

All right everybody, welcome to Valley Creek and welcome to season four, the final season of A Different Way. I am so glad you are here with us, and we've been in a year-long series called A Different Way, Do What Jesus Did, that we broke up into four different seasons, like your favorite show on TV. There's different seasons of it that we've been following along. And we've taken an entire year to ask questions like, What does it look like to be a disciple? And who am I becoming? And who do I want to become? And is it possible to change? And if it is, then how do I actually change? And what we've been saying all year is that we want to arrange and rearrange order and reorder our life around Jesus and his lifestyle. And we've been using this little thing that we just say that if you want to do the things that Jesus did, you have to first, and there we go.

We've been listening. Okay. You see, if I want to do what Jesus did on the spot, I have to do what he did behind the scenes. If I want Jesus's health, I have to first take on Jesus's habits. If I want to live the life that Jesus lived, I have to first live the life that Jesus lived. And you say, what does that mean? Well, if I want to do the things that Jesus did, like be a person of love and be free and have joy and peace and have a purpose and be deeply connected with God, then I have to first back up and do the things that Jesus did, like take on his lifestyle and his practices and his disciplines and his habits, things like fasting and prayer, solitude and Sabbath and community, and all the different things that we see Jesus practice in his life. And our theme verse for this whole series has just been simply train yourself to be godly. Don't try to be godly. Don't wait around and hope one day you'll be godly.

Don't allow the world to train you to be worldly. No, like train yourself to be godly. If I want to do the things that Jesus did to be godly, I have to first do the things that Jesus did. Train and live like he lived. And we know this is true in every other area of our lives, because we all know we couldn't go out and run a marathon right now, but you could back up and start training for it. We all know we couldn't go play for the Cowboys right now, but you could back up and start training to be a professional athlete. We all know we couldn't sit down and play Beethoven on the keys right now, but you could back up, and for 15 minutes every single day, you could practice piano. In a period of time, you would be able to do things that you couldn't currently do. And that's what we've been talking about. Those are spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines. A spiritual practice or a spiritual discipline is simply doing what I can do now so I can do what I can't do now later. A practice or a discipline is doing something I can do now so I can do what I want to do later.

Like, I can't run a marathon right now, but I can back up and go for a 15-minute walk every single day that builds over time. I might not be able to not be angry on the spot, but I can back up and practice fasting in my lifestyle to practice denying my flesh. Eventually, on the spot, I'll be able to do that, which I actually want to do. And so, as we've talked about a variety of practices, lifestyles, habits, and disciplines of Jesus, what I've been trying so hard to get through to you is that these are not religious duties. These are not religious obligations. These are not things you have to do. They are invitations from God. We enter every practice and every discipline with God and position ourselves to open ourselves up to simply receive his grace to change us from the inside out. In fact, I love this verse that says, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Grow in grace."

That's what we've been doing in the series, growing in grace. See, most of us think that grace is just the forgiveness of your sins. It includes that, but you can't grow in forgiveness. You're either forgiven or you're not, right? So, how could I grow in it? No, grace is so much more. Grace is so much more grace as God acting in my life to do that, which I cannot do on my own. And the practices are positioning us to receive his grace, to transform us from the inside out. And what I love about this entire series, this whole year of our church, is what we're talking about. Coming to God, not to get something from him, but to be with him and become like him. So much of Christianity today is about coming to God to get something from him. Salvation, forgiveness, freedom, a breakthrough, a healing, whatever. And there's nothing wrong with that, but there's so much more to it than that.

It's coming to God to say, "I want to be with you and I want to become like you. And so, I want to be your disciple." A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who's fully trained will be like his teacher. Disciples, students, or learners were being trained by Jesus to become like Jesus. We're moving towards him. And our intent of coming to him is to obey whatever he asks us to do. And so, there's been a lot of reflection and contemplation in this whole series where we're having to actually look at our lives and how we're actually living them. And in fact, this is why God says, give careful thought to your, come on, give careful thought to your, come on. "Give careful thought to your ways because you have planted much but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink but never have your fill. You put on clothes but are not warm. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the Lord almighty says. "Give careful thought to your ways."

