

CONNECT (Belonging to a Family)

“God’s unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ.” (Eph. 1:5 NLT)

This morning, we’re going to start a new series we’re calling “Knowing Your Purpose.” Do you know your purpose? Do you know why God brought you into this world? That is an age-old question. What on Earth am I here for?

In this series, we’re going to look at three things, among other things, that God says he made you for. First, he made you to connect with others (that’s belonging to a family). Second, he made you to grow spiritually (that’s becoming like his Son Jesus). And third, he made you to serve others selflessly (that’s being like a mother). The third part falls on Mother’s Day and we’re giving a tribute to our mothers with that message. Don’t forget to bring your mothers and friends on Mother’s Day.

The Bible teaches us and tells us that the reason God created the entire universe is that God wanted a family. God is love and He wanted to love us. So He created us and He created you specifically to be a part of His family. He wants that family to last forever in eternity in heaven for those who choose him.

The Bible tells us *“God’s unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ.” (Eph. 1:5 NLT)*

So, since the beginning of time it has been God’s plan to form a family. And the way to become a part of it is you choose to become a part of it. The question is: What is God’s family?

The family of God is the church. Church is not a building. Church is not an institution. Church is not an organization. Church is not a club. Church is not a place you go to. Church is a family you’re a part of. It is the spiritual family of God.

Your spiritual family is actually going to outlast your physical family. Physical families don't last. Kids grow up. They move away. People die. There's death, there's divorce. There are a lot of things that cause families to split up. No human family lasts. It dies or something happens. People get married and move off and start their own families. But your spiritual family, your relationship to others in the family of God, is going to last forever.

Now, if you choose to join God's family, as I said, there are some family responsibilities. The number one responsibility is this: you have to learn to love everybody else in God's family. That's the number one responsibility. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, *"I'm giving you a new commandment: love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for each other will prove to the world that you are my disciples."*

How do you know that you're in the family of God? One of the ways you know is you love other people in the family of God. You love other followers of Christ. If you don't, guess what? You're probably not in the family of God.

Why does God want us to love each other? There are three reasons.

First, it makes us like Him. God is love and God wants us to be like Him, like Father, like son or daughter. He says, "I created you. I'm loving. I love you. I want you to learn to love everybody else."

Second, God likes it when His kids get along together. You who are parents understand this. When your kids are upset with each other, they're irritated, they're fighting you don't like that. You love it when your kids get along together. God loves it when His kids get along together. So He says I want you to love, just as I have loved you, I want you to learn to love other believers.

Not only that, it is practice for eternity. When you learn to love other people, you're practicing one of the things you're going to do in heaven. One of the things you're going to do is you're going to love God.

Another thing you're going to do is you're going to love the other people there. So what does God want you to do while you're here on earth? Practice to love.

The Bible calls the act of loving others in the spiritual family – fellowship. That's the word for loving other people in the family. Fellowship has four levels and that's what I'm going to talk about today. These four levels tell you how to grow deeper in your relationships. How to have more significant, fulfilling, satisfying, intimate relationships with other people. Whether you ever get married or not, you need to know how to build relationships of love.

The Bible teaches that there are four levels of fellowship. They go from shallow to deep. Number one, the first level of fellowship is the

1. Fellowship of Sharing Together.

All love starts with sharing. You start sharing conversations. You start sharing meals. You start sharing ideas. The more you share with someone the more you grow to love them. If you don't share with them, you don't learn to love them. The more you share, the closer you're going to get.

The first followers of Jesus were famous for being loving people. Why were they such loving people? The Bible says this in Acts 2:44 "*All the believers met together constantly and shared everything with each other.*" (TLB) The reason why they were famous for their loving was they spent time together. You can't build a relationship without spending time together. If you're going to have a strong marriage you've got to spend time together. If you're going to have a strong friendship, you've got to spend time together. Not just virtually, as in Facebook, but physically. Fellowship takes time.

