertical fellowship. See, how we think about who we are is really important. It actually shapes what we do and how we live. I think that's quite counterintuitive. Actually, we tend to fall into a pattern of thinking that says that what we do is who we are. Really, the Bible would say that the opposite is true, that who we are actually shapes what we do. And that's precisely the shape of Colossians chapter 3 as we return to it. As Paul begins with those first four verses, establishing Christian identity. He says your past, your present, your future, they've all been totally transformed in fellowship with God. And so now flowing from that and the rest of the chapter explains the joys and of course the challenges of now living in fellowship with one another.

Paul begins with a list there of kind of do nots, doesn't he? Of things in verse 5 that the Christian is to put to death. Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

[21 : 09] Verse 8, anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. Verse 9, do not lie to each other. Paul says put these things to death. Let me say that lots of us looking at those lists will have made peace with some of these sins in our lives. Maybe we've bought the lie that whatever sin it is is tied to our identity in some way. Maybe we've battled with them for so long that we've given up and let them win. But Paul says here that we are to put that to death. He later says that we can take those things off. The implication is that it is possible in him to grow in this way. In other words, because of who you are now, dear Christian, remember who you are because of the transformation of verses 1 to 4.

Paul, this is not who you are anymore. You can put it to death. You can take it off. And notice how significantly relational all of those things are. Paul isn't just randomly naming a bunch of different sins here. He's not simply saying that you have a new identity, you have fellowship with God, and so now in a general and complete sense, go and live like it. But his instructions here are wrapped up in how the Colossian church relate to one another. It's why in verse 11, and this verse would be incredibly random in the context if it wasn't relational, he says there is no Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all. It's because all of those barriers to koinonia, to fellowship with one another. See, for the Colossian church, they're significantly ethnic and socioeconomic in that verse, and Paul says those barriers have been torn down because Christ is all and is in all. See, in Christ, you have koinonia, fellowship with God, and in Christ, you have koinonia with one another. So you can put to death all of these practices that are just so clearly relationally damaging. You can tear down those barriers. Indeed, they have been torn down for you by him. But it's not simply a put off. See verses 9 and 10. He says, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self. And David Nixon, who's one of the pastors at our friendly church down the road, Corubbers, recently made the helpful observation that if we take off without putting on, then we're naked.

Right? So what is the new self? What is it that we're putting on? Well, again, notice how relational this is in verse 12. He says, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Wouldn't we love to live in a community like that? I mean, seriously, a community that is willing to enter into one another's lives, the trials and the sufferings, to journey through that together with compassion, to listen to one another kindly, to offer help with humility and gentleness and to stay on that road for however long it takes with patience. Paul goes on, it will require patience. He says, bear with each other and forgive one another. If any of you have has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you. This is a key distinctive of Christian community, of koinonia. And C.S. Lewis puts it like this. He says, to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. I find that really challenging.

It strikes me that that could be challenging in, well, lots of different ways. But here are two ways that it might be. It might be that we don't know one another well enough yet to have got there. Maybe you're new here. Or maybe you've been here for a really long time and you just haven't quite made that step. Maybe you haven't put the time in. You might just find it really difficult. But whatever it is, you haven't got beyond the superficial with people in this room.

These verses imply that we would know someone well enough to have seen their sin. And I'm increasingly convinced that the best way to do that in church is to make time to see one another outside of the set piece things. Maybe you see one another on a Sunday at church and then again at small group or at a women's Bible study. But I really think if you're going to go beyond the superficial, it's going to be really important to spend time with one another outside of those things. And of course, look at how many people there are in the room. And we're not even all here this morning. You're not going to be able to do that with everyone. You just need to make peace with that right now. We're too big of a church to be able to do that. But you can invest really seriously and properly invest and do life with a handful of people here. That's what we would love to see happen. But as you do that, it just is true that the more you get to know someone, the more sinful you're going to realize that they are. If you're still under the delusion that anyone here is anything other than that, then you need to spend more time with them. And it's really good for us to start to see that in each other. Because it teaches us to practice grace and forgiveness towards each other. We grow as that happens. It teaches us to consistently point one another to the grace that's available for us in Jesus. And it gives us opportunities to sharpen one another.

[26 : 58] See in verse 16, the command to let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another. Part of koinonia is helping one another grow, helping one another take off the old self and put on the new. Maybe that's your challenge. Maybe it's the other side of the coin.

Maybe you've become too familiar with the sins of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Maybe you've become embittered by it. No longer willing to bear with one another and forgive.

Just think to yourself, is there someone else in this room that you just can't bring yourself to talk to anymore? No longer willing to compromise and put others first? If that's you, can I ask you even just right now to say a prayer in your heart that the Spirit would work in you towards forgiveness, towards compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness?

