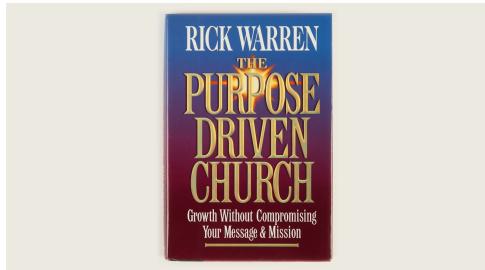


Romans 15:22-33
Joyful, Refreshing Fellowship

Main idea: God wants us to have deep, joyful, refreshing fellowship with one another.

[Picture of The Purpose-Driven Church]



In his book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Rick Warren identified five purposes that every church ought to see as their priorities: worship, discipleship, evangelism, ministry, and fellowship. And in the book, he challenges churches to put programs into place to assure that we're effectively engaging in all of these purposes of the church. So the question I want to ask us this morning is simply this: how are we doing?

How are we doing?

1. Worship
2. Discipleship
3. Evangelism
4. Ministry
5. Fellowship

If you had to evaluate how we were doing with each of these purposes, how would you say we're doing? Which ones are our strengths? Which ones are our weaknesses? And, in general, would you say that we're being an effective church?

It's interesting that when many churches evaluate themselves based on this criteria, most believe that one of their best strengths is fellowship. They believe that they're nice people who really know how to have a good potluck meal. And they define that as fellowship. But fellowship is far more than eating together and being nice to one another. Fellowship is loving one another,¹ being united in the Holy Spirit,² and therefore united in faith so that we are committed not only to coming together to worship,³ but also be there for one another through every season of life.⁴

What's also interesting is that when churches evaluate how they're doing in the area of fellowship, they typically think about it in terms of their strongest relationships. Like, of course we have great fellowship with our closest friends and family in the church, but do we even know the names of the people who come occasionally? And have you even checked on the people who used to come all the time, but we haven't seen since before Covid? And when someone misses church for a week or two, do you call them up and let you know you missed them? And when you miss church one week, do you long to be back, not because you feel guilty for missing, but because you love the deep, joyful, refreshing fellowship of the church?

¹ 1 Peter 3:8, 1 John 4:11

² 2 Corinthians 13:14, 1 John 1:3

³ Hebrews 10:24-25

⁴ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Paul had this kind of fellowship with the churches in Rome. Paul had never even seen them face-to-face, and yet he longed to be with them so that they could be mutually encouraged in their faith.⁵

Romans 15:22-33.

That is why I have been prevented many times from coming to you. But now I no longer have any work to do in these regions, and I have strongly desired for many years to come to you whenever I travel to Spain. For I hope to see you when I pass through and to be assisted by you for my journey there, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while. Right now I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints, because Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased, and indeed are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to them in material needs. So when I have finished this and safely delivered the funds to them, I will visit you on the way to Spain. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in prayers to God on my behalf. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, and that, by God's will, I may come to you with joy and be refreshed together with you. May the God of peace be with all of you. Amen. (Romans 15:22-33)

Father, thank You for the refreshment that we have in Christ, and help us to experience the fullness of this joy in Christ every time we gather together. Thank You for Your peace, and help us to have true fellowship that rests in Your peace. In Jesus's name, Amen.

As we talk about fellowship this morning, it's important for us to also keep in mind what true Christian fellowship leads to. Fellowship in the church ought not to lead to an inward focus, in which we just think about what will make us happy as a church, but rather an outward focus in which we minister to our community.⁶

I don't know how often this kind of thing happens, but I read about how in 2017, some of the NFL's elite sack specialists came together to train. The participants were star defensive players from around the league, with several different teams represented. They shared their own personal tips and tricks. They helped each other become better at what they do. Even though they were on different teams, and were in competition with each other, they loved the sport, and they shared this common bond that brought them together. And, sadly, that is often a better picture of fellowship than what often happens in churches.

Far too often, I think we've all seen things in churches said to be fellowship, when it's really just cliques and unwelcoming to guests.⁷ It's awesome and important for us to have close friendships in the church, but not if that means we ignore new people or people that we don't feel like we have a lot in common with.⁸ It's great to smile and laugh and grow with the people in the church that we've known for a long time, but it's easy to do that and forget that we only have that because someone once welcomed us into the fellowship of the church.⁹ So fellowship ought never to be something that excludes others, but always includes others as we all experience the love of God together.¹⁰

⁵ Romans 1:12

⁶ Philippians 1:5. A partnership in the gospel includes both mutual the acceptance of the gospel, and the mutual participation in sharing the gospel.

