

The Necessity of Community

a sermon in the series

A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

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I Corinthians 12:12-14

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For in fact the body is not one member but many.

Today I resume the series we suspended in the spring titled a *Gospel Orientated, Mission-Driven, and Community-Centered Church*. I suspended the series on purpose so we could resume in a timely manner in order to introduce a new ministry soon to begin here at Oak Grove Baptist Church. These series of messages have the intent of teaching us what a local church is to be and what it's to look like. So I resume this series today hoping I can refresh our memories and hit some of the highlights of the previous messages. Today I want to focus on the necessity of why church should be a community and why it's important we define the church as a community rather than a worship service on a given day of the week.

In this series we began with Gospel-orientation. To be Gospel-orientated means that the entire focus of your life is on the Gospel. Why is this to be the perspective from which we live? The answer is because the Gospel addresses everything about your life—every aspect, every perspective. The church springs from and is birthed by the Gospel and by the Gospel it is sustained. It is through the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that it grows into maturity.

One of the problems with the modern American church is that we have separated from and culled out the Gospel. We have separated it from the major teaching of the church and relegated it to be something evangelistic only. Once a person is brought to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, it's as if the Gospel is no longer relevant or important in that person's life and they now need to be taught more substantial and deeper truths. This has been a fundamental problem with the church and one of the reasons we have the difficulties we have. We have taken the very life source of the church away from it and the very means by which the church grows.

Paul the Apostle said in his epistle to the Ephesians that the only way the church can grow into the likeness and the fullness of God is by the Gospel. He said in Ephesians 4 that we are to “speak the truth in love” to one another and we have wrongly defined what that means. We have defined

it to mean that when there is something in a brother or sister we don't like, we have to muster up the courage and go to them and say something like this, "Now brother, sister, this is not easy for me but the Bible commands me to speak the truth to you, and I want to do it in love, so here goes." Certainly there is a place in the body of Christ for loving correction, no doubt the Bible addresses that, but it's not what the Apostle Paul is dealing with in Ephesians 4:15. He is saying the church grows by speaking the truth. And what is the truth? He defines it in verses 17-21 as the Gospel. It's the truth that you learned in Christ, the truth about Jesus that you've been taught. This is the truth you are to speak one to another in love.

In other words, the Gospel addresses every issue, every challenge, every pain, and every problem of life, and shows us how to navigate through it all. Therefore, if our church is going to grow into the likeness of Jesus we must learn to take the Gospel and apply it to a person's problem or pain or challenge. We have to learn to think that way ourselves; it begins with you and me. My problems, my opportunities, my challenges, my blessings, I need to see them through the lens of Gospel truth. I am to receive everything, whether it is pain or prosperity, blessing or obstacle, through the filter of the Gospel because the Gospel addresses all of those things.

When we become Gospel-orientated people we grow and encourage and edify one another. This is so contrary to the concept of church today. Today the church paradigm is that the church is a place for a "worship service." Location and event is the main way in which we look at the local body of believers. But this is what Jesus argued against, when He said:

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:21-24)

What does He mean? He shifted the paradigm of worship when He said it is no longer an event at a specific location. Worship for the Jews up to this point was exactly that, it was bringing your offerings and sacrifices of praise and confession to Jerusalem where they would be offered to the Lord who dwelled there in the temple. Jesus is saying no more of that because now the individual believer will be the temple, the dwelling place of God. They will be inhabited by God Himself and wherever they are and whatever they do, their whole life will become an offering, a sacrifice of worship and praise unto Him.

What we have experienced thus far this morning should be nothing more than an overflow of what you and I are experiencing Monday through Saturday. It should not be a place where we get revived, renewed, or reinvigorated for the workweek. What should be happening, if you are a temple of the Spirit and you are worshipping God wherever you are, is that all of your life has a Gospel-orientation. Meaning all of your life is lived in light of the death and resurrection of Christ. If that is the case, then you are worshipping the Lord, and what you experience during the week—whether it be garage sales or God answering prayers for work schedules or being able

to eat a bowl of ice cream when you've never been able to do that—is experienced collectively as we come together in an overflow of our personal, individual worship. (Earlier in the service, some testified of God's activity in these areas of their lives.) That's how Gospel orientation impacts our everyday lives and the life of this body.