He says, "Think about the way you're living. Is it working? Because maybe you're putting in a whole lot of effort and not getting a whole lot back. Maybe you're stressed and weary and wore out and overwhelmed and broke down and beaten." Maybe, like Jesus says, you're weary and burdened, but he offers us a life that is easy and light. Maybe, just maybe, there is a different way, a different way, a different way to live your life, to take you to a place that you actually want to go, to become the kind of person that you actually want to be. And as we've been going through this year-long series, three seasons are behind us. Now, I'm watching so many people take next steps, move forward in faith. The grace of God is growing in their life. God is transforming them from the inside out. And my hope and my prayer for you have been that you'll get to this place where you say, "I love where we're going. I love what we're doing. I love how it's going in me."

Because what's the alternative to say? I don't like where we're going, and I don't like what we're doing. I don't like how it's going in me. And so, as we enter into season four together, that was the recap to bring everybody else in the game. As we enter into season four together, here's my great concern for you as we go into season four. We have four more practices to go through, and all four of these practices are going to be familiar. And the moment I say them to you, my concern for you is that you will quickly check out because I think we will go to one of two spaces. We'll either be like, "Oh, I've mastered that practice, or I've already decided I'm not interested in that practice." And so, my encouragement for you as we go through these familiar ones is to have an open heart and an open mind. Don't let your experiences determine your expectations. Don't let your feelings determine your future. Believe by faith that somehow

God wants to take these familiar practices that are now external and outward. See, the first eight practices we've talked about have all been about you and God.

These next four require you, God, and others. And they're familiar. And so, we've already made judgments about them. And so, I'm just going to tell you straight up for these four. If you want to come after him, you're going to have to deny yourself and pick up your cross. So, before you decide I'm out, I'm not interested. Just you're going to have to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and maybe just maybe these are the ones that are going to bring the breakthrough that you've been hoping for. So, Holy Spirit, we enter into season four with faith, hope, and gratitude because you're moving in our lives and you're bringing this grace that is transforming us from the inside out. Help us arrange and rearrange our life around Jesus. Help us do the things that he did so we can do the things that he did. You see, the first practice that I want to talk about in season four is the practice called community. Jesus practiced community.

In fact, one of the most interesting things to me is that right at the beginning of his ministry, one of the first things that he does is builds a community for himself. Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed 12, designating them apostles that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and have authority to drive out demons. These are the 12 he appointed, Peter, James and his brother, John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon, the zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. So, catch this. Before Jesus goes out and starts healing the sick, casting out demons, preaching the kingdom, revealing the father, and fulfilling the mission for why he was on earth, one of the first things he does is builds a community for himself. He initiates it. He pursues it. He invites them. And he gathers these 12 men into his life to be his community.

And for the next three years, they practice community together. They walk together. They hang out together. They travel together. They eat together. They rest together. The disciples watch Jesus weep at Lazarus tomb. The crowds tried to kill him. They watched his family reject him. They watched the Pharisees come against him. They watched Jesus reach out and touch a leper. They watched Jesus go and befriend sinners. They watched as Jesus walked on water and talked to God. In fact, even when Jesus is on his way to the cross, he says, "My soul is overwhelmed to death. Please stay here and pray with me." Because community was important to Jesus. In fact, even after they all betrayed him and all left him, one of the first things the resurrected Jesus does is go and regather the community, reconcile it, and bring it back because community was that important to him.

And if community was something Jesus practiced, and if we want to do the things that Jesus did, we got to do the things that Jesus did. And this isn't like this vague, random community. These are 12 individual men. I left all these names on here so you can see this. These aren't just historical figures, figment of an imagination, or just a bunch of people. No, these are individual people with personalities and characters and brokenness and backgrounds and experiences and futures and destinies that Jesus went and gathered into his life to practice community. Now I get it. The moment I said community, I knew it. I've lost everyone in the room because all my introverts are like, "We out." This is one, we out. And all the extroverts are like, "Yep, got this. My life is full of it. I don't need it." Okay. Before you go there, just stay with me for a

second. Remember a few weeks ago, we talked about solitude, and we said that introverts practice really isolation and indifference, and extroverts practice crowds and conversations.

