

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 30, 2011**

## **THE MEANS OF GRACE: FELLOWSHIP**

**Philippians 2:1-4**

### **INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING**

As we turn to God's Word today, I want you to see that fellowship is a means of grace. Fellowship has to do with our relationships with each other in the church, and it is – or can be, and should be – a means of grace. Keep this in mind as we read just four verses from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. The text is Philippians 2:1-4. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

### **THE SECRET OF HAPPINESS?**

In 1937, before many of us were born, a team of researchers at Harvard University began a study to determine what factors contribute to a person's well being and happiness in life. The research team selected 268 male Harvard students (back then, there were no female students at Harvard) who appeared to be healthy and well-adjusted, to be part of a longitudinal study – meaning that the researchers would examine the lives of these men over an extended period of time. Begun all those years ago and still going more than 70 years later, the study provides a pretty significant picture of what has affected the health and happiness of these men over a lifetime.

The study (known as the Grant study) has tracked all the usual kinds of things you can measure – like marital status, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, exercise, the use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs – along with more subjective emotional and psychological factors, such as how a person uses defense mechanisms in dealing with the challenges of life.

When Dr. George Vaillant, the psychiatrist who has directed the study since 1967, was asked about the factors that have contributed most to the well being and happiness of the men in the study, he gave a surprising answer. The key to happiness, he concluded, was quite simple. He said: "The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people." (From Joshua Wolf Shenk, "What Makes Us Happy?" The Atlantic, June 2009, cited in [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).)

### **KOINONIA MATTERS**

The only thing that really matters? I think the doctor may be overstating it a bit. But the evidence in the study that relationships do matter – a lot – should not come as a surprise to us. Relationships matter. Relationships matter to God. If God didn't care about being in relationship with us, He would never have gone to all the trouble He has gone to in order to redeem us from our sins and to bring us back into a right relationship with Him. He would not have given us the privilege of becoming His children through faith in the saving work of His Son for us. If relationships didn't matter, God would not have placed us in families. Or

communities. If relationships weren't important to God, He would not have established the church as a people who belong to Him and to one another, connected by the experience of His saving and sustaining grace, and by a common faith, a common hope, a common love, and a common calling to serve one another and the world in the name of Jesus. If relationships didn't matter, we wouldn't need each other. We wouldn't need anyone. Each of us could be an island unto our self.

But that is not how God made us. He created us to be in relationship with Him and with each other. As Rick Warren says in *The Purpose Driven Life* (p. 130), we were “created for community, fashioned for fellowship, and formed for a family.” The word *fellowship* has to do with the relational dynamic of our lives as members together of God's family. The New Testament word most often translated as “fellowship” is the Greek word *koinonia*. Maybe that word sounds familiar to you. I hope it does! As I know most of you know – maybe all of you know it – Koinonia is the name of the community organization here in the Franconia, Kingstowne, and Rose Hill areas which seeks to provide help and hope to those who are needy among us. Through the contributions of individuals, churches like Faith, and businesses in the area, Koinonia is able to provide food, clothing, backpacks and supplies for school children, and emergency financial assistance for a growing number of families and individuals in our area who find themselves in need of help. There is a printed announcement in your bulletin every Sunday listing specific items needed for Koinonia's food pantry, along with other items they can use. Used in this way, the word or the name *koinonia* means sharing together or sharing something with one another.

The word *koinonia* is sometimes used this way in the New Testament (NIV), where it can mean sharing together or participating together in something, such as the bread and wine of communion (1 Cor. 10:16), or a special offering for the impoverished church in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13), or the ministry of the gospel itself (Phil. 1:5). Most often, though, the word *koinonia* speaks directly to our relationship with God, or our relationships with one another in the church, or both.

A few examples: In the aftermath of Pentecost, Acts 2:42 says that the believers in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This quality of togetherness, of sharing their joys and struggles together, was a central, foundational part of their lives as followers of Christ.

In Galatians 2:9, as Paul describes meeting the “pillars of the church” in Jerusalem – Peter, John, and James the brother of Jesus – for the first time, he says that they gave him and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship” (*koinonia*). The “pillars of the church” embraced Paul and Barnabas as brothers in Christ and partners in spreading the gospel message.