You know, however this fellowship stuff is challenging us this morning, this is key, that we know that we can't do this in our own strength. We need the transformation of verses one to four to take hold in our lives, to get anywhere with this stuff. And we need the Holy Spirit to be continually at work in us.

Notice, and as we come to a conclusion, just notice the one another language here. And it's repeated in Colossians chapter three, and it's actually all over Paul's letters. Whenever he writes to any church, he uses this phrase, one another. And the implication is that there is a group of people to whom he is writing who are significantly committed to one another in some way.

[28 : 37] It's one of the functions of membership here, making that commitment to one another, saying, I can't do this on my own. You know, there's no such thing as a solo Christian. And I just really encourage you, and maybe you're new, maybe you've been here for a while, maybe you know that you're only going to be here for quite a short time.

I'd still really encourage you to think about making the step to becoming a member here. It's just a way of saying, I commit to these people, to saying that I'm going to love them and bear with them and forgive them, and to work together with them for the sake of God's glory in the gospel. It's a wonderful thing to do.

You know, I heard this brilliant story on a podcast this week, and I think it's a great picture of koinonia, of one another, of church. This church, we're debating whether or not to get an organ. I think it was probably quite a long time ago. But it was the sort of church where they had only ever had music led by an a cappella choir. And there was a serious division over this question. One group, including most of their elders, were in favor of getting an organ.

They argued that it would supplement their sung worship really well. But there was another group, led by one especially outspoken elder, who were very much against the organ. They argued that worshipping God with an instrument would be unbiblical. And ultimately, the group in favor of the organ won the day, and the church started raising money to fund the thing. And so the elders literally went around church members specifically asking people to give towards this new venture.

And one day, the elder who had led the charge for buying the organ bumped into the man who had opposed it in the street. And the man in opposition asked this. He said, you know, you're raising funds for the new organ. Why haven't you asked me for my contribution yet? Well, the other replied, I just, I knew how strongly you were against it. So I didn't want to ask you to help.

[30 : 33] Here how he responded, the man in opposition, this is really helpful for us. He said, we, as a body, we made a decision. I can put my personal feelings aside and support the purchase as much as anyone else. And I think that is a wonderful example of fellowship, of what it's like to do church with one another, to say, I don't want this wretched organ, but I am willing to compromise and put others first, to bear with them, to forgive, to be compassionate and kind and humble, and above all, verse 14, to love my fellow church members for the sake of God's glory in the gospel.

We began by thinking about Kate Middleton and how her relationship with Prince William shifted her identity and gave her a new family, a picture of how our fellowship with God leads to fellowship with each other.

And last year, Kate, she'd been married to Will for more than 10 years, and she was asked in an interview about what it was like being royal, and she said this, I'm still learning. It's a struggle to know that you can be accepted and fit in, and you are still learning every day. The truth is, none of us are going to get this fellowship thing right. And before we win it, before we finish, I have to say that we could easily beat ourselves up about this, and we can always do it better, but I actually just want to encourage you, and let me particularly encourage you, if you've been here for a while, for a long time, if you've seen this church grow and change over the years, let me encourage you, because in our time here, there are just so many wonderful examples of you being exactly this for one another, of compromise, and of humility, and of patience. This is not a perfect church, not by any stretch, but for Katie and I, you've been exactly this for us. We felt very loved here. You've really helped us grow, and above all, you've been consistently pointing us to Jesus and who we are in him, and that's exactly what church fellowship is all about. And the key for us, for all of us in this, is to remember who we are in him. Remember the fellowship with God that has been one for us. If you're a Christian here today, you belong to his family. There's nothing you can do to change that. Your failures will never outstrip his grace to you. And so as we muddle through in fellowship with one another, that will be a lifelong struggle, just like for Kate, to know that you can be accepted and fit into God's family.

A lifelong struggle, and you will be learning every day, but it is a wonderful thing. It's a wonderful thing to enjoy fellowship with God, and it's a wonderful thing to have fellowship with one another as a result. So let's lean into it, and let me pray as we finish.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for all that you have done for us in Jesus. Lord, I thank you that we can be forgiven, given a whole new identity, that our present reality is now elevated with him, that we can look forward to a glorious future.

[34 : 03] Lord, I thank you so much for the fellowship that we have with you. And Lord, I pray that as we take full advantage of that, we would do so together, that you would, by your spirit, be building your church, that you would be growing in each of us, a desire to love one another, and that you would be helping us to muddle through in all the challenges of relational strife.

Lord, help us to love one another really well, even as you have loved us. Lord, help us to love one another, in Jesus' name, and for your glory. Amen.