The truth is, we need both solitude and community. Because if you do solitude without community, it will make you selfish. And if you practice community without solitude, it will leave you selfish. You say, "What?" Think about this. We're supposed to take what we discover in solitude with God into community with others. And we're supposed to take what's exposed in community with others into solitude with God. I'm supposed to take what I discover, the life with God in solitude with God. I'm supposed to take what I discover, the life with God in solitude and bring it into a community to bless those around me. But then, I'm supposed to take the things that get exposed in my life in community, the brokenness, the sin, the dysfunction, the messiness of my life back into solitude so God can heal me, make me whole, set me free, and deliver me. So, we all need community.

And so, let me go ahead and define it for you because it's probably not how you would define it. The practice of community is building relationships to seek God together. That's a practice of community. It's intentionally building relationships with others to seek God together. Community is not crowds and conversations. It's not acquaintances and activities. It's not proximity and neighbors and the people you are at work with and the people you sit at lunch with at school. It's not the people you're on a team with that are just in your life and in your orbit. No. It is a holy gathering of the people of God who come together for the purpose to be with Jesus and become like him. Community is planting myself in an environment of grace and truth where God's grace, and truth can transform me from the inside out. It's where I know and am known. It's where I love and am loved. It's where I serve, and I am served. It's where I'm vulnerable, authentic, and real.

It's where the real me is exposed to those around me. You see, it's a holy environment where we are shaped and formed into the image and likeness of Jesus. Community is not transactional. It's transformational. Community is not about feelings. It's about formation. It's not about comfort. It's about change from the inside out. And we said a few weeks ago in the practice of prayer that prayer is simply talking with God about the life we're living together. Okay, well, community is sharing the life I'm living with God with others. It's giving other people the gift of myself, and it's them giving me the gift of themselves. And it's in community where I am most able to practice becoming a person of love. And you are made for this. You go all the way back to the garden. The Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

This is not a marriage verse. This is a humanity verse that is not good for us to be alone. We were made in the image and likeness of God. Who is God? He's the Trinity. God, the Father, God, the Son, God, the Holy Spirit – three in one. God is not interested in community. God exists in community. And he made us in that image and that likeness. And the moment we put our faith in Jesus, right, we get baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We get immersed in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit. And you actually get invited to participate in the eternal community of the very Trinity itself. You now live in community with God, and you're supposed to draw others into that community with you. In fact, Psalm 133, I love this. It says, "How good and pleasant it is when

brothers live together in unity." What is community? It's when we come together in unity to seek God together.

How good and pleasant. Doesn't this sound like Jesus? How easy and light is the burden when we live together in unity? It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. What does oil represent? Anointing. The very power of God is given in community. And how do you get oil? You take olives and crush them, smash them, and press them together. The only way you get into community is when you are crushed, pressed, and smashed together. You're like, "I'm out." I know, I know. But that's where the anointing of God is. It's as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. Think of dew when you wake up in the morning. It's on everything. If there is protection and a power when we're in community, we're literally protected from the things of this world for there. God literally bestows and commands his supernatural power and blessing, and the life that we long for is in community. He declares it when we will practice it by faith.

Or how about at the end of Jesus's life? Let me just go through a few of these with you. At the end of Jesus's life, he's on his way to the cross. Here's what he prays. "My prayer is for those who will believe in me, that includes you, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me, may they be brought to complete unity." Jesus prays that we would practice community. Out of all of the 12 practices that we're going to talk about, community is the only one that Jesus prays that you would practice. He doesn't pray that you practice Scripture. He doesn't pray that you practice fasting. He doesn't pray that you would practice Sabbath.

He prays that you will practice community because it is that important and that's powerful in our lives. And if he prayed for it, shouldn't it become important to us? I mean, I can answer Jesus's prayer by becoming one to the same way he and the father are one, where there's one mind and one heart and one accord to seek God and be with him and become like him. And if you can catch this, look at what he says. "I have given them the glory that you gave me." He gives the community of the people of God the same glory that he carried when he was on this earth. Only in community. Are we strong enough to actually carry the glory of God? So, this is telling us, You are not strong enough to carry the glory of God on your own. Only in community. Are we strong enough to carry the glory of God? Only the body of Christ can carry the glory of God because glory means weight.