Sadly, we make *this* the “hour of worship” and we don't worship until we return again at the same time and place the next week. This is the problem. We need to redefine church as a community centered body.

I. Redefining Church as Community-Centered

Instead of thinking of ourselves as individual members of the church, we are to think of ourselves as a whole, as a unit. This is what Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians and to our church. Yes, you're many, yes, you're individuals, but you come together to support something greater than you, the whole, the unit, the church, the body of Jesus Christ. Look at how many times he uses those words in these verses.

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For in fact the body is not one member but many. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14)

The concept of the local church from the Apostle Paul, whether it's in Corinth or Paducah or at Oak Grove Baptist church, is that we come together collectively as individuals, but not only individuals; we are part of a collective whole, a unit called the church, a living organism. That living organism is something that works in perfect harmony and synchronization for a greater purpose than just surviving life. That's the local church and that's what a community does. It is a mutual support of one another for a larger more distinct purpose than just each other individually.

We defined the local church several months ago as this:

Church = A local church is a community of believers whose lives depend upon each other and interact with each other through food, relationship, and sharing of life for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Let me unpack that for us because it's been several months since we've heard that definition. A church ought to be a community of believers whose lives depend upon each other. Let us stop right there for a moment. There is to be interdependency among each other. We're not here as individuals hearing a sermon, singing a few songs, praying a few prayers, giving some money, and then going back to our individual homes, individual lives, and individual workplaces. No. Church is to be a body of believers that come together because they need one another. Why do we need one another? For a simple yet profound reason: we cannot live the Christian life on our own.

You say, “But I am living the Christian life and I’m not so plugged in, in fact I wish I were more plugged in but I’m doing alright by myself.” Oh, but, dear friend, you would do much better in community. I don’t say this in arrogance or anger but I dare anyone to put to practice community as God defines community, as we see it in the New Testament, and tell me that your Christian life will not be better. You will experience it and your life will personally be transformed as a result. Transformed by it! You cannot live in interdependence with other believers and have life continue as the status quo. There is to be a coming together because we need one another.

There has to be a dependency because that’s the way Christ designed it. God did not design for you to make a profession of faith, join a church, and then go out and do the best you can. Nor did He design us to compartmentalize our faith. That’s what we often do and that’s why there is no interdependency. Christianity is just a part of our life and for some of us it’s not a great part. How do I know that? Because the church is not a great priority in your life.

I maintain, to some people’s chagrin and disappointment, that there is no way you adequately love Jesus and not love the church. Why? Because He loved her and gave Himself for her. He died for her so it seems to me we ought to be able to live for her. This is the grand purpose for which we are made. It’s not for economic prosperity or survival. Our salvation brought us into a community of people whom we mutually support and without this interdependency we are painfully aware we are not thriving spiritually. This is what I’m trying to communicate with this definition. Our lives depend upon each other and we *interact*—how can there be interdependency without interaction?

Praying for each other while separated from the body is not the kind of dependency we’re talking about. You need more than my prayers and I need more than your prayers. I need the gifts of the Spirit that are in you and you need the Jesus that’s in each of us. In order for that to happen there has to be interaction beyond just a worship service. Let’s be frank, how much interaction is really occurring here right now? The only interaction is you interacting with me if you’re listening. If you’re listening, I want to interact with you but it takes two. You’ve got to listen and think about what’s being said and prayerfully receive it, if it is to benefit you. But a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening is not true community. If it’s not true community it’s not true church. This is not church and we are not “having church.” That is a wrong statement and wrong thinking.

Church is interdependency based on interaction. We have tried to facilitate it the best we can in the couple of hours we’re together on Sunday morning and Sunday night; we’ve tried to open up the service so it’s not just a couple of people ministering out of their giftedness and this morning is an example of that. I have been thoroughly helped by the people who have shared this morning. From the testimony to the Scripture to the prayers, I have been helped this morning for being here, but that is so minuscule compared to what should be happening as interaction is taking place.

Wednesday night is probably the closest thing we have to community life. We come together, we share a meal, we bear one another’s burdens, we hear your heart, you pray for us, we pray for

you. There is some interaction but as we continue in this definition we must ask how we should interact. The definition says we are to interact through food, relationships, and sharing of life. Everything about life should be shared.

