



## Marked (Part 5) – Community

Matt Chandler – September 10, 2017

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[Video]

**Kyle:** Hi, my name is Kyle, and I'm a Home Group leader and coach at the Dallas Campus. My wife and I lost our baby daughter at 36 weeks in the womb. That was a really bitter time for us, but it was also sweet because we gained a better understanding of the Lord and a greater sense of how close-knit our community really is. During that time, friends cleaned our house, mowed our lawn, and prayed for us constantly.

When we were planning the burial for our daughter, the funeral director came out and told us that everything had already been paid for by our friends and family. This was an overwhelming moment for me and an obvious callback to what Jesus did on the cross for us. You often hear about the church being the church and wonder what in the world that even means, but to see our community surround us and support us during the most difficult time of our lives was a very obvious reason for all of us to be in community constantly.

[End of video]

Good morning. It's good to see you. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab those. We're going to be in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, a pretty well known text if you have a background in church, and if you don't have a background in church, you'll like the text as you're introduced to it, Lord willing. We have been walking through our mission statement for the last five weeks, and we have been approaching it not as "Here are things we do" but "Here is what we are as followers of Jesus Christ." It's not behavior but rather what God has named us and is growing us all the more into.

So far, here's what we've done. We've said that the church of Jesus Christ exists to bring glory to God by making disciples through gospel-centered worship. That's what we covered last week, that we are worshipers and we will be growing all the more into worship as we follow the Lord. Then

this week we're going to settle in on this second component of what we are, that we are also a gospel-centered community. It's not something we *will* be; it's something we currently *are*. You and I have been put together, placed together by God as a community of faith.

Really, wherever humankind is in all of the world we cluster into communities. We'll get into this more in a moment, but sociologists would say that what happens is wherever there are overlaps of intent, experience, and identity you begin to see a community formed. Humankind cannot help but form communities among themselves because the nature of the creator God of the universe is communal.

We worship a God who is three in one, the triune God of the universe. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Three in one, in perfect communion and harmony. That God creates everything. He sits at the epicenter of all of reality. It shouldn't surprise any of us that we're drawn to community, because our God is community himself. Let me do a Trinitarian primer in about three minutes.

In John 1:18, here's how the gospel of John begins: **"No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side..."** Or this can be interpreted *bosom*. This concept of *bosom* is kind of missed on us. We don't really talk like that anymore. "Come to my bosom." It kind of carries with it the connotation of deep oneness and intimacy, that you are in the Father's bosom. **"No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he [Jesus Christ] has made him known."**

Later, when Jesus is teaching on the coming of the Holy Spirit, he says, **"He [the Holy Spirit] will glorify me [Jesus], for he will take what is mine [Jesus'] and declare it to you [the saints]."** Then just a chapter later, in the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus Christ, we hear this: **"I [Jesus] glorified you [Father] on earth, having accomplished the work that you [Father] gave me [Jesus] to do. And now, Father, glorify me [Jesus] in your own presence with the glory that I [Jesus] had with you [Father] before the world existed."**

What we're seeing happening in the gospel of John and throughout the Scriptures is what C.S. Lewis liked to call the *dance*. The idea that God the Father is like God, and then you have little baby Jesus and weirdo Holy Spirit that's always making things strange... That concept is foreign to the Bible. The Bible says what you have is God the Father glorifying God the Son and the Holy Spirit making much of Jesus, and it becomes this communion of life and connection and vibrancy that then spills out onto the canvas of creation.

It's no wonder that humankind is drawn toward and desperately needs to be in community with one another. The very essence of our being, being created in the likeness of God. God is a community calling us to be a people of community, and we see this spill out onto the canvas of creation. The Godhead has this conversation in the midst of creation: "Let us make man in our image." Like *us*. "Let's make man like us." "So male and female he created them."

You have God saying, "We're going to make humankind like us. They're going to be different than the animals. They're going to be different than the rest of the creative order. We're going to make them in our image, like us." Then we read in Genesis, chapter 2, this idea of the man and the woman, that when God created the man and the woman they were naked and unashamed.