In explaining that believers should not be “yoked together” in binding relationships with unbelievers, a biblical principle that applies most directly to marriage, but has other applications as well, Paul asks in 2 Corinthians 6: “What fellowship (*koinonia*) can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and (the devil)? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple (the dwelling place) of the living God” (6:14-16). Paul uses strong words here, and sometimes, at our own risk, we

choose to disregard this principle. What I most want you to see today is the meaning of this word *koinonia*. It is all about this idea of having something in common with someone, whether it is a love for baseball, graduating from the same high school or college, serving in the same branch of the military, losing a spouse, or a devotion to the Lord Jesus in faith, love, and loyalty, and a love for God's people in the church.

Sometimes *koinonia* is about our relationships with one another. Sometimes it has to do with our relationship with God. For example, 1 Cor. 1:9 reminds us that "God, who called you into fellowship (*koinonia*) with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." Faithful He is. You can count on Him. And He has given you the privilege of sharing life together with Jesus as your all-sufficient Savior, Lord of your life, and faithful Friend forever.

In 1 John 1, we see both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of *koinonia*. John writes: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard (concerning Jesus), so that you also may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us" (1:3). The horizontal dimension of *koinonia* is seen in the relationship between "us" and "you." Then John continues: "And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (1:4). There you see the vertical dimension, in the relationship of fellowship with God Himself.

John is not finished with this *koinonia* connection yet. He goes on to say this in verses 6 and 7: "If we claim to have fellowship (*koinonia*) with (God) yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from every sin." *Koinonia* with God and *koinonia* with one another.

We could undertake an exhaustive word study of *koinonia* as it is used in the New Testament. I hope this is enough to show you that our *koinonia* or fellowship with one another is not an optional or inconsequential aspect of our lives as followers of Christ and members of His family in the church. Fellowship matters because relationships matter. Relationships matter because people matter. People matter to God – so much that He sent His Son into the world to give His life for us in the ultimate act of redeeming love in His self-sacrificing, sin-atonement death on the cross for us. It is not just "people" in the abstract who matter. You matter. You matter to God. I matter to God. God loves *you*. God loves *me*. It blows me away when I think about it. But it is true. God really does love me. And you.

### **OUR FELLOWSHIP AT FAITH**

We say (I say it, anyway) that Faith Church is a place where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts. Amen? *Everybody* counts. We know that everybody counts, everybody matters, to God. Our job is to show it in the way we treat every person – young, old, strong, weak, healthy, sick, wealthy, poor, attractive, not so attractive, in the prime of life, past the prime of life, nowhere close to being in the prime of life, fully engaged in the church's life and ministry, on the fringes, committed, uncommitted, spiritually mature, or wrestling with questions of faith. Our job as member of this Christ-centered fellowship of believers here in northern Virginia is to love one another with the love of Jesus, to care for one another with tenderness and compassion, to share with one another and with anyone in need, to encourage

one another not to lose heart but to hold onto hope and to keep trusting in God when we go through hard times, to rejoice with one another in times of joy and celebration, to weep with one another in times of mourning and loss, to bear witness to one another of the saving and sustaining power of God's grace, and to extend grace to one another in both the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of life. If we neglect the "one another" dynamic of our faith, we miss out on an essential part of God's plan for us.

Our calling from God as a church is to be a fellowship of believers who worship God together with passion and exuberance, with reverence and joy, with shouts of praise and silent meditation. Our calling is to declare the worth-ship of God, both individually and together in *koinonia*. Our calling is to devote ourselves to the study and application of God's Word, both individually and together in *koinonia*. Our calling is to devote ourselves to the ministry of prayer, individually and together in *koinonia*. Our calling is to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's supper whenever possible, sharing together in the *koinonia* of remembering what the Lord Jesus did for us and for our salvation, and renewing our trust in Him. Our calling, individually and together in *koinonia*, is to bear witness to the gospel, to invite others to put their trust in Jesus and to follow Him. Our calling, individually and together in *koinonia*, is to love and serve and care for others in the name of Jesus, not with random or isolated acts of kindness and compassion, but as a way of life.