If you've ever seen a marriage that was really strong and thought, I wish I had a marriage like that. Or if you've ever seen two women or two men who had a really strong friendship, they had a deep, abiding friendship and you thought,

“They are so lucky to have that kind of deep friendship with each other”, it’s not luck at all. It was a choice. You build a friendship, you build a marriage, you build a relationship by spending time with people. If you don’t spend time with people you’re not ever going to have any deep relationships. If it’s just “Hi. How are you? Good to see you. I’m on the phone. See you later. I’ll be home later.” That doesn’t work. You’ve got to spend time. It’s not luck at all. You must make time.

If you don’t have any really close friends, I’m sorry. It’s not luck. You’re just not spending enough time with people. It’s your choice. This is the fellowship of sharing. It’s the shallowest level but it’s the level that gets you started in learning how to love. You start sharing conversation.

If you have a weak marriage you’re not spending enough time together. If you have a weak friendship you’re not spending enough time together. That’s why we emphasize here the need to get involved in a small group.

Small groups are the laboratory for learning how to love. You know why? Because most people didn’t learn how to love growing up in their family. They learned conditional love. They didn’t learn unconditional love. That’s why we have small groups which we call home groups, to help you learn as an adult some of the things you didn’t learn as a kid. You can’t be too busy for it.

The Bible says “*Let us not give up the habit of meeting together.* [Notice it’s a habit. You do it all the time.] *Instead let us encourage one another.*” (Heb. 10:25 GNT) You’re always going to need encouragement for your life. So you’re always going to need to be in a home group where you’re meeting together. I hope you never give up the habit.

Did you know that for the first three hundred years of Christianity there were no church buildings? Everybody met in homes. That’s why we have small groups in homes. It’s the way they did it in the Bible. They didn’t meet in big buildings.

They met in homes. Why? Because in opening your homes you let people into your life. And you get to know people.

What do I share? Two things.

First you share your experiences. What happened to you this week? Good times, bad times, what you're going through. A little bit of everything. This is what we call testimony time or praise time. You share experiences and you learn from each other.

Part of growing up is learning how to share. No kid automatically shares. Every kid is naturally selfish – “Mine! I don't want to share my toys!” – If you've ever been a parent you know one of the biggest lessons of life is teaching kids how to share. The rule is this, the more you meet together the closer you're going to get. You're not very close to the people in your small group yet. But the more you meet the closer you will get. So you share experiences.

The other thing you share is you share support at this first level of love. Romans 12:15 says, “*Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.*” You know the cool thing about this? When you share a joy it is doubled. On the other hand, when you share a tough time you're going through it is halved, cut in half. So every time you're in a small group and you share something good that happened to you, it doubles the joy in your life. Every time you share something bad that happened to you, it cuts it in half because other people are helping carry it. That's why God says the first level of fellowship is learning to share – sharing together.

There's a second level of love that God wants you to learn. The fellowship of sharing is just the shallowest level.

2. Fellowship of Belonging Together.

For love to grow deep in a relationship, a marriage, a friendship, a group, you have to go beyond sharing. Because love is a commitment.

This is what level two is all about. It's being committed to somebody else. Being committed to a church, being committed to a group, being committed to a team, being committed in a marriage, being committed to a friendship. You move beyond just sharing and hanging out together. Now you're going to learn a deeper level of love, which is the level of commitment. It's the level of belonging.

Belonging is the difference between dating and getting married. I share with a lot of people, but I belong to my wife. And she belongs to me. She belongs to me and I belong to her. Why? Because we have made a commitment of belonging and that took our love to a deeper level than just living together, sharing or whatever. It's the difference between being an attender of a church and a member of a church. Belonging. It's the difference between being a spectator and being an actor. Belonging is the difference between being an outsider watching stuff happen and being an insider and helping make it happen. That's belonging.

The Bible says that God wants every one of us to belong to a church family.

"You are members of God's very own family...and you belong in God's household with every other Christian." (Eph. 2:19 TLB) Being a Christian is more than just believing, it involves belonging. You may be a believer, but are you a believer? To be in God's family you've got to be a believer.

The Bible says this in Romans 12:5 (NIV), *"In Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others."* Did you know that if you're in God's family you belong to every other believer?

