



## The Christian Life - Grace and Identity

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Restoring the Broken Image in our Family Lives and Community - John 17:1-5; 20-26

### Introduction

How are we to think about our lives? The most basic thing we can say about our human life is that God created us to be like Himself – to reflect His goodness, holiness and love. The New Testament calls us to the restoration of this image through the love of Christ and by the power of the Spirit.

**1.** Fundamental to God's beauty and glory is that He is not alone. The Lord our God is not one, but three persons – who have loved each other, honored and glorified each other, communicated together, enjoyed each other through all eternity.

We are made in this likeness, not to be persons alone, persons who, as we are alone, reflect God's likeness, but persons in community who together reflect God's likeness. This was our original human calling – to be in community with God our Creator and to be in community with one another.

**2.** Sin and the fall change all this. It is because sin corrupts and damages them internally that sin drives and tears them apart, apart from God, apart from each other.

They are no longer one – rather they are now two, ashamed of themselves before God and each other, blaming and accusing each other, blaming and accusing God.

All sin is corrosive of our relationships. All sin damages community. We might even say that there are no purely individual sins.

All sin drives us apart from each other – even when no one else sees the sin, or is aware of it, because sin in corroding my life brings shame, guilt, self-despising – and these things alienate me from community with others. This is why in Lewis' *Great Divorce* the worst sinners are living in total isolation in utter darkness. They are completely alone!

**3.** This alienating effect of all sin is made worse – is aggravated – by two elements of our cultural situation today.

**a).** The emphasis on individualism in our heritage certainly has beautiful aspects to it. Each person has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But this has become an idol, the idol of self-fulfillment. I can decide for myself what life is for me, what will fulfill me, what will make me free, what will make me happy.

This self-loving impulse that is encouraged by our culture is powerfully destructive of marriage, of family, of friendship, of community at every level. Our cultures have simply encouraged the sinful nature and declared it to be good.

**b).** The very structure of our culture, of our cities, fragments relationships. We all live in five or six semi-communities with dozens of shallow acquaintances. We meet one 'community' of people at school, another at work, another at church, another at play, another where we live (if we even know our actual neighbors at all!).

Rapid change in a generation - my mother in her rural town was known well by her baker and butcher and post office staff.

Three or four years ago when many people died during a heat wave in Chicago Martin Marty spoke about life back in the 50s and 60s. People were neighborly. Today, people are terrified of their neighbors.

In our cities loneliness is the greatest problem. People do not even know how to develop relationships that might lead to marriage, so marriage is postponed for many years. When

people visit a church in a major city they do not want to give out their address, their phone number, a way to be contacted – even though they are lonely.

In many of our churches we are an audience rather than a congregation that is a community and the household and family of God.

**4.** But, Christ has come to bring us restoration: to restore us to fellowship with God – and to restore us to fellowship with each other. Christ is our peace with God and our peace with one another.

What does Christ command us to do? He calls us to live a life of love, love for God and love for one another.

John, Jesus' beloved disciple, teaches us that we cannot claim to love God if we do not love one another (1 John 4:7-12).

When Paul declares that we are being renewed in the image of our creator he writes about our relationships – not about some private, isolated, individual kind of holiness (Colossians 3:9-15).

When Jesus prays for us – and this is His prayer every day – He prays that we might be one, as He and the Father are one (John 17:11, 21 – 23). He prays that we might have restored relationships. He prays that we might live in love and community, just as He and the Father live in love and in community.

**5.** What will it take for us to realize this community?

First, resist individualism – resist the culture's constant pressure to think of your-self first and always.

Second, in your living situation - make some practical choices. Put the television in the basement – so that you have to make an effort to go and watch it! Eat meals together - without the television. Read to your children and to each other. Do things together!

Third, be involved deeply in your wider families, serve one another; don't just think about what will most benefit your nuclear family. My wife as a shining example of this – we are to live to serve

other people and not ourselves.

Fourth, practice hospitality and visit people who are hurting and sick, both believer and unbeliever.

Fifth, and most important, how are we to do all this, to be restored to one another in true community? Abide in Christ. It is, Jesus says, as He is in us, and we are in Him, that we will be one, that we will live in community. He will dwell in you and He will enable you to love others. That is what He is praying for – so just ask Him, this is a prayer that He will always answer 'yes.'