Here is the thing about fellowship: You can't do fellowship alone. You can't have fellowship with other believers all by yourself. You can only have fellowship with God when you are in relationship with God. You can only have fellowship with other Christians when you are in relationship to them. Warren says that the first symptom of spiritual decline in a person's life is usually inconsistent attendance at worship and other gatherings of believers. I think he is right. If you have developed a pattern of inconsistency with respect to church, if you are not as regular in your attendance, if your level of commitment or involvement or passion for God to be glorified in and through the church has a downward trajectory, let me urge you to take stock of what is going on in your heart, repent of any sinful attitudes you have allowed to infiltrate your heart, renew your devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ – your love for Him and your dependence in faith upon Him – and renew your commitment to the fellowship of God's people in His church. One of the benefits of being connected to one another in fellowship is that it can help to keep us from backsliding spiritually (Warren, p. 135).

I know the church is far from perfect. I've said for as long as I've been here that this church will never be perfect as long as I'm the pastor, because you can't have a perfect church with an imperfect pastor. In my reading this past week I came across a description of the church as "a collection of broken people recklessly loved by God" (Nathan Foster, *Wisdom Chaser*, p. 89). I like that. We are all broken people, whether we choose to admit it or not. And we are all recklessly loved by God, radically loved by God, royally loved by God, not because we deserve His love, but because that is the way He is.

Before I close, I want you to think about our fellowship here at Faith and your participation in it in the light of the spiritual benefits Paul identifies in Philippians 2:1. Paul is not questioning or doubting whether any of these things is true. He knows there is enormous encouragement that comes from being united with Christ through faith. He knows the

experience of God's love gives tremendous comfort. He knows we can have rich *koinonia* with God and with one another through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He knows there is – or should be – no shortage of tenderness, loving sympathy, compassion, mercy and grace to extend to one another in the fellowship of believers

The question for you and me as we reflect on this passage of Scripture is: Am I exhibiting these qualities in my life?

Looking at each of them individually:

- Am I encouraged in my spirit by the fact that, through His saving grace received by faith, Jesus has made me spiritually alive in Him? If it doesn't encourage me, if it doesn't bring joy to my heart, it is a sign that something is wrong in me.
- Do I find comfort and courage and freedom in knowing God's love for me?
- Do I have fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers through the work of the Holy Spirit in my life? Or do I feel disconnected somehow? And if I feel disconnected from God or His people, what step(s) do I need to take to get reconnected?
- Do I have a heart of tenderness, compassion, mercy and grace toward others in God's family? Or am I in need of surgery on my heart – spiritual surgery – to remove blockages caused by pride, anger, resentment, unforgiveness, or a critical or judgmental spirit? God specializes in exactly this kind of heart surgery. And He has an amazing track record.

Dear friends, this is a lean season for a lot of people, a lot of families, and a lot of communities across America with high unemployment and economic pressures. And the truth is that we are in a lean season in the life of our church. In our attendance, in our finances, in our volunteer resources to carry out various ministries, it is a lean time. In seasons like this, the sharing together quality of *koinonia* fellowship becomes all the more important. We need each other. Each one of us matters. Each one of us has a place and a role in our fellowship.

Paul says that the kind of fellowship to which God calls us, regardless of the season, is marked by like-mindedness in what we believe. We call it unity in the essentials of the faith. It is marked by a mutual love for one another modeled after the love of Jesus for us. It is marked by a unity of spirit and a common desire to serve God's purposes. Our unity promotes this kind of fellowship. And true *koinonia* fellowship promotes this kind of unity.

Humility promotes unity, too, but selfish ambition and arrogance undermine unity or, even worse, destroy it. They can fracture a fellowship. They can ruin a church. Which is why Paul warns us in verse 3 to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” Let's guard our hearts and our fellowship against any kind of self-serving or demanding “my way” attitudes or patterns of behavior which would threaten our unity or sabotage our fellowship.

Is fellowship the key to happiness? Maybe not. But maybe it is more important than we think. Is it a means of grace? When the distinguishing marks of our fellowship are unity in

the faith, unity in our love for God, unity in love for one another, unity in our passion for God and His glory, and the unity born of true humility, you bet it is a means of grace. It is a channel through which grace can flow. In our fellowship together, may we experience grace in great measure, remind each other of the extravagant grace God has lavished on us, and show grace to each other. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.