

Captivating

Community

A STUDY ABOUT
FINDING
YOURSELF AND
YOUR PEOPLE
IN ALL FACETS
OF LIFE

HANNAH FATHEREE

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my loving husband, Taylor, who has supported my writing journey and desire to use my words to love people better.

I would also like to dedicate this study to my dearest friends. Thank you for being the core community I needed in the best and worst seasons of my life. This study would not exist without these amazing individuals as they've taught me valuable lessons about what biblical community is all about.

Introduction

When my husband and I got engaged, we joked at the difficulty I would face in choosing bridesmaids because I had too many friends to count. My community extended from friends who I grew up with to friends I had recently met in graduate school. These individuals provided consistency, intentionality, and vulnerability in the time that I had known them, allowing our friendships to flourish no matter where we were in life.

Choosing a bridal party as well as friends to help with other tasks throughout our wedding day boiled down to one question: who were those friends that were my community? Who were those people that have seen me and loved me at my worst and at my best? Who were those individuals that no matter what, extended grace and spoke truth? At the end of the day, who really knew me?

After much thought and prayer, I was able to determine who those people were. These individuals stood by me or served on our special day with love and joy, just as I had hoped they would. Even better, every one of those individuals are still a part of my core community today. I've made additional friends since then, also joining my core community, because of similar attributes presented: consistency, intentionality, and honesty.

I've learned in this life that true community is essential, but it is not defined by where you live, how old you are, what you look like, or what you do. Community is a group of people who will lead with grace and land in truth.

Who are those people for you? Do you have those people?

Think back to a time when you went through a difficult season: a break up, loss of a loved one, or loss of a job. Maybe difficult moments don't cross your mind but particular struggles come to the forefront that seem to never go away: anxiety, loneliness, or anger. Better yet, think of an exciting season in life where someone genuinely rejoiced with you. Anybody come to mind?

In the midst of your most difficult or exciting seasons, what did you do? Better yet, who did you turn to?

Hopefully, there have been times you turned to a strong support system that offered constructive help or expressed joy, ultimately walking with you in that season. I beg to guess there have been times where, like me, you have turned to someone that ultimately hurt rather than helped. Maybe they weren't truly there for you, betrayed your trust, or acted in jealousy. Or maybe, you didn't turn to anybody at all and tried to face that season alone.

Regardless of how you cope through the ups and downs of life, one thing is for sure: We weren't made to walk through life alone (Genesis 2:18). Who you turn to is important. Community matters.

The Captivating Community Bible study exists to help you learn who you are and to find your people. A strong supportive community will help you be all that you are called to be. Whether you're 15 or 50, we all need community, but community takes work! This study will walk through practical steps to learn what effective community is, why we need it, how we obtain it, and how it prospers. We will dive into what scripture says about community and answer the difficult questions finding community brings.

This study incorporates a variety of activities, questions, and scriptures to read. So often I feel as if we dive into studies or devotionals that challenge us and we rarely put the time, thought and effort it deserves. Let me encourage you by saying these activities and questions have been thoughtfully incorporated into this study to understand the importance of community and to help you find your people. Remember my motto as you dive in each week: you get out what you put in.

Session One: What is community?

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friend." - John 15:13

What is community to you? Pause for a minute and write down your own definition.

Community is: _____

Personally, community is a group of people who fellowship with one another. Community has the base of common interests whether religion, characteristics, likes/dislikes, hobbies, or personality types. They're the people who will lend an ear when you need to talk, but respond with honesty no matter what. True biblical community lifts you up and encourages you to be who God has called you to be.

Let me be clear: there is a difference in friendship and community. Community creates friendships. Not all friendships create community.

A strong community will cultivate friendships based on honesty, vulnerability and intentionality. While sometimes, friendships are solely based on surface level similarities. Community has the courage to speak truth over what you want to hear whereas friendships may just tell you what you want to hear.

The relationship I was in before I met Taylor was unhealthy at best. For months, I ignored red flags until some people in my community finally sat me down and told me it was time to move on. This was a hard truth to hear, but I needed it. When Taylor and I met and began dating, I was so nervous the same thing would happen again. Not wanting to get too invested and face heartbreak again, I asked my community that knew Taylor their thoughts on him and our relationship. While ultimately I had to pray through this phase, my community could see things I couldn't and shed light to positives or negatives. Fortunately, they saw the good in him that I did. In both scenarios, God used my community to openly and honestly share things I needed to hear. They saw how Taylor helped me move closer to Jesus and step into my calling.

Jennie Allen said it best: "[Biblical] Community is how we fulfill the charge to love one another, and encourage each other toward the upward call of Christ."

Now that we know what community is, why do we even need it?

When God created man in His image, He said it was very good (Genesis 1:13). But as we read in Genesis 2, God says, "it's not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper for him." As God is three in one, He is never alone. If man is made in His image, then we too do not need to walk through life alone. I imagine if God recognized the need for community and companionship in the beginning of creation, there must be some weight to it.

Going deeper, Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up."

Fortunately, scripture has a lot to say about friendship and community, but I think the need boils down to this: we are all a part of the body of Christ, made up of many parts (1 Cor 12:12). Every part is needed for a specific purpose which allows the body to work together. No part is more important than the other.

If we're all a part of the body of Christ, when one part struggles, the body struggles. When one part excels, the body excels. "The parts of the body will not take sides, and all of them will take care of one another (1 Cor 12:25)." God has uniquely created us with different skills and passions to make up the body of Christ to fulfill a purpose together: make disciples of all nations by loving Him with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves.