Now I don't think this has to do with nudity, although you do see in Genesis 3 that they are actually physically naked, because God in his grace after the fall clothes them when they realize they *are* naked, but I think what you're seeing here is the type of vulnerability, openness, and being known that God is after for his people. They are naked and unashamed. There is nothing to hide. There is no projected image. They are fully known.

In fact, the Bible even uses that word for how they've come together. "And Adam *knew* Eve, his wife." There's a level of knowing there that's intimate and deep and there's nothing hidden. They are naked and unashamed. That beautiful picture lasts 22 verses, and then sin enters the cosmos and fractures everything, and immediately you see this fracture between God and man.

Then what does Adam do? God shows up and asks, "Hey, who told you guys that you were naked?" Remember Adam's response? "That woman you gave me..." Just a couple of verses earlier he was singing a poem about her. "This at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. I shall call her *woman*, because out of me she was taken." What happened here? Woman. Then what happens to their kids? Cain and Abel.

The Bible all the way through the redemption of Jesus Christ to this day is about this fracture, and our lives are playing out in a day and age in which there's such a deep hunger for communion, but all we can get is this loose connection with others. I'm not a hater of social media. I'm on Twitter. I tweet, and yet this is a shallow way of knowing that doesn't satisfy the soul.

In fact, what we're learning from research is it actually aggravates the deeper part of us that's longing for real connection, real communion with other people. So if you've ever found yourself stuck scrolling through all your stuff and feeling this low-grade hum of agitation, what that is is your soul wanting more for you than what you're getting.

Let me define community. Here's how community is defined by social scientists. *Community* is an emergent quality. Community, per se, does not exist. It is a perceived connection between a group of people based on overlaps of intent, identity, interest, and experience. The best way to think about this is to think about either high school or movies around high school, because you see this play out in those locations.

Unless you went to a high school with 70 people, where the athletes were also the band and also in theater arts and also happened to be National Merit scholars...they were all of it because there were only 12 of you in your senior class...what you probably saw (and if it wasn't at your high school it certainly is in every movie and television show about high school) is this definition playing out before our eyes.

The athletes form a little community. The theater art kids form a little community. The nerds (or those everyone will be working for later) form a little community. I want to point this out. Even the antiestablishment Goth kids form a community. Have you ever noticed there's never one of them all dressed in black and mopey, that there are always like 40 of them together? They can't help it.

To reject community is to form a community that rejects community. You cannot escape this. We are hardwired by our Creator to seek it and find it, and we will find it even as we try to ditch it. Even as we shake our fists at the establishment, we will simply organize around antiestablishment. You can't get out from under the communal nature of humankind.

Here's what I want to do. I want to dive into a text and show you that we *are* a community of faith, and here's my outline: we have the same Savior, we have the same story (sort of), we have the same assignment, and we have one another. That's my outline, and I want to dive into 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 to show you this. Again, a familiar text for many of us.

**"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not**

**counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."**

Remember the outline. Here's where I want to come right out of the gate and just celebrate this. We, as The Village Church, if you're a Christian here, have the same Savior. You and I worship and serve the same King. In fact, in 1 Peter he would say it like this: "Once you were not a people, and now you are the people of God." There has been in you and me a fundamental shift in identity, so that my primary identity now is found in Christ and not in any other definition or defining element of what I might be.

I am Anglo, but I am not primarily Anglo. I am a husband, but I am not primarily a husband. I am a father, but I am not primarily a father. I am a pastor, but I am not primarily a pastor. I have been bought by the blood of Christ, adopted into the family of God, and placed among the communion of saints, so that you and I now become a type of family that transcends all of my other identity markers, which means I am more loyal to you in our shared identity underneath that Savior than anything else that would mark us as being similar or different.

It's not hard for us to think that this transcends our similarities, but I'm telling you this transcends our differences. I have more in common with an Iraqi national who loves Jesus Christ than I do with an American who wants nothing to do with him. You can email me about that. I'm not embarrassed to say it. I have more in common with an Iranian national who loves Jesus Christ than I do with an American who wants nothing to do with Jesus.

