

Thank you, Dan. It is good to be with you this morning. My family and I are joining you from Lexington, Kentucky, this weekend. This photo is of my wife Andrea, the twins Laurel and Tucker, and Sam. You may have seen us around. We have visited on a handful of occasions. My kids love visiting their Aunt Keren and Uncle Dan. They particularly enjoy the large amounts of sour candy their uncle provides them. My wife is a dentist and does not enjoy it as much. But we all love visiting your church. There is truly a sense of JOY in your services, and we love praising Jesus with you.

Let me tell you about the first time I met Dan. It was thirteen years ago. I received a text from a friend, inviting me to a Bible study at his house the next week. I was expecting about seven people to be there, but when I showed up there were probably over a hundred people. Everyone had Bibles in their hands and Dan was in his sandals, leading them through a study of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy. It was so cool because there was a genuine excitement about the word of God in the group. I remember thinking to myself, “This guy legitimately loves the word of God; I need to get to know him better.” So our friendship started around a mutual love for the word of God. It has become one of my most cherished friendships and it has grown over the years as we have taken on careers and ministries and found wives and had children. I have watched as Dan’s passion for the word of God that I saw thirteen years ago has grown and has been the guiding light in each stage of his life.

Dan asked me to teach from Colossians this morning. This is Paul’s letter to the community of believers at Colossae. The theme of this book is “Jesus over Everything.”

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in [perfect unity](#). Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

## Community in Christ

This morning I want to talk about community in Christ. In this text Paul is giving the believers at Colossae a picture of what their church community should look like and how they, as individual members in that community, should interact with one another. We get a picture of a group of people who walk together in **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**. When they walk in this way towards one another they become **members of one body**. The love that they show towards one another results in a community that is characterized by unity and harmony amongst them.

I am not a musician, but I do know enough about music to know that musical harmony is a phenomenon that occurs when notes are arranged together to create a sound that is bigger and more beautiful than any one of those notes played by itself. For example, if you have ever been to a symphony, you have heard the power of harmony. Before the show starts, all of the various oboe and trumpet and violin players are tuning their individual instruments and there is this chaotic, dissonant, indiscernible sound filling the air. But when the director takes the podium, all the instruments become quiet. When he lifts his baton, they all begin to play together and there is an electric feeling that pulses through the air as the crowd responds to the beauty of the sound. If you love music, this moment will send a chill down your spine. The same concept of harmony can exist among people who live lives of love towards one another. Their life together produces something far greater and more beautiful than any one life could on its own, so much so that when others see this community it evokes a deep emotional response. This type of relational harmony is possible **ONLY** in Christ, only when he is the director empowering us and leading us.

When people really experience this kind of Christian community, it captivates them and draws them to Jesus. I want to share a story of how a friend of mine experienced this recently.

This is Misa Ito (view online sermon to see photo). Misa grew up in Japan, which has one of the highest atheist populations in the world. Misa describes the community that she grew up in as both performative, a place where everyone worked very hard to please those around them by having a successful career and earning a lot of money, and at the same time empty and dark, because beyond success there was nothing meaningful to live for. Misa became a very successful cardiologist in Japan and about four years ago decided to come study hearts at the

University of Kentucky. While in Lexington she was invited to our church and the night she visited our church was the first time she had ever experienced Christian community. This is what she had to say about it:

When I came to the service everyone was being kind and opened their lives to me; someone even invited me to dinner after church. I immediately thought this must be fake because every time I had experienced kindness before it was because someone wanted something from me. So I came back again to see what these Christians wanted from me but each time I came back they persisted in their love without asking me for anything. And so, I eventually concluded that their kindness was genuine, and I knew that no one could love me like this unless there was a God.

Shortly after her first encounter with Christian community, Misa asked Jesus to be Lord of her life. Now she is a dear friend to my family.

As Jesus was praying to the Father before he went to the cross, he prayed this:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:22,23)

WOAH!!! Do you see what Jesus is saying here? He is saying that Christians express a quality of love for one another that is so distinct, so different, so other worldly, that when others see it the only thing they can conclude is that there is a God and he loves them. Christian community rocks people's world at a heart level, so that when they see our unity it reaches down inside of them to that desire for a relational home that is so profound it obliterates the intellectual objections they may have built up against God. That is God's vision for his church—he wants the church to be known as a place where people truly love one another on a supernatural level and as a result draw people to Jesus. That pumps me up.