We specify food for a reason—because that's what the New Testament did. We'll talk about that in a few minutes. We talk about relationship, which is not defined as knowing one another and saying, "Hello, how are you?" and then getting into our separate vehicles and going to our separate homes and not have anything to do with each other until we gather again the following week. That's not relationship. That's not sharing life. A community of believers is a group of people who have said "no" to traditional paradigms concerning church and "yes" to a life-transforming paradigm of sharing life with other believers.

This is difficult because we are trained to be individuals in our society and even more so in the last 50 or 60 years than any other point in history. When we have a philosophy of life that says that even when you read a book it doesn't matter what the author intended for you to get out of it, but what matters is what you get out of it, we have a problem. It's called postmodernism. This is what's being taught and it's our society's framework. You hear it on TV don't you? From politicians to business people to Hollywood, you hear them say something to the effect of, "So long as I'm not hurting anybody, it doesn't matter what I do." That individualistic spirit has crept in and has shaped our thinking even of the church.

*"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."
(Ephesians 5:25)*

It's not wrong to say, "Jesus loved me and died for me," that is absolute fact but if you leave it at that you leave most of what Jesus accomplished on the cross undone. He didn't just die for you or me, He died for *her*. He died for the church, the collective whole, the unit. He didn't just die for you as an individual, He died for you as an individual to bring you into the collective whole, the body of Jesus, the church. That's why you've been saved! Not so you could have that little heart compartment filled and say, "Jesus is there!" and now you can continue with your regularly scheduled life with your ambitions just like you always had. No, He saved you to bring you into the body that He so loves and gave Himself for. Maybe I can illustrate this.

In the design labs of car companies, a group of designers will make from clay the car to actual scale they plan to manufacture. It will look exactly like the new car that will roll out of the assembly line, be loaded on a transporter and sold to you and sit in your garage. But one thing the clay model cannot do and that is move, drive, and work like the car it represents. Why? Well, for one reason, it's only one part; it's a huge chunk of clay and therefore, because it has no moving parts it cannot perform like a car. It looks like a car but it really isn't. One grand piece that looks every bit like the car sitting in your driveway is not a real moving car because it has no real moving parts. A car works because of the amazing synchronization of all its thousands of parts.

The same is true with you. You are to look like Christ and even function as Jesus; but you cannot by yourself. You were not designed to do that. The body of Christ is an amazing collection of many parts, moving in an incredible synchronization that becomes the same as if Jesus were here, on the earth, as He once was. You see, even though you have Jesus in you and He can live His life through you, the world will not see what Jesus looks like through only one person. That's not possible. It's not possible for one person to have all the character traits of our Lord and all the gifts of the Spirit. Not even the Apostle Paul could do that. In God's design, He took many, whom He has gifted differently, and brings them together in a cohesion that makes one. So now as the world watches this body interact and depend on one another they see what Jesus looks like in a better, fuller, more complete way.

What does the community do to make that happen? It does certain things together.

II. The Practices of Community

You have to go to Acts 2 to see this. In Acts 2 starting in verse 42 you see how the community functions and how they interact and what they share.

A. Hearing God's Word.

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (v. 42)

The early Christians came together and heard the Word preached and taught. But this was not the sum total of what the church does and yet we've made it to be so. It's important that the Word of God be central, we're not arguing that; it's important we come together on a regular basis and let someone gifted in preaching and teaching do that so we can be instructed in the Word of God. The Word of God is Jesus, it is Christ, and as you're being taught, the Spirit of God uses that, applies it to your life, and your life is advanced because of it. It's very important we do that, but it's not all the early church did. So why is it basically all we do? We come around and let people teach us and preach to us but that's not all of church life. That's a very small part. Listen to what else they did.

B. Eating Together.

"... in the breaking of bread" (v. 42)

"... and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (v. 46)

They ate together. This is extremely important. The Holy Spirit mentions this specifically. If you remember a few months ago I dwelt on this quite a bit because eating together is huge in the life of community. I even gave you a theology of food. There is something about eating together that brings people's lives together. It just does.

When two nations are striving or have disagreements what do they often do? They come together, have counsel meetings, summit meetings, and often during those meetings are times when the leaders eat together. They schedule this because there is something about eating together that is having something in common. It relaxes people and opens people to respond and receive, to give and take.