My family is the household of faith. I will be spending eternity with a group of men and women who have bent the knee to Jesus. We have the same Savior. You and I have said yes to the same Lord. That makes us a community of faith. On top of that same Savior, you and I have the same story. Now I know you're like, "Man, we don't have the same story," so I want to put "sort of" on the end of that. Let's talk about that. Let me set up two poles. Then we'll talk about the space between the two poles.

There are some of you in here who grew up in households where faith was nurtured, where you were encouraged to consider Jesus, where the Bible was a centerpoint of your home, and very early on in your life by the grace of God (don't ever despise your story)... Your heart was awakened to the beauty of Jesus Christ when you were 6 or 7 years old. You were baptized. You couldn't articulate much. You just knew the Spirit of God had done something and you loved Jesus.

The story of your life is you've never been drunk, never been high, and you were a virgin when you got married. If there was a moral exam, you made an A-plus, maybe even got to teach the class a little. That would be your background and your story. You don't really cuss unless it's in your car by yourself. Then you feel really, really guilty about that.

Over *here*, some of you were born into darkness and it just got darker. You were not born in a home where these things were nurtured or cultivated. It was wild, it was dark, it was scary, and you tried to comfort yourself in any place you could find comfort. So you feel like you have little in common with this person. You grew up afraid. You grew up lonely. You gave yourself over to licentiousness, settling for temporary pleasures as a way to try to medicate the hurt and fear.

You certainly did not wait until you were married. You have full weekends you don't remember. You've battled some shame and regret your whole life until Christ came and saved you. So if those are the two poles and all of us find ourselves somewhere in there, then how can I say that because we have the same Savior we have the same story (sort of)? Well, I can do that because of how Jesus talks about what it means to become a Christian.

In Psalm 51:5, David writes, "**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.**" This needs to be said in Dallas, Texas, as often as people will say it. You cannot be born a Christian. Are you with me? You can't be born a Christian. You can be born a Muslim. You can be born a Hindu. You cannot be born a Christian.

The Bible knows nothing of someone who would say, "I've been a Christian my whole life." You haven't. I hope what you're trying to say is "From my earliest memories, I remember submitting to Christ and doing my best to follow him," but you're not born... Your parents' faith holds no sway over your soul. It has to be *your* faith. Your parents' faith cannot be passed down as an inheritance. The inheritance is Jesus. You can't be born a Christian.

On top of that, the Bible gets really graphic when it comes to man-made righteousness. The prophet Isaiah says all of our righteousness is as filthy rags. I'm not going to get into what that actually translates as in the Hebrew. It's nasty. Our righteousness is but filthy rags. He looks at the people in the Sermon on the Mount and says, "Unless your righteousness supersedes the Pharisees, you have no place in the kingdom of God."

Now look right at me. On your best day, you are a junior varsity third string tight end on a team that doesn't use a tight end when it comes to morality in comparison with the Pharisees. They had the Torah memorized, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Some of us wrestle in February to get through Leviticus and Numbers in our Bible reading plan. We're like, "When are we going to get to John or the Psalms or something? Something narrative."

In this, they're just morally better than we are. Jesus says, "You're going to have to do better than that." What he was doing was laying bare the emptiness of man-made righteousness. In fact, later on in the New Testament it would be said that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. All of us, regardless of our background, have the same starting place. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Some of us have done that with our own righteousness. Some of us have done that with licentiousness. All of us need Jesus. There is no salvation outside of him. In this way, foundationally, we have the same story. The residual effects of the backgrounds can vary, but I would still argue that the self-righteous person does far more damage than they think they're doing to their own souls and to others.

They tend to be judgmental, they tend to be harsh, and they do all of that under the banner of Jesus. It's not uncommon to find people who become de-churched people or want nothing to do with Jesus Christ because they came across someone who didn't really understand what grace and love and mercy in Christ is actually like but were built on their own self-righteousness, so they sowed into the hearts of other people a real distaste for the things of God.

We both need Jesus to save us. In fact, when I meet people at The Village who are like, "Yeah, man. I'm from an Independent Baptist background," I'm like, "Oh, the mercy of God. Come here. I'm glad you're still with us." You get a really rigid, legalistic kind of practice of religion, and somebody makes it through there by the grace of God and walks in humility and lowliness and a praise of God's glorious grace, that's a real miracle. All salvation is death to life. All of it is miraculous, but I've found coming out of that is pretty stunning.