So how do we do it? How do we put into action this kind of relational unity? It starts with each one of us individually making Jesus king of our lives, surrendering to his leadership, and asking him to come and live inside of us. In Romans 5 we see that when we make Jesus king of our lives, his very love is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. When his love lives inside of us, we are supernaturally empowered to live lives of love to one another. Paul gives us five

practical ways of **putting on** lives of love to one another that result in a powerful, irresistible Christ-centered community:

**1. We bear with one another.** When we say, “Bear with one another,” what we are talking about is being patient with others’ weaknesses or imperfections. Bearing with others is one of the most challenging acts of love because it requires empathy, compassion, and patience over extended periods of time. There are two dynamics that we should mention when talking about bearing with one another. First, it is human nature to desire relational comfort. When God adds us into a church community, there will be people that God adds us together who will be relationally uncomfortable to spend time with. There will be people who are needy, weird, awkward, and even rude. People who don’t share your food, travel, and entertainment preferences. People who don’t have the same financial capacity as you. This will make for relationally difficult interactions. Our typical response to relationally uncomfortable situations is to back away and distance ourselves from these people, and instead create groups of people that we are comfortable being around. But here in the word of God we are instructed not to pull away but to press in relationally to one another and bear with those differences. This dynamic is one that distinguishes Christian community from all other communities. We patiently endure relational discomfort and forge through to create genuine relationships with others. My son Tucker was on a tee ball team last year. One of the kids on the team was a transplant from California. This kid (let’s call him Gavin) was one of a kind. He had the long surfer hair so he couldn’t see most of the time, he smelled like a weird herb, he was extremely unathletic, he had zero baseball IQ, and he was prone to nasty tantrums. The other boys on the team caught on to this immediately and wanted nothing to do with him. But as a coach and a dad, I wanted Tucker to learn how to exercise his ability to bear with others, so I quietly encouraged Tucker to connect with this kid. I could have just tried to keep Tucker from being mean to the kid, but I wanted more than that—I wanted him to move relationally closer to Gavin even though it would require enduring some discomfort. Now I would be lying if I told you that Tucker became Gavin’s best friend. But one game somehow Gavin from California got a hit. When he came back to the dugout, Tucker, who loves to celebrate, jumped up and gave Gavin a chest bump. At first this terrified Gavin, but then I saw a look of joy come on his face. I am not even certain that he knew he got a hit, but he did know that someone loved him. This is what happens when we bear with others—it creates relational bonds.

On the other side of the coin, there are times when others in our community will face difficult situations like sickness, the loss of a loved one, or even depression. Another function of bearing with others is to press in relationally when people are facing pain and to bear that burden with them. This is difficult because when people are in pain, they are not easy to be around and it often seems impossible to know how to connect with them. But bearing with others means allowing our empathy and compassion to lead us into these uncomfortable situations.

When it comes to bearing with each other Christ gave us an amazing picture to follow, and it is that journey he took to his crucifixion where he carried the cross, a cross that should not have been his, that should have been your cross to carry, the penalty for your sins, he carried your cross all the way up the hill to Golgotha. And there was a man named Simon that saw Jesus carrying that cross and while everyone else was watching and jeering he jumped in and helped Jesus carry the cross. We are all called to be like Simon and to bear with others.

- 2. We forgive each other.** “Forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone.” Jesus also spoke about forgiveness on multiple occasions; after love it may be his most emphasized relational principle. He taught that if you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly father will forgive you. When his disciples asked how many times they should forgive, Jesus told them seventy times seven. He included it in the Lord’s Prayer: “Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” And when he was on the cross, he uttered, “Father, forgive them.” Forgiveness is an absolutely essential element of Christian community. When forgiveness is practiced, unity flourishes; when it is withheld, bitterness invades and division spreads. Our church supports a missionary in Mexico named Pedro Basilio, a Mixteco Indian who grew up in the mountains of Mexico. When he was younger, his uncle killed his father to take his land. Pedro, filled with rage, decided to kill his uncle. He left his village and moved to Acapulco to work and earn enough money to buy a gun to kill his uncle. When he arrived in Acapulco, he rented an apartment from what turned out to be two Wycliff Bible translators and over a period of months they shared the gospel with him. Ultimately, he accepted Jesus as his Lord and his heart changed. By the power of God, he forgave his uncle. He went back to his village, found his uncle in the marketplace, shook his hand, and said, “The land is yours.” Instead of returning for revenge, Pedro planted a church in that village. The church has grown into a Christian community of hundreds of Mixteco Indians. Forgiveness is an act that brings relational reconciliation and causes Christian community to flourish.