I think back to my season of engagement: all the excitement, preparation and pre-wedding jitters. The men and women involved in our wedding loved, served and equipped Taylor and I as we prepared for our special day. Throughout the engagement process, my core community of women frequently checked on me, asked how they could help, and offered advice when I needed it most. Their willingness to simply be there in the process resonated with me, as Paul describes a community that works together thrives together. Each person involved used their gifts to selflessly love us as we started our lives together. Without these individuals, Taylor and I would not have been as prepared for our wedding and the marriage that followed. They guided and advised us to grow together for His glory, praying over us and walking with us through the ups and downs of engagement.

Community exists to offer fellowship: bearing each other's burdens, sharpening each other, and loving one another as yourself. Biblical community offers companionship in lonely seasons, provides accountability when facing temptation, supports on the most difficult days, and rejoices with new seasons.

Going Deeper:

What are your goals for this study? _____

How do you find Biblical community that aligns with His word? _____

What are characteristics of a good friend/community to you?

What are your expectations when it comes to community?

Read: Mark 2:1-5, Romans 12:4-5

Reflect: _____

Session Two: Who are you?

"I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." - Psalm 139:14

Knowing who you are helps you determine what you need in Biblical community. What motivates you? What enables you and pushes you closer to Jesus? What hinders or tempts you?

While personality tests should not take the place of the gospel, they certainly help you learn about yourself, your needs, and others. There are countless personality tests out there, but for the sake of simplicity we'll look at the enneagram and love language test. The enneagram test helps you understand what motivates you, what your core fears are, and how you act in seasons of growth and stress. The love language test explains how you best receive love, and while this test is most often used for couples/romantic relationships, it still provides clarity from a community perspective.

I think it's important to know your personality type and love language as they explain two different aspects of who we are: what are our motivators and how do we receive love? When we know who we are and how we work, we can better communicate our needs, desires and thoughts with our community. These tests not only help you learn about yourself, but also help you know your community and how to better serve and love them.

For example, I'm an enneagram two who loves quality time and words of affirmation. My core community knows my deep desire for one on one time, encouraging words and wanting to help others. When my community needs help, they know they can call me and I'll be there in the drop of a hat. Sometimes this is a good thing and sometimes it means I take on too many tasks. In reverse, some of my closest friends are type sevens or love acts of service. With that, I try to utilize my passion to help others by serving these friends in ways they need help most or encouraging spontaneous adventures, even if small.

Let's break down the Enneagram numbers and love languages. As you read about each number or love language, think about which one you most identify with. It's important to not place your identity in your number, love language, or any other personality type. These tests are merely tools to help you learn more about who you are and how you work or process. Let's also remember that we are all unique individuals who can't and shouldn't fit into a box. If you're an enneagram three you may relate to qualities of an eight or a nine - and that's okay.

*Enneagram One:
The Reformer or
Perfectionist*

Key Motivators:
to be right,
purposeful,
maintain
accuracy/
consistency

Strengths: ethical,
responsible,
disciplined, reliable

Weaknesses:
holds grudges,
repressed
frustration with
self or others

*Enneagram Two:
The Helper*

Key Motivators:
to be loved,
wanted and
appreciated

Strengths:
selfless, loving,
empathetic

Weaknesses:
prideful,
manipulative

*Enneagram Three:
The Achiever*

Key Motivators:
to be successful,
receive
attention,
impress others

Strengths:
productive,
successful,
confident

Weaknesses:
deceptive,
overly
competitive

*Enneagram Four:
The Individualist*

Key Motivators:
to be unique,
find their
purpose, express
themselves

Strengths: creative,
compassionate,
inspirational

Weaknesses:
self-deprecating,
jealous

*Enneagram Five:
The Thinker or
Investigator*

Key Motivators:
to have great
knowledge and
be capable of
doing

Strengths: wise,
perceptive,
intelligent

Weaknesses:
greedy, arrogant

*Enneagram Six:
The Loyalist*

Key Motivators:
to feel secure
and supported
by peers, to have
guidance

Strengths:
devoted,
trustworthy,
genuine

Weaknesses:
paranoid,
anxious

*Enneagram Seven:
The Enthusiast or
Optimist*

Key Motivators:
to be happy and
satisfied, having
their needs met

Strengths:
optimistic,
energetic,
encouraging

Weaknesses:
gluttonous, self-
absorbed

*Enneagram Eight:
The Challenger*

Key Motivators:
to be in control,
prove their
strength, protect
self and others

Strengths:
strong,
dedicated,
charismatic

Weaknesses:
destructive,
hostile,
vindictive

*Enneagram Nine:
The Peacemaker*

Key Motivators:
to create
harmony/peace,
avoid conflict,
preserve

Strengths:
mediator,
loving,
trusting

Weaknesses:
passive, lazy,
indifferent

After looking at the nine different Enneagram types, which number do you identify with MOST? Remember, Enneagram numbers are about what motivates you.

Enneagram Number: _____

Love Languages Explained:

According to Dr. Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages*, the primary love languages are: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch. While it may feel self explanatory, it's important to understand all love languages, as others receive love differently than we do.

Words of Affirmation:

Verbal expressions of affection such as, "thank you for your help," "you looked really nice today," or "I really appreciate when you take time out of your day to talk to me." Arguments, insults, or harsh words typically have a greater impact on those who receive love most through words of affirmation.

Receiving gifts:

Includes tangible and intangible gifts that make someone feel loved or appreciated. This can be anything from receiving flowers on a weekday, buying a Starbucks gift card or their favorite latte, or crafting a homemade gift. Someone who enjoys receiving gifts appreciates the thoughtfulness behind a gift.

Acts of service:

Doing something helpful or kind for someone else. Taking initiative to wash the dishes, drop off a home cooked meal, or fill the car up with gas. Someone who appreciates acts of service will be hurt by lack of anticipated needs or help - especially in busy seasons.

Quality time:

Spending intentional time doing something you both love, without distractions. If you both love playing board games, sitting in a coffee shop or watching a movie, that time together will mean more than doing anything else. But if present with distractions, the person who needs quality time will feel disconnected.