It's substance. It's the splendor, the majesty, the power, the beauty, and the very life of God. And only the body of Christ is strong enough to carry it. That's why Jesus says, "For the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." And we have seen the glory of the one and only Jesus. The body of Christ carried the glory of God. And now us as the body of Christ in community, are literally strong enough to carry the glory of God. So, if we want to see God's glory on this earth, we practice community, and we come together because only then are we strong enough to carry it. This is why it says one can put a thousand to flight. Two can put 10,000 to flight. A cord of three strands is not easily broken where two or three are gathered. There I am. We think those verses are about a lot of other things, but they are literally saying only in community. Are you strong enough to literally carry the glory of God on this earth? And

we all say, "Wouldn't it be nice to see God's glory cover the earth the way the waters cover the sea?" Well, Jesus prays that we'd get in community so it could actually happen.

You want the glory of God in your life, which is found in the practice of community. In fact, one more long one for you. "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it. The body is not made up of one part, but of many. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. And the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you. Its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. In fact, God has arranged, that word sounds familiar to me, the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." So, you're the body of Christ. And only the body of Christ is strong enough to carry the glory of God on this earth. And the moment you put your faith in Jesus, you become a part of the body. You don't have to ask for it, and you don't get an option to not be a part of it. The moment you put your faith in Jesus, you get grafted, bonded, and placed into the body. And if you think about a part of the body, what would make something a part of your physical body?

Well, life would be flowing into it from another part of the body, and life would be flowing out of it into another part of it. So, to be a part of a body, to be connected in a body means there's life flowing into me from another part and there's life flowing out of me into another part. And God has placed, I literally love this, "arranged the part of the body exactly where he wants them to be." Like, God has determined that you would be alive right now in this time in history, a part of Valley Creek Church at whatever campus you're a part of in that space and the place and the life that you're in. He has arranged. He has decided this is who I've created you to be. This is where I've placed you. This is where I've arranged for you. The only question is, are you willing to align with that? And a lot of us will say things like this, "Oh, bro, I got plenty of Christian community." I mean, my grandma, she lives in another state, but she's awesome. And I got a friend from college and like, yeah, they totally go to church and in Massachusetts. And I work with a guy who prays sometimes.

I mean, he's a great guy. That would literally be like Jesus saying, "Hey, I don't need the disciples, guys. I don't need community. Why? Because one of my friends that I grew up with, he's a Pharisee in Rome. He writes me letters. They take like five years to get to me. And a guy I built tables with, actually he goes to synagogue in Athens now. He's awesome. And I mean, come on, I was cousins with John the Baptist. You don't get any more community than that. I know he's dead, but then I still had the community." No, he needed 12 men in the daily reality of his life. And if God has placed you in this church, he's arranged for you to be here because there is something he wants to do in you. So, can I ask you a question? Is there anyone in this church who would invite you to their wedding, to their baby shower, or to their birthday party?

Is there anyone in this church who you've been in their house, who you could show up unannounced on their doorstep and it wouldn't be awkward, or who you could ask to borrow money from? Is there anyone in this church who could correct you, coach you, challenge you, or whom you would feel comfortable to confess your sins to? If the answer is no, then you have an invitation to practice community because you have to ask yourself. If the answer is no, when did God release me from my responsibility as a part of the body of Christ? When did God say, I don't have to be a part of it, and I don't have to be concerned for others? And I no longer have

to be aligned the way God arranged me. Like, was there a time that God came to you and said, I know you're so busy and you have so many things going on, and you're so much better than most people. So, community and the body of Christ is not relevant for you.

And if you do have community, is your community strong enough to carry the glory of God on this earth? You see, here's what's interesting about community. We all enter into it with a different premise. We all enter the community. Remember how I've defined community? It's building relationships to seek God together. But we all enter into community with a different premise or a different reason. Some of us come into the community because there's things we want. It's selfish. We have a motive behind it. We may be aware of it. We may not be aware of it. Sometimes the thing that I want is actually checking off the religious box. Like, I just got to make myself like feel good about having a community. But some of us enter community because there's something we want from others. It goes a little deeper. And some of us enter community because we have needs. We have real needs. We need people to help us. We need people to care for us. We need people to pray for us, counsel us, and help us because our life is broken.