So, we have the same Savior, we have the same story, but we also have the same assignment. I love this. Let's look together at verse 18. **"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the**

**message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."**

I love this. What's happening here is we have the same Savior and the same story, and God has put together his team in a given place at a given time for the glory of his name and the joy of his people, and then he has given us all the same assignment. You and I are operating in different domains, but we have been given the same task. You and I have been put in different domains. I am in the domain of vocational ministry. You are in the domain of sales, education, government, business, law.

You have been put in a domain, and God's big plan to seek and save the lost is not preachers; it's you being sprinkled across every domain that exists as ambassadors of Christ, as those carrying the message of reconciliation. If you're bored with your faith, that's on you, because you've been given an epic task and then empowered to fulfill that task. This is not my job. *We* have been called to this. This is just my spot to play.

We've been talking about this for 15 years. Your job, your neighborhood, the places you inhabit... All of that is on purpose. All of that, according to Psalm 139 and Acts 17, has been set up so that when men seek God to find him he won't be far off. Do you know why he's not far off? Because *you're* there. We are ministers of reconciliation, ambassadors for Christ.

Look at all that we have in common. Regardless of ethnicity, regardless of socioeconomic status, regardless of whether or not we grew up in a home that was nurturing or one that was abusive, here we are. We have the same Savior, and Christ found us where we were. Think of how we might encourage one another, how we might stir one another up, how we might ask questions of one another that go below the empty, vain connection-type stuff and into more communal relationship.

Then from there we have one another. There are 54 "one anothers" in the New Testament...to love one another, be gracious to one another, show kindness to one another, forgive one another, and my favorite, outdo one another in honor. I think I like that one because you can make a game of it. You can be competitive. "Oh, you're going to take the last parking spot all the way out? Well, I parked at home and walked, bro. What's up now? Outdone in honor. Chandler wins today." You can kind of have some fun with it in your Home Group or with those you do life deeply with.

Here we are, outdoing one another in honor, loving one another, serving one another. We become these things for one another. We don't demand it of people. We become it for the good of the church

and the glory of Jesus Christ. I love this concept. When we think about The Village Church, which is just a subset of the universal church, what we see is that God has brought us together at this time, in this proximity, for the glory of his name and our joy. We have one another.

According to the Bible, I need you and you need me. You have giftings and ways of seeing and this testimony with our shared Savior that I need to become all that God would have me become, and you need one another to become all that God wants to do in this place. The reason I want to lean on this is that after 15 years in the area, I meet a lot of people who go to The Village, and I'm honing in on what that means.

What that means is *when* we go, that's where we go. Let me say it again. Coming to church and listening to sermons is not anywhere in the Bible God's prescription for his people. Belonging to the church is God's prescription. Not *going* to; *belonging* to. That's a lot scarier and a lot more nerve-racking than just sitting in because you like the music and sometimes I can be funny. You rob only yourself. You don't rob The Village; you rob you. I guess in a way you rob us.

Again, this goes back to an achievement-based culture. I think some of us sit and never really engage because what would happen if people actually knew us? What would happen if they found out we don't know squat and our wife knows so much more than we do and she's just dragging us along? We don't want to be seen as weak like that. Remember we talked about this the first week? Men cannot be seen as weak, and women must be seen as perfect. That's the culture in which we live.

So what if they find out we're *not* perfect? What if they find out we *are* weak? What will we do then? I know. Let's just not let anybody know us, and let's just make ourselves feel better by going to church once or twice a month and checking that box. This isn't what the Lord has for you. This isn't the good design. It's certainly not what we see in the Godhead. We've been given one another, put in this given place. We didn't pick this team; God did. Think about that. I didn't pick this team. I would've picked a couple of billionaire titers.

I didn't put us together; God put us together, because God knew what he was trying to bake up here. I don't know. I can see in the Word of God what we are to be, but it's God who brings in the ingredients for a unique work in a unique location to accomplish his purposes to the ends of the earth. God has brought us together and made us a family. No one in this room would have picked this eclectic, weird group of humanity. God has done that. It's a really beautiful thing to consider.