Physical touch:

In a community sense, physical touch is platonic. This is probably the most difficult love language to work with when talking about community, as it's confined, but those who thrive with physical touch will appreciate a hug or closeness. Body language is important to those who love physical touch. Physical distance may make someone who appreciates physical touch feel disconnected.

Which love language do you identify with most and why?

Secondary love languages: Maybe two love languages equally stood out to you. Maybe you thought, "I really love gifts, but I also love when someone does something for me just to be kind." Our secondary love language is another way we enjoy receiving love; it just didn't secure the highest ranking. If you take the official love language quiz, you'll receive your top love language which scored the highest all the way to what was ranked last. Your secondary love language tallied as the second highest on your test. Generally speaking, if your first love language is unable to be met, receiving love by way of your secondary love language helps.

The best way I know how to explain this is by sharing insight to my love languages. My top love language is quality time, whether with friends or my husband. I thrive on one on one time with those I care about. But sometimes life gets busy and schedules don't align. When I'm unable to spend time with my closest loved ones, receiving words of affirmation serves as a helpful place holder until my primary love language of quality time can be met.

What do you believe is your secondary love language and why? _____

We've scratched the surface on personality types, but hopefully you have a better idea of who you are, if you didn't already know your type. One of the biggest aspects of growth for community starts with knowing who you are and knowing the others around you. Remember these tools as you grow your community and meet others. Ask your community who they are, how they receive love, or think and feel in different scenarios. The more we understand each other, the better we will grow in community.

For further information and full assessments about the Enneagram and The Five Love Languages, visit the websites below. Both tests are free of charge. Remember, answer the questions honestly, and answer based on how the quiz directs you. There are no wrong or bad answers!

<https://www.yourenneagramcoach.com/assessment-1>

<https://www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/>

Note: Enneagram Type information was gathered from The Enneagram Institute and Your Enneagram Coach. For further explanations on types, wings, stressors and growth, you can visit the following websites:

<https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-descriptions>

<https://www.yourenneagramcoach.com/types> .

Love language information derived from Dr. Gary Chapman's website www.5lovelanguages.com and book, "The 5 Love Languages." Visit the website or read Dr. Chapman's book for further information on love languages.

Going Deeper:

Are you surprised by your Enneagram or Love Language answers? _____

Based on those answers, what do you identify as your needs or desires when it comes to community? _____

What are your closest friends' enneagram numbers or love languages? _____

How do you interact or communicate with friends based on their differences in personality? _____

How can you better express who you are to grow closer in community? _____

Read: Matthew 5:14-16, Ephesians 1:3, Romans 15:7

Reflect: _____

Session Three: How do we get community?

"Therefore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." - 1 Corinthians 15:58

Thinking about the questions, "How do I make friends?" or "How do I find community?" honestly feels cringeworthy (because let's be real, the process of making friends IS cringeworthy at times). But if we're honest with ourselves, finding and keeping a strong community isn't as easy as it looks. Odds are, those around you feel the same way.

Captivating community looks different depending on what phase of life you're in. If you're in middle or high school your best chances of finding community may be at school, sports, or church. In college, well, it feels like there are infinite possibilities: classes, dining halls, campus ministries, churches, or other campus organizations. As an adult, seeking community usually happens in the workplace, church, small groups or other hobbies.

One thing is for sure: no matter what phase of life you're in, you have to work for community.

I graduated college a year early thanks to dual enrollment classes in high school and 18 hour semesters my last year of undergrad (don't recommend). I knew grad school was something I was supposed to pursue and knew it would be costly (hello student loans). I left almost all of my best friends in Athens, GA to finish up their last year of undergrad and moved to Louisville, KY, eight hours away. My family also moved from my hometown in Georgia to Tennessee so it really felt like we were starting over. My first month in Louisville was pretty decent. I had a great roommate, a cool internship, and an awesome cohort of classmates, but something was missing: strong biblical community. I had tried out a few churches and small groups but nothing felt "right." I wanted to feel like I fit in.

One of my best friends from undergrad, Laura, knew someone who attended one of the largest churches in the country which just so happened to be in Louisville. Laura introduced me to Adrienne and from there she welcomed me into the college age ministry. I attended their Sunday morning group and service and initially loved it. The following week, I was unable to attend Sunday morning due to work, but the college ministry was hosting their monthly worship night. Extremely exhausted from two 15-hour work days, I had little to no energy to attend this worship night. Trying to talk myself into staying home, God kept putting it on my heart to go. I knew deep down I could never expect to have a deep, biblical community if I didn't put myself out there and try to find a church or group home.

Reluctantly, I went.

Can I just pause for a minute and say that you are NOT alone if you're in a new place and are terrified to go somewhere new because you feel as if you're going to be all alone? Let me stop that train of thought quickly and say yes, it's scary and sometimes awkward. But I promise you there will be several other individuals who feel the same way.

I met several people that night, most of which are still some of my closest friends today. One of those people I ended up marrying. (Note: Don't attend church gatherings for the sole purpose of meeting a spouse, but it certainly is a great place to meet someone.)

When I went home that night my heart was extremely full. I felt like this church and college ministry was a great fit for me. Again, I knew I'd never find a church home if I didn't put myself out there.

The most important lesson you can take away from this session is this: community takes time. Community requires consistency. It's not a one and done thing. It's trial and error, visiting numerous places, grabbing coffee with multiple people, attending a group or service more than once, and not giving up.

Going Deeper:

Being totally honest with yourself and God, where do you feel like your sense of community is right now? _____

How consistent are you in pursuing community? _____

Where do you feel your needs and expectations are met or unmet? _____

What can you personally do to improve when captivating community? _____

What qualities or characteristics make up a strong community to you? _____

Read: Luke 6:31, Proverbs 18:24, Galatians 6:9

Reflect: _____

Session four: How do we get community? Part Two

"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a difficult time." - Proverbs 17:17

Maybe you have landed in a church, small group, campus ministry, etc. We now know that in order to get our foot in the door of community, we have to put in effort. But how do we go beyond the weekly meetings, conversations and prayer requests? How do we go from structured time together to pursuing community outside that 1-2 hours every week?