We're falling apart. We're hurting. We have needs that we need others to help us with. When you go a little further, some people enter community because they just want friends. Like, "Man, I just want friends. I want to have people to belong to. I want to be a part of something bigger than myself. I'm looking for some good friends." But then, we get below this line where you're entering in community as a disciple. And I enter it because I'm looking for godly relationships, other people to seek God together with so I can grow. And then, you get to the deepest level. It's like, "I enter into community because I just want more Jesus." And everything above this line is transactional, and it is not strong enough to carry the glory of God. Everything below this line is transformational, and it carries the glory of God. So, my question for you is, if you have community in this church, what was your premise that you entered that community for? Ready? Circle people?

If you're in a circle, why are you in a circle? Are you in a circle because you want Jesus, godly relationships, and growth? Or because, really, I just wanted some friends or some needs or someone? Because here's the problem. If you enter a community above this line, the moment things get hard, somebody does something you don't like, somebody says something offensive, you're like, "Peace, I'm out." And I always laugh when people tell me they're leaving their community because somebody offended them or sinned or did something they didn't like. And I'm always like, "That's the whole point. The entire point of community is to practice being offended and dealing with it." Like, think of the one another verses in the Bible. One another. These are the things. Strengthen one another. Forgive one another. Confess to one another. Be compassionate with one another. Accept one another. Wash one another. Submit to one another. Listen, do any of those sound easy and fun and free?

They imply brokenness, messiness, and problems. I mean, wash one another. You know what that means? That means you're dirty in the way that you live your life. Not in Jesus. In Jesus, you're holy. But there are whole kinds of broken, dirty, worldly, sinful things in our lives. We get so confused that we get offended in the church, offended in community. We get offended because we're more concerned about our opinions than one another's. And the whole point is

to get here, to become really good like Jesus and forgiving people. If you were perfect, I wouldn't have to accept you. You would be everything I ever wanted in a person and this world. Fair? It implies that there's things we're going to have to work on. So, it's a gift from God. Here's your practice plan. It's practicing before the moment.

That's what community allows me to do. In fact, it's where you learn to be a person of love. Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It's not proud. It's not rude. It's not self-seeking. It's not easily angered. Man, it keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It protects, it trusts, it hopes, and it always perseveres. Again, just listen to how love is defined. It implies that the people you're going to love have things going on in their life and that they're a person in process, that they are not yet fully who God created them to be. And so, it's in community where I get to practice becoming a person of love. Did you ever just stop and think, how did Jesus on the cross say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do?" Maybe it's because in community he had three years of practicing, not keeping a record of wrongs because there were a whole lot of wrongs he could have kept with the disciples.

Do you ever wonder when they were beating him, he was able to turn the other cheek? Well, maybe it's because for three years in community, he practiced patience. Did you ever wonder how he picked up his cross and laid down his life? Well, maybe it's because for three years he practiced not being self-seeking. So, he was able to do what he wanted to do on the spot because he had been practicing behind the scenes. See, if we would get into community, it is the environment that helps us learn to become a person of love. And the reason we probably can't love the people in our life on the spot is because we never practice behind the scenes. If you can actually think about it, community is your practice. It's your practice squad, if you will. Real life is your family, your coworkers, the people on the road, your neighbors, and the other people you interact with. And the reason I can't love them on the spot is because I don't have people that I practice with behind the scenes. Because when I get in a community and they irritate me, I just leave.

I know, but they're supposed to irritate you so you can practice here so you can do it where it really matters. Maybe the reason we can't be patient with our children, forgive the people who hurt us in our lives, or persevere in our marriage is because we don't practice being a person of love in a godly community. Making sense to you? Because, see, here's what happens. Just think with me, wherever you were in this whole, people that were in COVID, people that experience a leadership failure in the church, people that experience change that they don't like, or anyone who is above this line, when COVID, a leadership failure or a change happens, they're gone. You're like, "Where'd they go?" No one really knows. The problem was they weren't there as a godly relationship to become like Jesus. And they weren't there really for Jesus. They were there for transactional. And once the transactional no longer brought them what they wanted, it's gone.