There is a key to being a person who can forgive—the key is Christ. When we walk with a daily understanding that we have been forgiven by Christ for our betrayal against him, it empowers us to have the capacity to forgive others.

3. **We love one another.** Paul is pretty clear here that above everything else the most significant characteristic of members of Christian community is love. “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” The Greek word here is “agape.” Agape love can best be described as a choice to do what is best for someone else as opposed to just feeling positively about someone. The distinction here is that this kind of love is not dependent on how you feel. People who operate in this kind of love choose to do what is best for others regardless of how they feel. When we choose to value and act in the best interests of those around us, it creates harmony. Recently a family in our church was facing a medical situation one in their family needed an elective procedure that they could not afford. A person in our church who was aware of the situation sent out a text to a small group of families in the church and asked if anyone might want to help out. In thirty minutes, this \$18,000 procedure was fully funded and they were able to hand the family a check to take care of that financial burden. Think for a moment what that kind of sacrificial love in action would communicate to someone looking for community. This kind of love can only be found from one source: God. He is perfect love, and we can only partake in this kind of love when we receive it from Jesus in our hearts. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid his life down for us. And we ought to lay our lives down for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16).
4. **The peace of Christ rules in our hearts.** Often when we think about peace we think about personal peace and being at one with ourselves. But the idea here is that when Christ rules in our hearts, we are at peace with one another. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.” If you have ever been to Europe, one thing that is immediately striking is the number of different nations crammed together in such a small geographical region. You can take a train from London to Paris in 2 hours and then be in Brussels in an hour and a half. One of the unfortunate historical consequences of this proximity is the vast number of bloody wars that have taken place between European countries over the years. This no doubt can be attributed to the fact that these countries do not share a single authority. Each one of these nations is pursuing and looking out for their own well-being and interests. In a similar fashion, in communities in which people are primarily pursuing their own interests and their own personal security, such as focus

results in relational conflict and competition. However, when Jesus sits on the throne of the heart of every individual in a community, there is a peace between them. When I allow Jesus to be my Lord there are two ramifications: (1) I make all my decisions based on him receiving glory from my life, doing everything for him; and (2) I don't worry about being provided for, being loved, or having personal security because I trust Jesus my King will provide these for me. When we all do this together, it releases us from competing with one another and frees us to serve each other—Christ is all and he is in all.

- 5. The word of God dwells in us.** Most of us are pretty familiar with the idea that we need to have a quiet time and read our Bibles each day and that we should listen to our pastor teach about the word of God on Sundays. But Paul's description of the role of the word of God in Christian community is a little more expansive than this. He says, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs." The picture we get is of a group of people who are daily thinking about the message of Christ, talking to one another about the message of Christ, and even singing about the gospel. Think about what you talk about when you get together with your friends or family. What stories do you tell? What ideas do you talk about? Every culture and family friend group has stories, ideas, and values that fill up their conversational space. These stories, ideas, and values end up shaping the way those groups act towards one another. When it is the message of Christ that fills up our conversational and meditative spaces, our lives begin to actualize the gospel. It focuses us on the mission of sharing the gospel with others and it guides us in living like Jesus did. We are staying the weekend at Dan and Keren's house. As we walk around their home, we see post-it notes of various verses you have been studying here at the Creek. This is such an amazing way to help turn our minds and hearts towards the message of Christ, and it is a great conversation starter. People want to engage in meaningful conversation about things that truly matter eternally. They want to talk about truth; they want to hear stories that are beautiful. No conversation can compete with the truth, the wisdom, and the beauty of the gospel. When there is an ongoing vibrant conversation about the message of Christ naturally occurring in our community, it attracts the world to join in.

There we have five practical ways to cultivate and activate true Christian community.

There are a couple different ways you might respond to today's scripture. First, you may be experiencing the unity and love found only in Christ-centered

community for the first time here at the Creek. Like my family, you may be captured by the joy in this room and your heart may be telling you God must be real. If you want to make this type of life your permanent home it only requires one thing—make Jesus Lord of your life. Do it today.

Second, you may have been a member of this community for a while, but you know you are not really engaging in relational community like Paul is talking about here where you truly share your life with others. Maybe you have been hurt by a community in the past or maybe you are an independent type and you have always lived the solo life. If God is calling you to press into a deeper level of sharing your life with others to help create this community we are talking about today—let's go; we want you to get involved here at the Creek.

There is a room over here called the Porch if you want to respond to the word of God this morning. We have people in the Porch who can pray with you.