Depending on your love language and personality type, taking community to the next level is easier for some than others. If you're a type 2 like me, or love quality time, seeking others outside of a group or church is what you thrive on. Seeking that one on one intentional time is what makes you feel most connected and your desire for it is so strong, you almost don't stop pursuing community until you have it. But for those who have quality time on the bottom of their love languages or may be deeply introverted, taking that extra step may be more difficult for you.

We all want to have that person or few people who we can go to in the best times and worst times, but getting there requires work. Community requires several aspects such as intentionality, vulnerability, and consistency.

Let's go over a few key steps of captivating community:

Discernment:

Incorporating discernment into community sounds well, weird. I wouldn't typically piece these two words together, but hear me out. Sometimes there's an obvious choice of who to pursue (or not pursue) community with. Maybe it's a group of people who don't usually make good choices based on your values or have fundamentally different beliefs and faith base as you. There's the old saying, "you are the company you keep" and there's truth to it. Scripture outlines this in 1 Corinthians 15:33, "Do not be deceived. Bad company corrupts good morals." Odds are, you probably know those individuals in your life who are not the best influence and base for your community.

On a broader scale, sometimes there are numerous options to plug into. Perhaps there's a few campus ministries you enjoy or small group options at your church that work out with your schedule and you don't know which one to choose. This is a GOOD problem to have, but remember this: it's much more difficult to find your people when you engage in multiple groups. You'll find yourself spread too thin to where you won't be able to offer consistency and depth within your group. Pray about it and pick one. If after a few weeks or months it doesn't seem like a good fit, find another group. Strong communities will always be welcoming to new people. If they're not, they are probably not a group you want to invest in to begin with.

In high school, college, and now adulthood, I have always struggled feeling like I truly “fit in.” To cope, I would be a part of multiple friend groups, hopping from one group to the next depending on what each group was doing, or truly what I was invited to. On the outside, it looked as if I were the social butterfly (and I was), but on the inside, I just wanted to have a core group of people I could call my own. In each phase of life I had to discern where to invest the majority of my time. In many ways, there wasn’t a wrong answer. Each friend group consisted of like minded individuals who at the core believed the same thing: growing closer to Jesus together and making His name known. Each group offered diversity in age, interests, and looks, and it felt nearly impossible to “choose.” At the end of the day, I had to sit down and pray for discernment on where I would best find my people. Over time, I realized who those people were, ultimately encouraging me on my hardest days, loving me through my worst, and rejoicing with me through my best. This didn’t mean I cut the other individuals out of my life, but more so made sure I was consistent with my core group of community.

Consistency:

Let’s be real. It’s very difficult to captivate community without consistency. Without consistency, we aren’t as willing to open up or do life with others, ultimately defeating the purpose of biblical community. Community requires consistent time and communication. Time seems to be one of the most difficult aspects of community to provide as we continue to move forward in the digital age. Distractions and busyness often get the best of us - to the point where we don’t feel we have enough time to create consistency.

Looking at the life of Jesus, He did not rush. He stopped along His journeys to meet people where they are, ultimately building His community. He spent consistent time with His disciples to build a foundation so they would follow Him. Community also requires consistent communication. Truly, how can we expect to engage in conversations, be vulnerable, or build trust if communication is not consistent? The more we communicate, the more connected we become, making our steps towards community only greater.

Vulnerability:

This word makes most of us want to throw up. Sharing your innermost thoughts, struggles, or fears is scary. We often don't want to practice vulnerability for fear of being rejected, misunderstood, or have our trust betrayed. All of these feelings are valid. But if you've ever experienced true biblical community, you know the value and connection vulnerability brings. Truthfully, whatever it is you're going through, there will be someone else out there who is struggling in the same way. And if you decide to be vulnerable with someone one on one who isn't experiencing the same struggle, that's okay. Think of it this way: they will likely be able to provide you stronger biblical counsel and guidance. There is wisdom in practicing vulnerability with those in the same shoes as you AND with those who aren't. Back to point two, you probably won't be comfortable being vulnerable with a complete stranger. So how do you get to know someone? Spend time with them consistently. We're much more willing to be open with those we know and see on a regular basis.

Intentionality:

One of my favorite aspects in life. Being intentional is easier for some than others, but there is power in intentionality. How good do you feel when someone seeks you out wanting to spend time with you or ask how you're doing? Pretty great, right? Intentional actions such as reaching out to someone for prayer, asking how they're doing or spending quality time only promotes vulnerability and consistency. Being intentional only eases the process of opening up and creating connection.

Honesty & Trust:

I think these two traits go hand in hand. With more honesty comes greater trust. Not to point out a cliché here, but always being honest, no matter what the situation, will only further connect you to others. The moment you decide to not be totally honest with others begins the breaking of trust. We know broken trust leads to broken community, either temporarily or permanently. No matter how large or small, the truth will always be revealed at some point, and it's best to share truth from the beginning.

Loving Your Neighbor:

The two greatest commandments say to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-34). I don't think it's any mistake that Jesus incorporated loving your neighbor in the Greatest commandment. Why? When we love others as ourselves, we express patience, kindness, selflessness, without envy or pride, bearing and enduring all things (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). We are able to act unified as the body of Christ, meeting the needs of others and bearing burdens when we put love first.

Going Deeper:

From your perspective, rank the different aspects of pursuing community from easiest to hardest: discernment, consistency, vulnerability, intentionality, honesty and trust, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

1: _____

2: _____

3: _____

4: _____

5: _____

6: _____

Which do you find the hardest? Why? _____

Which one do you find easiest? Why? _____

What experiences from your past have made these aspects of captivating community difficult or easy? Be specific and honest with yourself. _____

How do you think your personality type relates to how you ranked these different aspects of pursuing community?