People below the line don't like it. I don't know anybody that was like, "I loved COVID." But people that came into community before COVID, you're like thinking, "Does anybody like COVID?" But people that got into community before COVID below this line, guess what? God used it to help them become more like him. This is why in the church, totally, and I don't have



time for this, there's so many leadership failures. I get all that stuff. But when the body of Christ enters into the body of Christ for godly relationships or Jesus as a disciple, they don't like it, but they know God is using it for their good and his glory. And because they are in community, they are strong enough to carry the glory of God, even in hurts and brokenness and disappointments and so on and so forth. And the paradox is this. If you will enter into community for Jesus, he will give you godly relationships and friends and meet your needs and give you the desires of your heart.

Whichever level you enter, God gives you everything above it. You can't enter for once and expect to get Jesus. You can't enter for friends and expect to get godly relationships. But if I come for godly relationships, I'll get friends and my needs. Does that make sense? So, the question then for you is, Where do you enter? Do you have it? And where have you entered? Listen, one of the things that you, if you've ever heard us say, we've said this for years, we say, we want to do this a long time together. It's been really important to us. Basically, for 20 years, we've had the same leadership core team. For almost 20 years, we've been together. Ben, Becca, Brad, Don, Justin, Jason, Chris, Chris, and Cindy. For, like, literally, two decades, these people have been together. And then, the next ring of people has been like for 10 to 15 years. Dave, Sebastian, Heather, Ashley, Todd, Kristy, Ryan, Brian, Rob, Trip, Fred, and Joy. And we've been together. And then, the next group has been like five to 10 years.

We've been together so long, and we've hurt each other, frustrated each other, and we've offended each other. I just offended one of them that I forgot their names. But because they know we're here for this, they're like, "That's God's using it. John did that on purpose to help me grow and become more like Jesus." Right. And sometimes, just sometimes, I wish you would appreciate that because I don't think we as a church appreciate it. Because my thought for you is this, If the leadership is like the organs of the body, how many organ transplants can one body take and survive? So, this whole transactional churchstaffing.com things out, how many organs can a body have transplanted and survive? How many times can one part of the body be transplanted and survive?

But if you don't appreciate transformational in your own life, you won't appreciate transformational in your church. If you're looking for transactional, all you want is transactional. And the reason we don't get into community is time and pride. Time. I don't have the time for that. I'm too busy. And pride. I don't really need it. I'm doing pretty good. Okay. What are you doing that's so important that you don't have time to be a part of the body of Christ? And then, what makes you so much better than everybody else that you don't think you need the primary environment that God transforms us in? It's a great question to ask, isn't it? I mean, look at what Jesus says, "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." Do you understand Matthew 18 when he says this? It's in a run. I'm talking about dealing with sin in church, not talking about football games and picnics and fun. He's talking about where people are sinning and there's brokenness and there's pain when two or three come together in that hardship because they want me. There I am.

There is a facet of God's presence in your life that you will never experience if you don't practice community. Solitude, we meet with God in the secret place. Community, where two or three are gathered, there he is also. Worship, God inhabits the praises of his people. You need

all three. We pick one we really like. Me and Jesus, we're doing great. Oh, I love the gathering of the people of God in worship. Community, where two and three gathered, there I am also. I need all three. If I come to the practice of community just because I want more Jesus, and he says that's where he is, that changes everything, like everything with me on that. See, one of the most practical ways that we do this in our church is just call it circles. It's one of the ways we practice community. You hear us say, "Get in a circle. Join a circle. You should be in a circle." You're like, "No, no, no."