⁷ Hebrews 13:2

⁸ Romans 14:1

⁹ Romans 15:7

¹⁰ Galatians 3:28

Our passage last week talked about Paul's aim to preach the gospel to those who have never heard the name of Jesus.¹¹ That, of course, is called evangelism, and it's one of the five purposes of the church as outlined by Rick Warren. Evangelism is sharing the good news of Jesus, inviting others to put their faith in the Savior who died for their sins, and therefore inviting them into the fellowship of the church. And this certainly ought to be a high priority in our lives since Jesus told us to go into all the world and preach the gospel.¹² So that's what Paul had been doing. But even while Paul evangelized, he longed to visit the Romans face to face so that he could have fellowship with them. Verse 22.

That is why I have been prevented many times from coming to you. But now I no longer have any work to do in these regions, and I have strongly desired for many years to come to you whenever I travel to Spain. (Romans 15:22-24a)

Paul wrote all the way back in chapter 1 of his letter to the Romans that he longed to come and visit with them in Rome.¹³ This was a church that Paul had heard about, but had never actually visited or preached to. And yet as the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul felt this overwhelming desire to know them, minister to them, and worship with them. Do you have an overwhelming desire to worship God with His people?

Most Christians in America today are saying "no." For the last two and a half years, church attendance across the nation has been significantly down. We can blame it on Covid, how we were all told to stay home for so long, or we can blame it on the secularization of society, but I think the issue is bigger than these things. I think a big part of the problem is that churches lack real, joyful, refreshing fellowship.

You know, we can often get so busy with so many other things in life, that church can seem like just one more thing that we need to do. But church isn't a need-to, it's a get-to. You would never say about going home after work, "Well, I guess I need to go home now. I need to see my wife. I need to see my kids. Man, such a burden to my busy schedule." No! At least I hope you wouldn't say that. No, we get to come home. We enjoy time with our family. And in the same way, church is something we ought to look forward to.

Being a church is more than coming, singing, listening, and leaving.¹⁴ It's sharing our lives with one another.¹⁵ Don't just come to sing songs and hear a sermon, come to have fellowship with others. And that's not just about smiling and catching up with your friends. Come to encourage others and be encouraged by others.¹⁶ Come to get to know others, hear their stories, and help one another.¹⁷ Come, not just to do church, but to be the church.

End of verse 25.

For I hope to see you when I pass through and to be assisted by you for my journey there, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while. Right now I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints, because Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased, and indeed are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to them in material needs. So when I have finished this and safely delivered the funds to them, I will visit you on the way to Spain. (Romans 15:24b-28)

¹¹ Romans 15:20

¹² Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8

¹³ Romans 1:11

¹⁴ We certainly are to do these things, but with thankfulness. Colossians 3:16

¹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:8

¹⁶ Proverbs 27:17

¹⁷ Galatians 6:2

Paul wrote that when he passed through Rome, he would be “assisted” by them. Even though Paul was a tentmaker and supported himself in the ministry, he received their offerings and was able to pass them along to the poor in Jerusalem. And the churches in Rome were glad to take up offerings so that Paul could continue ministering to others in the name of Christ. It’s a blessing to give!

Part of what we do every week here is take up an offering. When we take up offerings, it’s not primarily to pay for electricity or insurance or even salaries, but to give to the Lord.¹⁸ That’s why even though I receive a salary, I still give. That’s why, even though our church certainly doesn’t have an abundance right now, we still give every month to the Nokomis Christian Missions, and to the Cooperative Program, which funds missionaries and church plants, and disaster relief. As we give to God through the church, we’re also giving to people all over the world who need to be impacted by the gospel.¹⁹ So it’s important and a blessing to give.

But more than taking up an offering, Paul looked forward to being refreshed by the church in Rome. I hope that you’re refreshed when we gather together. It’s so easy to focus on what others did or didn’t do, or what the preacher did or didn’t say, but when it comes down to it, we’re all just imperfect people gathering together to worship a perfect God, so we rejoice together in His grace.

God wants us to have deep, joyful, refreshing fellowship with one another. We should long for that. And even when we have to miss coming together for one week because of health or other circumstances, we ought to really miss it.

It used to be that church was the one thing that you missed everything else for. Now it seems like everything else takes precedence over worshiping God with the church. You wouldn’t believe some of the excuses people have given me as to why they couldn’t come to church. I woke up late. Then set an alarm! I stayed up too late the night before. Then go to bed earlier! I have too much to do. Then do a little less, and make time to worship the God who created time!