What qualities do you look for in a strong community?

Who is someone you can reach out to this week to spend intentional time with? _____

Where do you need to practice better intentionality or vulnerability? _____

How can you better connect with others? _____

Read: Luke 10:25-37, Proverbs 24:26-34

Reflect: _____

Session Five: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly in Community

"Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." - Proverbs 13:20

We all have positive and negative experiences with community. That's to be expected. But what we take away from any experience with community will only help us grow and improve as we move forward in life.

The Good

In the best case scenario, community is life giving. It provides you fellowship with others while allowing time to be vulnerable, share in your grievances, connect with others and sometimes just have a fun time.

The first semester of my freshman year at UGA was rough. I felt alone. I didn't seem to fit into any group. I struggled with my identity and what I believed about Christianity. All the things you experience when you go off on your own the first time and have to determine who you are and what you believe. I was attending two different churches that semester, trying to figure out the best fit. A family friend from back home knew a senior at UGA who attended one of the two churches I was going to at the time. He invited me to their weekly community group, or as we called it then, house church, and I decided to go. I also thought I was very cool driving to group with a senior guy in a convertible Audi who I also thought was cute. Maybe my motivations were off but it still got me there.

My first night there, a blond haired girl spoke up and said the most profound thing I had ever heard. So profound I don't even remember what she said. After our group, we were all hanging out and I decided to meet this girl. Maybe she'd be my mentor. To my surprise, she was a freshman too, struggling to find community. Her roommate and another girl were there as well and we all decided to get lunch at the dining hall the next day.

The girl I met? Yeah, my friend Laura. From that meeting, I was later introduced to a few more people who still are my closest community today.

What is a good experience you have with community?

Who are those friends in your life that have provided true biblical community? _____

The Bad

Every community experiences bad moments because we're all sinful humans who mess up every day. A relationship can overall be healthy yet experience unhealthy moments.

Here's an embarrassing example: My sophomore year of college was rough. There's a reason people call it the "sophomore slump." Some of my closest friends and I moved into a house (we thought we were so cool for signing our own lease) and were excited for what the year had to bring. I had been dating a guy for a few months who honestly was not good for me and certainly led me to some poor decisions throughout the year.

A few months in, we quickly learned who were the clean roommates and who were the messy ones. The funny part: there are two types of messy: clutter vs. dirt. Generally speaking I was one of the cleaner roommates (for the most part - I had my moments no doubt). My friend Laura on the other hand, was probably the cleanest in the house. With good reason, it drove her crazy when dishes piled up in the sink for days. We had a general rule of cleaning up after ourselves and even created a chore chart.

One particular Friday night that fall, one of my roommates and I knew the dishes had piled up all week and Laura was particularly bothered by it. To our defense, it was test week. Four tests, six homework assignments and two projects all due that week.

This friend and I thought it would be funny to leave a note by the dishes asking Laura to clean them up, knowing that she wouldn't take it funny. We hid in the downstairs bedroom by the kitchen and listened as Laura found the note, got upset and called a friend. She quickly walked out of our house and took time to gather her thoughts.

We were right. Laura didn't find it funny, which only made us think it was funnier. Needless to say we quickly went after Laura and told her it was a joke, cleaned the dishes and moved on. Laura was gracious enough to forgive us and let it go. But here was the problem: this wasn't the first or last time that year that I presented unhealthy moments in my friendship to Laura.

As I said earlier, community experiences unhealthy moments - sometimes seasons, because we're all sinful humans. Fortunately, I had a come to Jesus meeting and realized my behavior that year to many of my friends had some serious toxicity which led to some deep consequences. But because I had a gracious community on the other end, who accepted my apologies and repentance, and took on Christ likeness, those friendships were able to mend. Our friendship was able to mend because of honest conversations and apologies followed by action.

Fun fact: I'm still close friends with all those people to this day.

Where have you experienced unhealthy moments in community? _____

When have you been an unhealthy friend? _____

The Ugly

We've all experienced toxic community. At some point you've probably had a toxic friend, and in all honesty you've probably been the toxic friend before too.

What exactly is toxic community?

I found it quite difficult to nail down the definition of toxic community to one sentence, so I outlined five key characteristics that I've experienced, seen, or done so myself. In essence, toxic community either keeps you from drawing into your calling or causes you to not love your neighbor as yourself.

1. Toxic relationships and characteristics occur in a variety of ways. Probably the most important toxic trait to be aware of is when friends are placed above Jesus.

My friend Wyatt once told me one of the biggest truths I've heard regarding community: Friends don't replace your need for Jesus. They aren't a crutch nor are they your decision makers. You can't place God type expectations on a friend. When you do, you will always be let down. The only friend who won't let you down is Jesus.

Woof. How many times have you placed expectations on a friend that are really expectations for God? Or has someone ever placed those expectations on you? Pretty difficult to manage or obtain, right?

When I first moved to Louisville, KY for grad school, I faced a lot of loneliness. (Remember that story from week 3?) I frequently talked with my friends back at UGA and often felt let down when they didn't have time to talk. I placed my loneliness and desire for community in my friends who were hundreds of miles away, expecting them to lift me up and be there whenever I needed it. I hoped they would provide clarity and guidance on where to attend church, what internship to apply for or if a certain guy was worth dating. I expected them to fill the role God needed to, and it ultimately brought tension in some of my friendships. Are you starting to see how all these aspects of community fit together?

2. Another way community can be toxic is when a person(s) tells you what you WANT to hear over what you NEED to hear. Yeah, this one stings for me too.