Okay. Community doesn't mean circles. Circles is just the most strategic way we could do it for a lot of people in a large church. Circles is just three or more people that get together to discuss the weekend message, engage the Scriptures and pray. And it comes from Mark chapter four, one of the most important parables Jesus tells us. He says, "A farmer goes out and sows his seed. Some falls on hard ground. It's quickly snatched away. Some of that seed falls on rocky soil. It springs up, but it quickly withers and dies because it had rocks and it never got rooted. Some of that seed falls on thorny soil. So, it grows up, but the thorns and thistles choke it out and it never bears fruit. Some falls on good soil and produces 30-, 60-, and 100-fold return." He tells the parable, the disciples are confused. Then Jesus basically explains it to them. He says, "The farmer goes out and sows the seed. The seed is the word of God. And it falls on four different types of soil, four different types of heart. And when it falls on the hard heart, it's snatched away. When it falls on the rocky heart, we get excited, but it never roots and it never does anything.

It falls on the divided heart, the distracted heart. Everything else chokes it out. But when it falls on the good heart, 30-, 60-, and 100-fold return. And in the parable, it's the same farmer, the same seed, the same environment, the same circumstances, what's different? The condition of the soils. It's the only difference between snatched away and grow. And what Jesus is teaching us is that it's in community where we cultivate the soil of each other's lives. Who is cultivating the hard parts of your heart? Who is removing the rocks that is keeping God's word from getting rooted? Who's telling you you're distracted and divided and uprooting those thorns and thistles to create good soil where it can grow? Scripture says some plants, some water, God makes it grow. Listen, every week you're getting a planting and God says he wants it to grow. The only question is, Is anybody watering it?

Same seed, same God who wants to make it grow. Is there anybody watering it? Working the condition of the soil of your heart. Community is like an environmental greenhouse that just brings things to life. And I just want to say to you, listen, some of the most wealthy men in our church are in a circle. Some of the most influential women in our church are in a circle. Some of the coolest students are in a circle. Some of the people who have been here the shortest and the longest are in a circle. Some of the people who are just getting started with God and who have been walking with God for years are in a circle. Some of the people who are the hardest working and have the most full busy lives are in a circle. What are you doing that's so important that you can't? And why do you think you don't need it? That's just a question for you to wrestle through. I mean, think about this. Are you still with me? Just hang with me a few more minutes.

That was good, but we'll skip it. Jesus, look at in the Sermon on the Mount, life in the kingdom. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Listen, Jesus literally says, the point of entering in the community is not to point out the speck and your brother's eye. The point of entering into community is to show up with a giant log sticking out of your face. And when I go into community, knowing there's a log, a blind spot sticking out of my face that I don't know what it is. And I get in there and I start moving around. I start sweeping this giant log, knocking everybody down talking. People are dodging. They're ducking. They get hit. They're bruised. The entire point of community is to get in it so that your log will be exposed because it's in community where the real you get exposed.

Because you can have a woman who looks like she's really kind and then you wash your talk to customer service and you're like, "Whoa." You can have a guy who everybody thinks is a great dad, but then behind the scenes, he's got a rage problem. You can have a student who everybody thinks is so wow, but they're incredibly narcissistic. You get in community, not for a day, but community where you practice it. You can't avoid the sweeping log, knocking all the people around you out. We get into community and we think we're there to pull their speck out. And then, we get offended by their speck. And we're like, "We're out." You're like, "Do you not know how many times you've knocked all of us over?" Here's the paradox. You get into community, you start knocking everybody over with your brokenness that you're unaware of. And just about the time the people in your community have the courage to speak truth and love to you, you get offended by their speck and you're out.

Here's the question. The last time you left a church, community, a serve team, pick your thing, a pod, VCLA, student leadership, whatever your thing is. Last time you left one, my question for you is this. Was the work of God complete before you left? Was whatever God was trying to do in you, in that community, was it complete? If the answer is yes, then you can move on. If the answer is no, then there's still more he wants to do. He wants to remove the log so you can see clearly, not just to take out their speck, but to live your life as a person of love. Was the work of God complete? I think we almost always leave before the work of God is done because we're not even aware God's doing a work because we're so offended by their speck.