I was going to do this but I thought it might embarrass you. I was going to have you turn to the person next to you and say "You belong to me and I belong to you." But, let's try that anyway. Some wives are saying to their husbands, "You belong to me and your money belongs to me."

Belonging is not optional. The Bible says, *"Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."* (1 John 14:21 NIV) It isn't optional.

There's a third level of love. God wants you to go even deeper in your love. In your relationships in your marriage, in your small group, in your church because life's all about learning how to love.

First he says there's sharing together. Then he says there's a deeper level than that, belonging together. That's commitment.

Then He says the third level is serving together.

3. The Fellowship of Serving Together.

If you want to deepen the love in your marriage, if you want to deepen the love in your small group, if you want to deepen the love in your friendship start serving together.

At this level you start working together. You start collaborating. You join forces, you pool resources. You work together. You partner for a common purpose. When you partner with somebody in a common purpose, guess what? Your love grows deeper for that person and their love grows deeper for you. When a small group partners together for a purpose it just takes that group one level deeper.

The Bible word for fellowship in the Greek is the word *koinonia* and it's also translated "partnership." Those of you who are business people know that when you make partner in a company that's a big deal. It means you are now on the inside. You're not just an employee. It's a big deal to become a partner.

But God offers to you the greatest partnership you will ever experience. A partnership in the greatest cause in the world, the kingdom of God. A partnership in His family that's going to last forever. A partnership that's going to last far longer than any business partnership will ever, ever last.

The Bible says "*We are partners working together for God.*" (1 Cor. 3:9a GNT) When you do that it draws you closer to the people you're partnering with.

God never meant for you to serve Him alone. The Bible tells us the advantages of partnering with others in ministry, in service, in making the world a better place.

First, you get more done. *“Two people are better than one because they get more done by working together.”* (Eccl. 4:9 NCV)

Those of you who enjoy sports know that there was a very famous article in the New York *Times* several years back. The title of it was “You don’t need Superstars to Win.” The author did a study of all the winning sports teams and they found that the teams that really keep competing year after year and winning in their area of expertise were not those with the biggest superstars, the highest paid guys. It is those who know how to work together. A team that knows how to be a team. A team of normal people working together will always outlast the team that has the superstar but they’re not working together. Can anybody say *Wizards*?

Not only do you get more done but you actually grow personally. You grow more personally when you’re working with others.

Why do parents put their kids in team sports? Because one of the greatest lessons in life is learning how to work with other people. If you don’t learn how to work with other people you’re not going to make it in life.

The Bible says this in Ephesians 4:16 (NLT), *“Under his direction, the whole body [taking about the church] is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”* Notice that when you help other people, God says it helps you grow. When other people work together we all grow together.

You see, this church needs you. God did not bring you here to sit and soak and sour. He brought you here to serve. There’s something in your life, in your background, in your talent, in your contacts, in your interests, in your desires, in your passions, in your hobbies, that God says I brought you to Fil-Am because I want to use that here.

Galatians 6:10 (NCV) in the Bible says this *“When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of believers.”*

The deepest level of love...it starts with sharing, that's where love begins. Then you learn to belong. That's commitment. Then you go deeper through serving. If you want a relationship to be strong, start serving God together.

But the deepest level of love is what the Bible calls t

4. The Fellowship of Suffering Together.

Love grows deepest when we suffer together. This is the deepest level of fellowship. When you share a pain, when you share a hurt, when you share a heartache. Suffering together draws you closer.

I want to state unapologetically without any hesitation that Anabel and I will never get a divorce. The reason why we'll never get a divorce is two things.

One, we love Jesus Christ and when we got married 14 years ago we locked the escape hatch on our marriage and threw away the key. We may kill each other but we will never, ever divorce.

The second reason is not just because we love God and love Jesus. But because we have been through too much suffering together. I don't want to waste that. We don't want to waste all that pain.

I read the story of this guy who had been slipping in and out of a coma for several months. Things looked grim, but his wife was by his bedside every single day. One day as he slipped back into consciousness, he motioned for her to come close to him. She pulled the chair close to the bed and leaned her ear close to be able to hear him.

“You know” he whispered, his eyes filling with tears, “you have been with me through all the bad times. When I got fired, you stuck right beside me. When my business went under, you were there. When we lost the house, you were there.