C. Praying Together.

“...and in prayers.” (v. 42)

They didn't just pray for each other in their individual homes, they came together and prayed and laid hands on one another. They prayed and wept and claimed God's promises together. They prayed together.

D. Sharing Material Goods.

“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” (vs. 44-45)

They shared life's resources. How do you do that if you're not interacting with each other, knowing what the other needs? Do you know the needs of the people seated around you? Maybe you have something someone needs and maybe you need it too or maybe you're willing to sacrifice because that's what a community of believers does. They live their lives not for themselves but for the welfare of one another. Their attention is not on their welfare but on the welfare of the other. This is the purpose of community: sharing.

E. “Hanging Out.”

They hung out together.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship.” (v. 42)

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house.” (v. 46)

What did they do? They just hung out with one another. They got into each other's lives. Oh, that sounds scary, doesn't it? *I don't want anybody messing around in my life. I don't want anybody tinkering with it, I don't want anybody examining it, no, I'm not into that. Just give me a good worship service, preach to me, I'll listen and take it and I'll go home and try to put it into practice.*

That's not the early church and it's not the latter church. The latter church has to be like the early church in spirit and in practice, if we are to experience the same Jesus they experienced.

Let me ask two questions before I bring this message to a conclusion.

Why must we be a community, if we are to be a church?

You and I are not a real church unless we are first a community. It doesn't matter what we have come to believe church is or how we have come to define it. We're not talking about our definitions of church we're talking about Jesus'—He's the one who died for it so He gets to define it. There is no such thing as being a legitimate church unless there is a legitimate community because church is a community. How do we answer this question, why must we be a community, if we are to be a church?

1. One person cannot be Christ on the earth.

You cannot be all this world needs. The infinite God dwells within you but you're not infinite and therefore your expression of His life will not be infinite either. It takes a collective group, the many parts coming together, so that this area might get a glimpse of what Jesus does as we interact with one another.

2. It takes more than one to demonstrate and display love.

You may be the most loving person in the entire world but if there were no one to love no one would know how loving you are. God has designed a body so that they can interact one with another so the world can see what the community of Christ looks like. "This is what the community of faith is like, this is what fellowship with Jesus is like." You say, "I can be loving to the sinner." Yes, you can. But notice what Jesus said, "By this all men shall know you are My disciples, in that you love **one another.**" We are commanded to love the unlovable but you can't do it alone. Jesus tied it to the community.

When the community is operating as Jesus defined it in this interdependency, sharing and caring one for another, seeing the love of Christ displayed to those who don't always deserve it, there is something evangelistic that takes place. So much so that Jesus would say this would be the spearhead of His church's evangelism. I believe one of the reasons we're not seeing many people converted is because we are not demonstrating this kind of love before them so they can see it. I'm convinced that if they saw the love of Christ that we have for one another they would be saved, we're just not together enough to demonstrate it. They have no idea of what the community of faith is really like, but if they could see it some would want it, they would even die for it. They're starving for it they just don't believe it exists.

3. The life of the Spirit works through the gifts of the Spirit.

My second question is this, why must you be part of the community if you are to be a Christian?

I do not mean that you're not a Christian if you're not in a community of faith in a local church, but I am saying that you cannot live the Christian life, the life Jesus died and rose again to give you, without other believers. It's impossible. You say, "What about those in prison or solitary confinement for their faith?" That's the exception not the rule and God has special grace for those situations but even then, in those places, they would delight to have another brother or sister. Tell me they wouldn't think their life had been blessed immensely if they could be with other Christians in fellowship. So, yes, while you can be a Christian without a local church, you cannot be a growing, thriving, successful Christian without a community with mutual dependency. Jesus designed it that way and you cannot break His mold and thrive. I'll give you four reasons we need community to thrive.

1. To solve the loneliness issue.

Have you ever heard the cliché, "Alone in a crowd"? We all experience loneliness to one degree or another so that even in a crowded room we can feel alone, but when you are sharing your life and there is an interdependency and fulfillment that is a solution for the loneliness problem. Are you lonely? Then you need to find some brothers and sisters and just say, "You need to get in my life and I need to get in yours because this is not working."