A few years ago, someone told me they couldn’t come to church one morning because they weren’t feeling well and couldn’t get out. That morning, I went to Kroger to buy grape juice for the Lord’s Supper, and guess who I saw there doing all their weekly shopping?

Listen, I get it that sometimes you just don’t feel like coming to church. I don’t either. But that’s when we need to come the most. We need to be refreshed by God’s word, with God’s people, and even if you still leave the church that morning with a bad attitude, at least you can know that you didn’t lie, and you were where God wanted you to be.

But more often, I hear people say that they really didn’t want to come, but they were so glad they did. Sometimes lately, I preach what I thought was just kind of a mediocre sermon, but I hear people say that it was exactly what they needed to hear that day, and they were so glad they came, even when they didn’t feel like it.

Listen: God’s word is refreshing! And God’s people, even though we can certainly frustrate one another sometimes as iron sharpens iron, are refreshing! We have to come with the expectancy of being blessed by God and His people. That’s what Paul did. Verse 29.

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 15:10

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:2

with me in prayers to God on my behalf. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, and that, by God's will, I may come to you with joy and be refreshed together with you. May the God of peace be with all of you. Amen. (Romans 15:29-33)

Paul was eager to go to Rome expecting to be blessed. And he went expecting them to pray for him, and he knew that God answers prayer. And he even prayed that they themselves would be refreshed, and that they would have peace.

But according to the book of Acts, not long after Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, Paul was arrested, and it seemed like he wouldn't get an opportunity to go to Rome after all. The Jewish court called the Sanhedrin didn't like that Paul was preaching Christ, so they sought to shut him up just as they did to Jesus. But through his trial, he appealed to Caesar so that his trial wouldn't be a religious one, but a civil one, and so that Paul would get the opportunity to share Christ with government officials. And it was through these circumstances that Paul did get to go to Rome, where he was in custody for over two years awaiting his trial. So not long after receiving this letter from Paul, the churches in Rome had the opportunity to minister to Paul in prison.

And they did. It talks about this in Acts 27. While in custody, Luke wrote:

And so we came to Rome. Now the brothers and sisters from there had heard the news about us and had come to meet us as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with the soldier who guarded him. (Acts 27:14b-16)

So even though Paul was not a free man, he had fellowship with the believers in Rome that he longed to be with. Even despite his circumstances, he had joy and peace.

And it's precisely because He knew God. Romans 15:33.

May the God of peace be with all of you. Amen. (Romans 15:33)

Paul had peace and contentment in any and every situation because he knew the God of peace.²⁰ Many churches and confessing Christians today are characterized by conflict and restlessness because it seems like they don't really know the God of peace, or at least that they're not resting in Him.

Jesus said in Matthew 11:

Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

You see, when Jesus died on the cross for our sins, it was also for our restlessness. It was for the fact that we always try to do things our own way, to make things happen in our strength, when salvation and church isn't about what we can accomplish, but what God has accomplished for us.

So we don't really need to evaluate ourselves in the area of fellowship so that we can make a plan and become better at doing fellowship, we need to rest in the God of peace, because through Jesus we have

²⁰ Philippians 4:11-13

fellowship with God and with one another.²¹ And it doesn't depend on how good we are at doing it. It depends entirely on how good God is, and what Jesus has done for us.²²

So when you come to church, don't come expecting others to do for you what only God can do. When you over expect from others, you get disappointed. When you grumble about others because they didn't welcome you, shake your hand or say hi to you this morning, maybe they should have, but that shouldn't affect your spiritual and emotional experience.

But when you come expecting to experience the God of peace, to know Him more, and rest more in His grace, then you'll be transformed so that you become the one who welcomes the one who feels unwelcome. Because our fellowship with one another isn't at all about how nice and welcoming we are, but entirely about how God has welcomed each of us into His presence by grace through faith in Jesus, so that He gives His peace. And then that propels us to worship Him, tell others about Him, train each other to follow Him, and minister to others in His name so that they also may experience His salvation and peace.

Maybe you haven't had peace in awhile. Know this: that God is the God of peace. Rest in Him. Trust in Him. Worship Him. Find your peace not in the circumstances of life, but in Jesus.

²¹ Exodus 33:14, Psalm 127:2, Philippians 4:6-7, Hebrews 4:9-10

²² 1 Peter 3:18