All of the pieces are here now. We have the same Savior, we have the same story (sort of), we have the same assignment, and we have one another. All of the pieces are here. We have intent, we have identity, we have interest, and we have experience with God, but...here's where I want to press a little bit...God wants more for us than mere connection.

What we see in the Godhead is not connection; it's communion. That's a deeper level of knowing than just kind of being connected. I think the best way to understand these concepts around communing versus connecting is to get into the difference between knowing and being known. Curt Thompson is a guy I enjoy reading. He wrote a book called *Anatomy of the Soul*. He wrote another book on shame. Both are beautiful reads if you want to read into some of this.

Here is his definition of knowing: "*Knowing*...brings power and influence. It is an activity that involves a primary subject...thinking, feeling, or acting while separated from the idea, object, or person toward which his or her thoughts, feelings, or actions are directed. This type of knowing is not so bad for facts. Not so good for people. [...] Ultimately, then, knowledge alone does not satisfy. What does satisfy is being known."

If I could take that definition and simplify it... It will not be hard for you to get enough information about anyone in the world and become a kind of expert on who they are and never have known that person and not be known by that person. If I could hit maybe close to home, I'm sure I could grab a couple of you brothers and we could go into Connection Central, have a cup of coffee, and you could tell me all about Dak Prescott.

You could tell me where he played his high school ball. You could tell me where he played in college, how he did in college. You even know his pregame music he listens to, what he likes to eat if there's a night game, what he wants to carb load with before he goes out there. You can tell me a history of injuries. You can tell me all of this, but you don't know him, and he certainly doesn't know you.

One of the things that happens in a world where achievement is king and knowledge is easy is we will use knowing to self-protect and shield against being known. This even happens theologically. We will know a lot about God and use that as a shield to not let anybody in to actually see who we are. You do this every time you throw some thoughts out about God in Home Group and in a coffee shop that kind of self-protects from where you feel not enough. This is using knowing to self-protect.

Now think back on this. God, three in one, makes man in his own image ("like us"), and you see this deep communion form between Adam and Eve so that they are naked and unashamed. One of the things I like to do often with you is show you when the world catches up to the Bible. What you see happening in this Genesis passage is psychology catching up to the Bible.

A theory began to be developed a couple of decades ago called *mirroring*. The concept of mirroring in psychology is the idea that you can never truly know yourself until you see yourself through the eyes of another. Psychology stumbled on that and was like, "This is game changing. We can really serve and help people get a deeper knowledge of themselves, walk in greater wholeness, and open up their capacity to walk in deeper relationship with others."

They're like, "We've figured it out." No, no, no. God showed us that in the first two chapters. Do you remember this? There was not a suitable helper for Adam. So what happened? All the creative order got in front of Adam. The horse was there. The horse was magnificent, beautiful. "I don't see myself in the horse." A labradoodle comes up, makes eye contact. Adam is like, "Brilliant. Doesn't shed. Quasi-obedient. A little hyper, but we can deal with that. Don't see myself. Lion?"

Through all of the animals, he looks and looks and looks. "Can't see me. Can't see me. Can't know myself." Then what happens? He goes to sleep, wakes up, and there's Eve. What does he say? "At last! Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. For out of man the woman has come. I see me." Now we have the possibility of being naked and unashamed because he can see himself.

What the Lord is ushering us into is not loose connections that occasionally have the word *Jesus* on them but deep communion with one another that involves risk and time and trust in the hope that what our souls are longing for in deep communion with one another will take place. This will require grace. It will require forgiveness.

I'm talking about this like this is easy. This is scary stuff. I think this is especially scary for men. Remember, we're talking about this in the context of an achievement-based culture. Here's what happens. If you have learned your whole life to hold up the shield... You've learned your whole life how to self-protect with knowing.

You don't want anybody to know what's really going on behind this shield. You don't want anybody to know you're afraid. You don't want to let anyone know your marriage is not going well. You don't

want anybody to know you're not perfect and you're stressed out. "In fact, if the kids wouldn't have gone back to school I would've died; my hair was falling out." You don't want to let anybody past that, so what you have is a shield of knowing.