2. To practice self-sacrifice and love for others.

How can you practice self-sacrifice without sacrificing yourself for someone else's good?

3. To promote edification in others.

Once again, the whole issue is not coming here and as individuals we get what we want and go home (which is the normal way of thinking about church). No, you are a part of something bigger than your own life. You come here to sacrifice yourself for the wellbeing and good of the whole body. We typically think quite opposite. We want the church to thrive and be successful because it will be better for me.

I know there is not a person in this room who is truly a Christian that does not want Oak Grove Baptist to thrive and be a vibrant church for our Lord. But there are some of us in this room, including me, who don't always know how to get there because we've never been in that kind of environment. We've been in traditional churches all of our lives. Churches that go through the motions of what is expected but never get to the heart of what God intended. They might come up with different programs and have different names and labels but it ends up being the same thing, just repackaged. When was the last time you were in such a community of believers as I've described to you, where people knew you at your worst and they still loved you? And you knew them at their worst and you didn't give up on them?

Typically our whole concept of church is this, if our church would grow we would have more people and resources. Maybe then we could have a stronger children's ministry or a greater

youth department. Maybe we could even have women's ministries or men's ministries. Maybe we could even have a softball team. If we had more people we could do more things and that would be wonderful for my family. This would be great resources for me. Maybe we could even have a school or at least a preschool. That would be great for our young parents. So, yeah, let's see our church grow because the bigger it gets the more things that are available.

That's exactly the same concept the world has.

I remember when the first Wal-Mart came to Springfield, Missouri. We had department stores, we had hardware stores and clothing stores and grocery stores, but here came this big building and now a lot of what those stores offered was in one place. Clothing, toys, the dime stores, the Woolworths, it was all there in one location! But what happened when the Super Wal-Mart came? Now you had groceries and automotive, you had everything, and the regular Walmart died. Why? Because people wanted to go where it was bigger and there was more resources.

They didn't go to the Super Wal-Mart because they were interested in contributing to its cause, they contributed to Wal-Mart because it had what they wanted or needed. And that mentality has shifted to the church.

People are going from one place to another trying to find what's best for them. God designed the church for you to come here to find out what's best for the *body*, to find out who needs what you are gifted in and what you possess so that you might give it like Jesus, self-sacrificially. That's community!

4. To promote edification in you.

This is not about you sacrificing to your own neglect and nobody cares about you. The more you give the more you will receive. The more you put the spiritual progress of a suffering brother and sister ahead of yours, your spiritual progress will always be addressed. God will make sure of it. The body is designed for it. Listen to me. My thumb is a part of this body. It helps to make my body do and function as God designed. But I don't need my thumb to live. I don't want to be without it but if it has to be I can. But this thumb cannot live without me. Without the thumb I'm going to be limited in my gripping abilities, but I can still grip, maybe not as good, but it can happen. But without me, the finger has no hope of existence.

This is the body. This is what our text is telling us. "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ." You are baptized into one body so you might thrive as you give your functionality to the body. When you do that, you will always be edified.

III. Obstacles Preventing Community

This will not be easy. We've tried for years to implement some of this and we're going to accelerate it in the next couple of months. We're going to facilitate it but it will still be difficult because of our culture.

A. American Culture.

The lifestyle of American culture is opposed to the biblical mandate of community. We do not understand real community because our way of life does not really allow for it.

One of the things that works against this is our work schedules. We've suffered this as a church. We've got so many of us who work long hours it makes it hard to get together and interact.

Then there are children's school and extra-curricular activities. It seems our culture has so put a demand on children and their activities that we don't have time for church life.

Then there's the individualistic spirit we spoke of earlier.

But there's another obstacle I haven't touched on in this series that I want to leave you with. There is a huge reason why this will be fought, why this will be discouraged, and why there will be a difficulty in making this the testimony of the church and it is the fear factor.

B. Fear.

I. The fear of exposure.

Fear of being found out that you are not as spiritual or that you don't have things together as you portray. The fear of being found out. It is a big fear and a huge obstacle. We would rather limp spiritually than thrive spiritually, if it meant being exposed. There is something frightening about knowing others will find out maybe you don't pray regularly or that your Bible study is very scant. But have you thought about what's going to happen in your Bible study and prayer life if you continue doing the same things you're doing now? What hope do you have of it improving? Be honest. Take off the mask. Let people know, "This is where I am in my walk with God," and let the power of the Spirit of God in them move into you. That's the way God designed it. So what you have faults? We've all got blemishes; we've all got spiritual issues, every one of us, including me. There has to be a point where we confront our fear and say to our fear that God has something better for us.