Ladies, this one is especially for us. You know when the guy you've been dating pulls a total jerk move or your professor/boss adds a lot to your workload for seemingly no reason? What do you do? Probably go vent to your best friends, right? But why do we do that? To be honest, we go to these people because we know they will pick our side in the argument and tell us that we have every right to be angry or frustrated and let the other person know it.

Don't get me wrong, there is a time to feel frustration and your feelings are valid. But think about how you respond or how your mindset continues when these friends share what you want to hear: what sinful thoughts or actions do these responses lean towards? How much more frustrated are you the next time something happens?

A person or group who displays biblical community will lead with grace and land in truth. They are the ones who will provide an ear to listen but be honest in their response with how the Bible says you should move forward, even if you don't like their response. And friend, if you react in a manner that is not honorable to Christ, then it's time to consider if you're the toxic friend.

3. Toxic community is rooted in jealousy and comparison.

Have you ever struggled to be happy for someone based on their success? Especially if they achieve something you also want? To name a few: when you struggle to be happy for the friend who is in a new relationship, when you act possessive of a friend because they spent more time with someone else that week, or when a friend gets a new job or promotion and you are hoping for the same. Maybe jealousy creeps in because you were left out of a hiking trip and fear sets in that you will always be left out (also called FOMO). Comparison is deadly in community. Especially for girls, it's easy to look at other friendships and grow jealous or confused why others have all the things that you want. For whatever reason, I've found comparison more difficult as I've grown into adulthood.

In moments of comparison or jealousy I try to do the following:

- Rejoice with friends in new seasons or phases. It's much easier to combat comparison when we actively express our joy to community.
- Start listening. God didn't get things wrong. You are where you need to be. You don't need to compensate for who you aren't. Give thanks for how He made you and trust that what He has for you is just as important. Remember we all go at different paces, and this is a GOOD thing.
- Be sensitive. Maybe you are the friend experiencing new seasons and excitement and others are struggling with comparing themselves to you. It's totally okay to express your excitement, but don't make it the sole thing you talk about. For every person you compare yourself to, others are doing the same about you.

4. Toxic community takes more than it gives.

Boundaries are essential in community. Remember when I said earlier that friends don't take the place or need for Jesus? Sometimes we have that friend or two who seeks you out only because they want or need something from you: attention, affirmation, expertise, or anything really. They're the friends who are available only when it's convenient for them or only come to you when they want something. They're the friends that ask for advice only to turn around and continue on the same path. Maybe you're this friend sometimes.

Society would tell us to cut that friend out because well, they're toxic. But what would Jesus say about that? Jesus didn't cut us off or take away our opportunity to hear truth because we exemplified toxic qualities. In fact, He came to Earth and died a horrible death despite all those things. At the core: we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. Meaning we shouldn't completely cut someone off due to toxic characteristics.

That brings us back to boundaries. How do we appropriately set up boundaries, still love and serve these people, but balance with life giving community?

Jordan Dooley said it best in her podcast episode, "5 Ways to Know if Your Friendships are Healthy or Toxic" that we have to have a balanced amount of stewardship and fellowship. A community based on stewardship includes those individuals who are different than you, have different values, needs or ideas. They are the ones who might not know Jesus or if they do, could be the ones taking more than giving.

Sometimes you may have to step back - not away - from stewarding friendships and replace some of that time with fellowship. Fellowship communities are based on people who are like minded, have similar values, and composed of individuals who influence you and vice versa.

Notice I said balance in regards to stewardship and fellowship. Both are equally important. More often than not, we struggle more to keep stewardship a priority. But how boring would it be to only surround yourself with people who think and act like you?

5. Toxic community is often exclusive rather than inclusive.

Sounds like high school, right? I honestly wish this wasn't still an issue in relationships, but as I've grown up, I've realized exclusivity in community still happens. A strong community is great. It's actually the reason I wrote this devotional: to encourage you to captivate community and let it prosper. But let me be very clear: exclusivity happens in community no matter what season of life you're in, and it happens in Christian community more often than you think.

Exclusivity is hard to recognize if you're on the inside, but those on the outside can probably identify it just by walking in the room. Here's a few ways I would identify an exclusive community: a separate group text with only a few of the group members, consistent forming of sub groups within small groups, or intentionally leaving people out of an invitation.

Inclusive community should never be a closed group. There should always be room to include and welcome others. Yes, it can be difficult to break into an already established group, but a group that is inclusive will welcome you with open arms. If you are one of those people who are already in an established group, think of how you can further extend a welcome or be intentional with new people.

One of the best examples I've seen of offering inclusivity comes from my friend Allison. She embodies the mindset of "never met a stranger" and knows how to make everyone in the room feel like they belong. She finds the person who is alone and draws them in with the greatest sincerity. I think as a believer, it's always our job to make people feel welcome. That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like after all.

How should we move past toxic relationships?

How should we respond when someone else is being toxic?

Going Deeper:

Describe a positive, negative and toxic experience with community.

Positive: _____

Negative: _____

Toxic: _____

What aspect of toxic community speaks to you most? Why?

What can you do this week and weeks ahead to step away from toxicity? _____

What are other barriers to community? _____

What boundaries do you need to set with toxic relationships?

Do you appreciate the good moments enough, communicating to your community what they are doing well?

Evaluation: Have you been, or are you currently a toxic friend? _____

Talk with your trusted community. Ask them how you're doing. Go into the conversation with an open heart and mind and ask God to help you be receptive to their feedback.

Read: 1 Peter 3:8-9, Ephesians 4:31-32 James 5:16, Hebrews 3:13-14

Reflect: _____

Session Six: Community in Different Seasons of Life

"There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven." - Ecclesiastes 3:1

No matter what season of life you're in, you still need community. But the type of community you need varies as you grow up and grow in your faith. My former mentor gave me a great piece of advice when I went through a difficult transition period with community: some friends are meant for a moment, some for a season, and some for a lifetime. As we go through these different seasons, remember that God only has His best for you - including your community. If it's time to pursue something new, the friendships that need to stick will and those that need to fade away will, all while building new community.