You have good Bible verses you can throw out. You can say all of the facts you know, but facts aren't the experience of grace that transforms us. To get there you have to put the shield down. Because that's so terrifying... Again, this is sociology. I love this stuff, because it's like they're discovering something the Bible teaches all the time. Like, "Eureka! We've discovered something." "That's roughly around 4,000 years old, but congrats."

Brené Brown would say when this happens, when I come up to this place where I'm longing for deeper communion, I'm known by a lot of people but feel alone, and nobody really knows who I am, we have three things we tend to do. The first is that we move away. We just immediately move away. I've seen this with men my whole life.

You let something start to feel squishy, to feel emotional... We call that at The Village *below the line*. You start getting below the line with dudes, and someone is going to make a joke. They're going to move away. It's going to be like, "Oh man, this thing happened. I was really struggling. I didn't know what to do." "Yeah, that's what your mom said."

It's like, "We can't do that. That's a little too raw. I'm not going in there. That's not what men do. Men are strong. I'm not going in there." So they'll make a joke. They move away from it. The very life they want is in it, and they can't step into it because it feels like every way they've learned to self-protect their whole life has to be laid down to get in there, so they refuse. They move away.

Others of us don't move *away*; we move *against*. You just make everybody your enemy. "Nobody can be trusted. I can't let anybody in. If people were to know what's really going on inside of me they would..." What happens is you kind of grow in hostility toward this whole idea or concept. You move against.

Here's the way I want to encourage you: or by the grace of God we can move *toward*. Let's be honest about moving toward. It's scary. We use the word *discombobulating* when we talk about it with staff. It's just discombobulating. I have learned to self-protect my whole life by being a harder worker and being able to get more done than most people. I've learned to get by on being charming and being able to out-argue.

This is how I defend myself from being perceived as weak or confused or not knowing what to do. Oh my gosh. What would happen if I laid that down and let people in? Here's what I'm not saying. I'm not saying go to Home Group this week and say, "Here are all of my deepest, darkest secrets." Don't do that, because I want to be straight with you. I don't know who's in your Home Group, and I'm sure that not everybody in there can be trusted with that information.

What I *am* saying is that we need to do the hard work of moving in, where you trust a little bit and see how the person does with that initial trust. One of the first things I have to do with people is I have to see whether or not I have to wear the cape for you. Do you expect me to be "Super Matt"? If you expect me to be Super Matt, then you and I can't go to any place that's vulnerable for me, but if you don't need me to be that...

When I think about my crew, when I think about Josh Patterson, when I think about Brian Miller, when I think about Brad Payne, when I think about Trevor Joy, when I think about the guys who are in my life, none of those brothers need me to be Matt Chandler. I get to just be Matt. That means sometimes I'm confused, sometimes I don't know what to do, and sometimes I'm really anxious and hoping the Lord will move past and move through my weaknesses despite me.

There are times that Lauren and I don't see eye to eye and I'm not quite sure how to get out of that. There are times that just the pace of life can feel like too much for me. Over the last 15 years, one little nugget at a time, that group I just mentioned showed themselves trustworthy, so that we're to the point now where I have zero secrets with those brothers.

In fact (I use this as an illustration all the time because it just shows how far we're willing to go), Josh Patterson and Brian Miller get a copy of my tax returns every year, because I can't be a brother who's telling everybody to be generous and then live a life that's not marked by generosity. I want accountability. I want those who know every aspect of how I think, how I spend, how I interact, and I've invited them to call me out when I need to be called out. Move toward brothers and sisters.

That does mean taking some risks. It can go badly. Look at me. It can go badly. You can be betrayed. Some idiot might not know what to do with the information you're giving them. It's worth it. To be known... Like, *you*. Not that thing you're projecting...*you*. It's at that point that you can see yourself through the eyes of another. Now you'll actually believe that God can see you as you are.

Think about how this mirroring concept works to create conflict in marriages. If you get married and you need your spouse to justify in you something that's actually not there, then think about how... "You don't respect me." Yeah, you're not respectable. What she should mirror in you is that you're a broken person who still can be shown grace.

It's when we can see this through the eyes of others that we're capable of receiving this from God and walking in greater communion with one another and with him. This will never happen as long as you're unwilling to risk putting your shield down and putting that projected image of yourself down. We can't get there if you're not willing to do that.

