

Family Responsibilities

Welcome back to Walking with Purpose! I trust that you had a meaningful week, as you had a new perspective on those around you...your extended family of brothers and sisters in Christ. You know, being part of a family brings with it responsibilities. In my family, my responsibility seems to be taking care of the yard. Now, I don't remember signing up for this job, and women are just as capable at pulling weeds as men. But any given Saturday morning, if the sky is clear and the weeds are higher than the flowers, you'll see me on my hands and knees out front. I do this chore without complaining...well...most of the time... (*chuckle*) because I'm part of a family. It's part of belonging.



Fellowship

1. What were your family responsibilities growing up?



Discipleship

Does this scene sound familiar? You're 10 minutes early for church, telling yourself this time is important because you need to "fellowship." Up comes friend #1 and you embark on your first superficial conversation of the day: "So, Thomas, how's it going at work?" "Fine, Fernando! By the way, are you driving a new car?" "Yeah, I got it used. How's your family?" "Oh, the same. Well, great fellowshipping with you, Fernando." "Same here."

All across the church property, groups of believers are having the same depth of conversations...a far cry from the vibrant life of community we see in the book of Acts. Turn with me to Acts 2:42-47 as we read it together. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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."

We've been on a quest to learn how to bring glory to God; how to bring a smile to His face and joy from our lives. Did you know that one of your main purposes is to do that by loving other believers? So what does authentic love look like? What are our responsibilities within our Christian family? If you want to experience the genuine thing when it comes to fellowship, you have to be committed to fulfilling five qualities of real life together: **accept** one another; **prefer** one another; **serve** one another, **be authentic** with one another and **pray** for one another. Now that's a lot of "one anothers"! But God uses those two words 58 times in the New Testament! That's proof in and of itself that one of your purposes is to be connected! How else will you fulfill all His "one another" commands? Your spiritual family will long outlast your physical family, so let's see how we can **accept** and **prefer** one another, and next week we'll explore service, authenticity and prayer.

I recently "met" a woman online who has two small children, a demanding job and an overall stressful life. One day she took her baby in the stroller and headed to the mall for both some exercise and fun. She found a sale on pajamas for her daughter, so they went into the dressing room to try them on. She later wrote that she didn't know **what** came over her, but she found herself slipping the unpaid-for clothes under the stroller and covering it with other packages. As soon as she left the store, two plain clothed policemen approached her, demanded her identification and placed her under arrest! She was banned from that particular store for 6 months...but her emotional ban from her husband when she returned home was even more severe. She released her pent-up disappointment and horror of her actions as she wrote to her on-line friends: "How could I have shoplifted? I've **never** done anything like this before! What was I thinking??" As I kept reading and following the drama, one by one her on-line friends formed a circle of understanding and support around her for the next few months. The trial date came and went; her husband continued to hold her sin over her head; her life was now more stressful than ever...but those friends were always there to lend words of encouragement and compassion. They didn't condone the sin, but loved the sinner. That, my friends, is what it means to **"accept"** and is the first stone in our foundation of community. Romans 15:7 says to "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

People need to feel loved and accepted before they are willing to obey James 5:16... "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Satan loves to use sin to isolate us; to **withdraw** us from community. It's a sad and vicious cycle: the more isolated a person is, the more destructive sin's power over him. The stronger the grip of sin, the more deeply he becomes involved in it...and the greater the isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This is especially prevalent in the midst of a pious community where a person is afraid of rejection, and therefore of confession. Yet in a community of love and acceptance, with a spirit willing to support rather than reject, confession brings the light and healing of the gospel.

Have you ever been blackmailed? I remember when I was young and my sister caught me in a lie! I had told my parents I spent the day at a friend's house, when I really went to a movie they didn't approve of. Boy, did she use that information for all it was worth! The combination of my guilt for the sin *and* fear of exposure was enough to bring a sense of relief when the truth was brought to light and I was punished! Now, I don't want to compare my sister to Satan (*chuckle*) but he uses guilt and fear of exposure in the same way...to steal our joy and isolate us from loving fellowship. Disarm him with confession so that you may be healed, and allow others to do the same without fear of rejection from you. Dr. Larry Crabb writes: "A central task of community is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down...safe enough for each of us to reveal our brokenness."

Now, what does it mean to "*prefer*" one another? I love how the dictionary defines it: to promote or advance to a rank or position; to like *better* or *best*; and to give *priority* to. If I *prefer* you to myself, I will care more about meeting your needs than meeting my own. I will rank your preferences as of greater importance than mine. If your desire for a day *off* nursery duty conflicts with my desire to stay far *away* from dirty diapers, guess whose needs carry greater importance? If my desire for an evening with a good book is held up against my neighbor's crisis and need of a hot meal...guess who needs to get in the kitchen...or at least order take-out? Paul tells us to be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose; to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but to consider others better than ourselves; and to look out for other people's interests!

Fulfilling my role in the family requires me to arrange my priorities, schedule, relationships and everything else around that purpose!

Chuck Colson has observed that when the Communists took over Russia in 1917, they did not make Christianity illegal. Their constitution, in fact, guaranteed freedom of religion. But what they *did* make illegal was for the church to do any "good works." No longer could the church fulfill its historic role in feeding the hungry, educating the children, housing the orphan, or caring for the sick. What was the result? After 70 years, the church was largely irrelevant to the communities in which it dwelt. So what do you think? Would your community weep if *your* church were to pull out of the city? Would anybody notice if you left?

2. Read I Corinthians 8:1-13. Talk about a present-day example of a gray issue that could cause another Christian to stumble.
3. According to verse 12, how seriously do Paul and God take your decisions and treatment of your Christian family?
4. What is the level of commitment to another person we see reflected in verse 13?
5. Read Romans 14:1-4. What are some disputable matters you struggle to accept others' opinions on?

6. Read Philippians 2:1-7. What are the day-to-day challenges of obeying verses 3-4?



Ministry

7. Read James 3:13-18. What hinders our ministry to each other according to verse 16?

8. What gifts and abilities has God given you to use in the “family”? How can you use them in this small group?



Evangelism

9. Talk about what you can do as a group to get out of your comfort zone and welcome visitors to your church and/or small group. Can you arrive 10 minutes early and look for newcomers who may feel uncomfortable? Can you invite them out to coffee or to your home for a meal?



Worship

10. When we are loving others and fostering authentic community, we are worshipping God! Pray for each other and challenges you will each face this week...as well as those who will be the *recipient* of true community (possibly for the first time)!