For the high school or college person: find a solid ministry on campus or at a local church and get plugged into groups. I guarantee there are some awesome, life giving groups around your city with some awesome leaders.

For the single person, I'd encourage a women's or men's group. Before you roll your eyes, let me say this: there is nothing wrong with attending a coed group. However, from experience, being in a women's group prior to marriage helped me keep focus on my calling, connect with other like minded female believers, grow in ways that I needed to (in ways that only being in a group with other girls would offer), and be myself. When you mix guys and girls in a group there almost immediately becomes this false sense of presentation, because honestly, if we have the chance to

impress someone of the opposite sex and catch their attention, we probably will.

If being in a coed group is important to you, then go for it! I simply encourage it not be the ONLY group you're in until marriage. Yes, it's an old fashioned idea, and yes, I too was active in coed groups most of my college years, but I always supplemented it with a women's group. There is power in not self isolating singles groups. It certainly doesn't make any single person feel better (been there). But when emotional and spiritual bonds are formed with someone of the opposite sex that is not your spouse (or even engaged to) we open up more opportunities to create idols of others and be let down by the opposite sex, only adding to poor views and stereotypes we may already have.

My solution? Attend coed hangs. Be a part of (or event start) a young adults ministry composed of males and females, single, dating, engaged and married individuals. But when it's time to break into groups, be in a group with people in the same phase of life as you. You will get so much more out of it.

For the new adult, search for a young adults ministry, women's groups or men's groups. Oddly enough, I've found seeking community in my young adult life more difficult than any other season. I'm honestly not sure why, but if I had to guess it would be something along the lines of overwhelming feelings and to-do lists, mastering all the adult steps (finances, taxes, working full time), trying to figure out who you are and what you want to do with the rest of your life, and fitting in. If there's one thing that has helped me most during my few years of adulthood it's consistently attending a small group of other young adults.

For the married people: I cannot stress enough the importance of attending a married group. Put your marriage first. Always. Pursuing a married group should take precedence over any other group. Only if you have time after plugging into a married group should you pursue another group. Why? Well, for one, when you get married you become one flesh. Not that you lose your individuality or identity, but scripture clearly states "the two shall become one" (Ephesians 5:31) and therefore your lives are intertwined and all aspects of it. Your ministry is to pursue Jesus and tell others about Him - together. Your marriage won't grow the way it's designed to if you're not spiritually doing life together.

I only know this because I was trying to do it all until recently. I led a high school girls group, led and attended a young adult women's group and was in a married group with my husband Taylor. After a while, I realized being in 3 different small groups was taking a large toll on me. I wasn't able to pour out as much because I had too many places to pour out. And you know what? My marriage suffered from this. I was so used to the last 15 years of my life being in a group with only women that devoting the right amount of time and attention to a married group was seriously lacking. Ultimately, I was opening up more in my women's group than my married group. I put more effort and time every week to these wonderful women than the group with Taylor. Honestly, it hindered us. There's nothing wrong with being in another group but when it takes precedence over growing with your spouse spiritually, it needs to be let go.

Transition Into a New Community

Sometimes we need to transition to a different type of biblical community. There are obvious life changes that make sense to transition to a new group: going from high school to college, entering adulthood, getting married, or having children. But sometimes these transitions aren't as obvious. So how do we know it's time to transition?

If you're realizing you don't connect as well with other people in your group based on their season of life or struggles, it's probably time to make a change. Maybe you're getting a job and others are going to grad school. Or maybe it's your senior year of college and there are some freshmen in the group. You're thinking about what life after college will look like and they're wondering what to major in and how to do this whole college thing. Or maybe you're in a group focused on the struggle with anxiety but your main struggle is jealousy and comparison.

At the end of the day, you need a group of people who you feel comfortable opening up to and walking through life with. Diversity in groups is important, but relating to others is equally important. The best pursuit of community will be with those who are like minded and in similar phases of life as you.

Leading community: As believers, we're called to use our gifts to serve the local church (or community). For some of you, your gifting may include leading community groups in your church, school, team/club, etc. A strong, consistent community group leader will encourage the same characteristics in a group, allowing the community to grow deeper. Maybe your young adult group is too big and needs to split up and you'd be a good fit to lead one of the groups. Or maybe you have a passion for middle schoolers and want to pour back into them because you remember having a strong leader when you were in that phase of life. Here's the cool thing about leading community groups: not only do you get the opportunity to serve, but you also have an added sense of accountability in your walk with the Lord.

Here's another great piece of advice I've received about pursuing community and leading community: We all need a Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy in our lives. We need a Paul to mentor us; Barnabas to do life with, and a Timothy to pour into. Your Barnabas needs to be the key focus: they will be your people to grow with, do community with, and spend time with. Your Paul and Timothy may be people you come across at work, lead in a group, study with in the library, or simply call on a random day of the week. It looks different for everybody - and that's okay. Your best yes will require a difficult no, but it will allow you to connect with the right people and pursue the best path.

Going Deeper:

What season are you in right now? _____

Does your current community group support your current season? _____

If not, what steps do you need to take? _____

What advice would you give to those in a phase you've already gone through? _____

Where can you step up and serve? _____

Read: Psalm 133:1, Ecclesiastes 7:8-11, Philippians 2:2

Reflect: _____

Session Seven: How Does Community Prosper?

"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." -
Proverbs 27:17

Hopefully by now you have a good idea of community: how to get it, what you need in community, how you can love others, good vs bad, and in different seasons of life. As I mentioned in the beginning of this study, we were not made to do life alone. Genesis highlights this early in scripture when God created Eve from Adam. As followers of Jesus and truly as human beings, we continually need community in life. So how do we cultivate a prosperous community?