God has given us several pictures of this. I'm going to use one biblical, and then I want to use one that's one of my favorites in the natural order. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 14... Here's God's imagery. When God talks about communing together, being a community of faith together, he always uses organic illustrations. He never uses mechanical illustrations.

Not like, "My people are like the iPhone, multiple apps that can accomplish..." No, no, no. It's not instantaneous. It's always organic. It's always kind of strung out, and if you really dove into the illustration God has given us you could see this takes time. This is very organic. This is not very controllable, but it can be nurtured. So let's look at this, starting in 1 Corinthians 12:14.

**"For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?"**

Here's what you get. You get this picture of a human body in desperate need of the different parts. If we had more time to dive into this text it would talk about honorable parts and dishonorable parts and what God has exalted versus what man exalts, but he's painting this picture of our deep need for one another inside the organic concept of a human body with different functions and different gifts, all in desperate need of one another and that we're growing together as a body.

This is what it'll look like to be a communion of saints rather than a connected group of saints: one body growing together, hurting together, rejoicing together, entering into the victories and losses of one another in deep and abiding ways. Here's the picture from nature. It's how I pray for us now. I

don't know if you've ever seen a cluster of aspen trees. Probably one of the more beautiful trees in the world. If you've ever been to Colorado or up into Jackson Hole out west, this is the most numerous kind of tree in the United States.

Now here's something unique about the aspen tree. A singular aspen tree is not the organism itself, but actually, aspen groves or clusters are singular organisms, which means there's a deep embedded root system that shoots up all of these aspens, so when you're looking at a forest of aspen trees you're actually looking at a singular organism that supports and comes alongside of one another and shares nutrients with one another for the good of the grove.

The taller trees are drinking in sun and sending it down to those smaller trees that aren't getting sun because of how tall the other trees are, and the nutrients that are being pulled from the soil are being shot up to the highest trees. You get this picture of a grove, a cluster. They're actually called *clones* of aspen trees. Aspen trees are always growing, even in the winter. At times, that root system will defer nutrients to healthier trees to support a sicker tree. I wish I could get into other aspects.

The largest grove known to man is in Utah and weighs 6,600 tons. Isn't that insane? One of the more beautiful trees on earth is actually a grove, a singular organism with a strong root system, where the healthy support the weak and where nutrients are given to all for the good of the grove or the cluster. This is how I'm praying for us. I think we *are* a community of faith. In fact, we've never used any other language except that we're a community of faith, a household of faith.

What I'm longing for for our church is for men and women to drop the shield, take the risk, and step into greater vulnerability for greater communion, because this is what God has purchased for you in Jesus Christ. We have the same Savior, we have the same story, we have the same assignment, and we have one another. Oh, what we're missing out on when we loosely connect rather than deeply commune. This is the invitation.

Men, I think you especially need this. Men love to organize around tasks. You get men talking about emotions and they'll be like, "Hey, how about we just go down to Houston and rebuild? Can we do that? That sounds godly. Let's do that." So is the dread of being seen as who we actually are. Brothers, look at me. Life is found there, though. Calm is found there. Peace is found there.

I pray you'll eventually grow weary of holding up that self-protection. Maybe you're already feeling it. Maybe you feel angry and exhausted and everything feels thin. Well, maybe it's because you

know but are not known. This is available. It just requires that step forward in vulnerability, trusting a little to see who you might continue to trust and build this with. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for these men and women. I do thank you for the invitation to participate in the dance of the Godhead, to be in communion with the saints. We pray that you would deepen our connections here and that we might move past connection and into communion with one another, being fully known and experiencing the grace of God as others mirror to us mercy, forgiveness, compassion. Protect us. These things are scary to us. Give us wisdom as we interact with one another.

Help our Home Groups and our friendships be places where these are safe conversations. Put to death in us anything that's self-righteous. Put to death in us anything that is not compassionate and kind, that we might become a kind of counterculture that sits opposed to predominant culture in love for one another, in support of one another, in encouragement of one another, and in the building up of the body. Might we be a bright, beautiful cluster of aspen trees here in this city, in this area, for your glory and our good. Help us. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.