"If we are to use the word community meaningfully, we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together,' and to 'delight in each other, make others' conditions our own.'" (M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drumbeat*) p. 113

That's it. Taking the mask off and learning to let people be who they are in their spiritual journey. Let them be where they are and learn to walk with them from that point on, not stand over here and say, "Well, when you get to my level then we can fellowship." You learn to make that person's spiritual weakness as your own. You embrace it so it becomes your issue.

2. The fear of rejection.

A young entrepreneur started his own business. He rented a fantastic office and hired an interior decorator to make it look well appointed, but he didn't actually have any customers yet. When he saw a man come into reception area, he wanted to at least give the illusion of busyness, so he picked up the phone and pretended he was in the middle of an important deal. He threw out figures and acted like he was negotiating a huge deal. Finally, he hung up and said to the visitor, "Hello, may I help you?"

"Yes sir," the man said. "I'm from the phone company; I'm here to install your phone line."

We are so afraid of being rejected and being seen for who we really are so we will put masks on and go through this charade, trying to fool everyone into believing we are what we are not. But if you learn, by God's help—and it will take that—to overcome your fear of being rejected, we can grow as a community. No doubt some people will reject you, but they're not the broken and the contrite ones and they're not the ones Jesus dwells with. We want to dwell where He is. Right? Take off the mask. Say yes to being rejected. Jesus was rejected for you.

Dustin Willis tells in his book, *Life in Community*—and I recommend that book to everyone—about a young woman named Emily who was afraid of exposure. This is what he relayed about her. I'm going to read a sentence, make a comment, and then read the rest of the story.

Only by persevering over the long haul will we see genuine love produce personal transformation.

That is a remarkable statement and profoundly biblical. I want to make a statement and it will be odd but just listen. The Bible alone cannot transform you. It will never transform you. Hearing sermons will not transform you. Being taught will not transform you. Now God uses the Word, He only uses the Word by the Spirit to transform us, but God intended that Word to be displayed in a community of love. Speaking the truth in love. When you just have truth after truth after truth without it being demonstrated and being backed up by love just beats you up. That's all it can do. That's all it will ever do. But when that truth is given in a community that truly loves you, the power to transform is amazing. That's what Dustin Willis is saying. Then he demonstrates it in this illustration:

Emily, a typical college student, was unable to commit to anything. By her junior year she had changed majors four times, broken up with three boyfriends, and rotated between churches like a merry-go-round. She was attractive and likable, but after a few minutes of conversation, you could tell that she was hiding something. Her most recent church stop led her to

our church, and she was immediately pursued by a number of women about joining a small group. She would go but whenever the conversation shifted to her, she would give superficial, trite, and unclear answers. When people would press her for more, she would bail and move to another small group.

People in the church grew wear of her evasiveness. But Elizabeth stuck with her. She called her, texted her, took her to lunch, and never gave up. Finally one day Emily removed her mask and confess the sin that other had committed against her as a child. She wept over the guilt and shame that clouded her understanding of God and the church.

Elizabeth's perseverance was rewarded with the fruit of Emily's life transformation. Often we undermine this process when we fail to do the hard, long work of fighting for honesty in relationships. (Life in Community, p. 85)

I think that story illustrates what Paul is trying to say in our text. That's what true church life is like, people being real and being loved for their genuineness and honesty and transparency. It ought not to grieve you that the same person shares the same prayer request week after week after week and they seem to make no progress. What we need to do is continue to speak the truth in love and love that person, not give up on them, but make their weakness our own and fight against it as if it were our own problem. Pray for it as if it was our own problem. Struggle with it as if it was our own struggle because this is what God designed this church to do, to carry one another along, to bear one another up, so that together, not individually, but as one whole unit, we stand before Him beautiful, pristine, gloriously spotless without wrinkle or blemish. That's what God saved you to be a part of. That's what He's calling us to be. Let's join Him. Amen.