Thriving community certainly requires all the aspects we discussed in session four "how do we get community?" (For reference: intentionality, discernment, consistency, vulnerability, honesty and trust, and loving your neighbor). Prosperous community requires further effort beyond obtaining community. We all want community that lasts too! So what does it take? Truly, I had a list of 20-30 aspects that help community prosper, but it felt overwhelming, so I picked my top eight. Prosperous community certainly doesn't stop at these eight attributes, but it's a great place to start.

Hospitality:

Always welcome others into the group. One of the most difficult aspects of finding community is when a group already exists and welcomes a new person(s). Community is ever changing and should always be open, never closed. Hospitality in community presents itself in a variety of ways but always includes a welcoming environment. When we practice hospitality, we create an environment that feels welcoming to all, encouraging people to attend, and being vulnerable and intentional. An alienating group of community will discourage people from returning and likely face struggles of exclusivity down the road.

Humility:

Community without humility will not thrive. Humility brings wisdom and grace among a group of people. When we humble ourselves before community, we are open minded to the thoughts and words of others, as well as being open to when we sin, especially if we sin against others in our group. Pride often creates tension, causing others in a group to feel as if they are less valuable than others. When we lead with pride, we create separation; when we lead with humility, we create connection.

Empathy:

Offering empathy further encourages vulnerability. As we discussed in session four, vulnerability is a key step when trying to captivate community. For community to prosper, we need to empathize with those in our community with whatever they are going through. Empathy means understanding another person's thoughts and feelings from

their perspective rather than your own. It's putting humility first and engaging in cognitive, emotional, and compassionate connection with others. Sometimes empathizing with someone is easy because you've gone through a similar situation, and other times you may have never experienced anything like it before. Regardless, we are all capable of stepping back and offering a connection that further promotes community and carries one another's burdens.

Fruits of the Spirit

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." - Galatians 5:22-23. When we embody the fruits of the spirit, we look most like Jesus. Community will continue to grow when members engage in all fruits of the spirit.

What fruit of the spirit is easiest for you? What fruit is the most difficult for you? _____

How can you better embody all fruits of the spirit with your community this week? _____

Serving:

I think serving goes back to session four with the idea of loving your neighbor as yourself. When we pursue our community or others with a serving mindset, we allow our hearts and minds to think, feel and act selflessly. It's the biblical, or as I say, the Chick-fil-A model of going the extra mile. A servant perspective encourages us to meet the needs of others before ourselves. Remember session two when we discussed knowing who we are? Know your community. Serve them in the way they receive love or based on their personality. Serving can look different for everyone based on their gifts: leading community (as mentioned last session), setting up a meal train for someone going through a difficult season, helping with moving, or buying someone's favorite cup of coffee.

Enjoyment:

Remember, community is supposed to be fun! Yes, it is so important for biblical community to be a place of time in the Word, in prayer and doing life together, but it's also supposed to be fun. Set some time aside for the spiritual conversations and do something you and your community enjoys. Watch a movie, go to a game, go shopping or just catch up. Having fun can be an entire day or something as simple as starting off your time together by sharing your hi's and low's for the week. (This is something my small group practices regularly and it makes for lighthearted conversation before diving into that intentional time together.)

Forgiveness:

Remember that we're all sinful people who have fallen short. Inevitably you and someone in your community will mess up. The important thing is how you handle it. Lovingly confront the other person and seek forgiveness. Don't point fingers and place blame, but admit where you messed up and share how you will improve in the future. Pray for your heart to be softened, even if it wasn't your fault. Ultimately remember to forgive as He forgave you. Forgiveness means forgetting their messes and moving forward.

Evaluation:

As seasons change, so do your needs or the needs of others. Someone entering marriage or parenthood needs to be in a group of similar people. If you're entering college, it's time to separate from high school groups and find college focused groups. Or my personal favorite: if you're wrapping up college and entering the fun season of adulthood, find people who are in the same boat.

Another important aspect of evaluation includes self and group reflection. Get honest and real about how your group is doing as a whole. What needs improvement? How are you or your group doing? Is the conversation biblical?

We'll only grow as much as we're willing to and growth beings with evaluation.

My core group of community are amazing young women whom I've met in multiple places of life. The amazing thing about these ladies is that some of them I'm extremely similar to in personality and others I'm quite different from.

A large majority of these women I've been able to stay connected with even as we move and enter different phases of life because we actively take steps to keep a prosperous community.

Going Deeper:

What other characteristics help community prosper?

Are you growing in your current community setting? _____

Are you in the same season with your group? _____

Is there an aspect of community you could improve in?

Are you or is your group healthy, unhealthy or toxic? _____

Read: Hebrews 10:24-25, Romans 12:9-13, Galatians 6:2

Reflect: _____

Conclusion

Community is something that should always be a part of our lives, no matter where we are at. When we walk through life with others, we are best set up to pursue His calling for us. We are surrounded by people of faith who will uplift and encourage us through all seasons.

As people, and as believers, we have a desire to be known and heard - something that God gives us not only through His word, but also through community. I hope this study has opened your eyes in some capacity about what biblical community is, what it isn't, and how to captivate it. I hope you've been able to dig deep into your heart and soul and get honest with yourself and others about what changes you may need to make. We all know change isn't easy, but you know what makes it easier? Community.

Life isn't always about what we do, but rather who we connect with. It is connection with others that leads to production - and what do we produce? Life change. Fruits of the spirit. Disciples. When we put connection ahead of production, we remember the why in it all: "We care so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

At the end of our lives, we'll best remember the lives we touched or those who touched us, not what we did or possessed. When we remember the idea that people matter, that community matters, we'll realize the endless possibilities God has for us through this wonderful gift.

I'll end this study with one final thought from Revelation 7:9, "After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were robed in white with palm branches in their hands."

Man. What a celebration it will be when we enter eternity with Him, surrounded by community.

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