When I got shot, you stuck with me. When my health started failing, you were still by my side. “And you know what?”

“What, dear?” she asked gently.

“I think you bring me bad luck.”

Honestly when it comes to suffering as Christians, as believers, we here in America don't have any knowledge of this compared to the rest of the world. We don't understand how persecution actually brings people closer together.

But that is a real definite reality in dozens of countries around the world where being a follower of Jesus means if you're found out, you could be killed. This will probably shock you but since Jesus Christ walked on earth over seventy million people have been killed for being Christians. Seventy million since Jesus walked on the earth. The amazing thing about that is sixty-five percent of those were in the twentieth century. About forty five million people were killed because they refused to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ. Most of them by Communists in the twentieth century. That's so sad and appalling. That's why in our prayer meeting on Wednesday nights, we pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. We go to persecution.com and there we look at some of the prayer requests, and there are tons of them, and we lift them up to the Lord. That's why I encourage you to join us every Wednesday night at our place. The prayer group is growing and I want you to be a part of it. You don't have to commit to coming every Wednesday. You can do it twice a month or even once a month. And I promise you, we will not only pray. We'll also have picture-taking. Seriously, come early, before 8 PM, and we'll share a meal together. And even share experiences. So, there's fellowship even in a prayer meeting.

Now, the amazing thing about suffering is it's humanizing. It makes us more human. And it is unifying. It brings us together in spite of all of our differences. You remember how unified America was right after 911? Nobody was going,

Democrat... Republican... this religion... that religion.... No. Everybody was just American. Why? Because suffering unifies people. It brings people together.

That is the Fellowship of Suffering.

Galatians 6:2 (NLT) says “*Share each other’s troubles and problems and in this way you obey the law of Christ.*” What is the law of Christ? It is love your neighbor as yourself. In serving, we talk about doing your part, in suffering, you share your heart.

Do you ever do that with anybody? Do you ever take any time in your life to help somebody who’s in pain? If you’re not helping anybody in pain ever you’re too busy. You’re missing the major point in life. Because the bottom line is it’s all about relationships.

I have been at the deathbed of many, many people. At the deathbed I’ve never had anybody say as their dying wish, “Please bring me my diplomas I want to look at them one more time.” Nobody has ever said, “Bring me my Little League or bowling trophies.” Nobody ever says, “Bring me my stock certificates.” Because when somebody’s dying *things* don’t comfort. When somebody’s dying in the last moment of life everybody eventually realizes it’s all about relationships. They want people around them who love them when they’re dying. Eventually everybody realizes what’s most important is relationships.

I just hope as your pastor you’ll learn it before your last breath. That you realize that relationships are more important than accomplishments. Relationships are more important than achievements. Relationships are more important than success. Relationships are more important than money. Because life is about learning how to love. If you don’t learn how to love God, and you don’t learn how to love people, your life is wasted away. It doesn’t matter a whole lot. Because you didn’t learn the two most important lessons in life – learning how to love God and learning how to love other people.

This is what it means to be part of a church family, a part of Christ's body. The Bible says *"If one member suffers, all suffer together."* (1 Cor. 12:26 ESV) I don't know if you've noticed but if you've got a toothache your whole body hurts. When one part of the body of Christ hurts, we should all hurt with it.

Romans 12:10 (GW) says, *"Be devoted to each other like a loving family."* Real fellowship is being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ.

Everybody knows John 3:16 *"God so loved the world..."* but most people don't know 1 John 3:16. *"We know what real love is because Christ gave his life for us. So we ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters."* That means being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ. That's the kind of love Jesus has for you.

When the Roman Empire was throwing Christians to the lions a secular historical wrote this famous quote about Christians: "Behold how they love one another."

Let me close by saying, at what level are you in God's family? Let me give you four words: sharing, belonging, serving, and suffering. These are the four levels of love. The four levels of fellowship.

How do you know if you're in God's family? The invitation is open to everybody but there's one common condition. Galatians 3:26 (NLT), *"So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus."* How do you get in God's family? Put your faith in Christ Jesus.