It's in community where who you really are gets exposed. And to stay in community, you have to deny yourself and die to yourself because their speck is real. But you're not there because God needs you to remove it. You're there because God wants to help you discover this log that's knocking everybody out. Because it's the same log you knock your community out with. Just so you're clear, it's the same log you knock your spouse out with, and knock your children out with, and knock your parents out with, and knock your friends out with. And that's the reason you're not getting a promotion. They just don't have the courage to tell you. But it's that log that's just... So, again, here's a practice environment to do the things behind the scenes. So, when I'm on the spot, I live like a totally different person. See, community shapes you, holds you accountable, and reminds you of what's good, true, and right. The community will shape you, form you, and mold you. He who walks with the wise becomes wise. Companion of fools suffers harm.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. I mean, you get into a community for the purpose of becoming elite. No athlete that wants to be elite trains alone. They know they need other people to train with to become who they want to be. No great musician plays alone. Nobody who can speak fluently in a foreign language speaks to themselves. They get around other people who are going in the same direction. Do you want to be an elite disciple of Jesus? Actually, that's a great question for you to ask. If you want to be an elite disciple of Jesus, you actually need community. If you don't want to be an elite disciple of Jesus, you don't need it. And you can keep practicing good American church and call it a day. The community holds you accountable. Listen, accountable, the ability to give an account for that which God has created and called you to do. We get in community to be held accountable, to have other people actually call us to account for the life that we're living.

You say, "That's why I don't like it. I don't like it because no one's supposed to judge me." You're right. We're not supposed to judge you. But Jesus says we are supposed to inspect your fruit, speak the truth in love and correct and rebuke each other when we're not living the life that God's created and called us to live. In fact, catch this one another that says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love, and good deeds." Does to be spurred feel good? You spur a horse. Is the horse like, "Ha ha ha?" I don't know. I don't have a horse. I don't ride horses, but I wouldn't think the horse is like, "Oh, it's like a massage." It doesn't feel good. Listen, in my community, my community has looked me in the face and said, "You're being harsh. You're being arrogant. You're moody. Fix your face. That was wrong. That was sin. You need to make that right. Your perception is off."

You're like, "That's why I'm not in community." I know, but maybe that's also why you're not growing. Because is there anyone that can challenge you, correct you, coach you, and spur you? See, we think we get into community to feel good. The point of community is to become the kind of person who naturally does good. There's a big difference. And then, it reminds me of what is good, true, and right. Like, it lifts my head in a world of brokenness and pain and lies and deception and deceit. It reminds me of who I am, who God has created me to be, and what I'm created to do. And if you actually want to practice community, community, I'm done. Stay with me. Community is your responsibility. I guess not on anybody else. Responsibility. God has given you the ability to respond to that, which he has invited you to do. We have got to move past thinking it's everyone else's responsibility to create community for me.

Jesus went and invited. He pursued. He made it happen. It's no one else's responsibility to help you practice fasting, Scripture, meditation, silence and solitude, or Sabbath. It's no one else's responsibility to help you practice community. You must, you must, you must if you want to take the initiative and step into it. Say, How do I do that? The 400 times a year that we tell you, join a circle, do that. That would be one way. Another way would be saying, you see a couple of people in your life that you want to pursue them and say, "Hey, would you be interested in being godly relationships and practicing community and seeking God together?" Reach out to someone and say, "Hey, would you be a mentor in my life? I need someone to practice this community with." Like, you could take responsibility and you'd be amazed at what happens. In fact, if you can catch this, the highest form of discipline in the New Testament is

de-fellowshipping. The highest form of discipline when somebody did something wrong in the church was to remove them from the fellowship.

Isn't it interesting that we apply the highest form of discipline to ourselves by choosing not to practice community? In fact, if you can catch this, do you know what hell is? Hell is the eternal separation from God and his people. Isn't it interesting that we choose to practice hell on earth by separating ourselves from God and his people in our practical daily life? And then, we say things like, "But I want to go to heaven when I die." Do you, though? Like, think, if you don't want God and his people on earth, why do you think you would want them in heaven? If I'm not interested in God and his people now, why do I think in 50 years when I die, I will want God and his people then? That would be something to reflect on. Community takes time.

If you think you can show up to two circles or two conversations or two coffees a year, and if you get upset because you jump in, you're like, "Oh, these people are so cliquish. They all know each other." They've been on a journey together. If you join my circle right now, it would take you a while to feel like you're in it. Why? Because I can look at their face and I know exactly if they're having a good day, a bad day, or what's going on. What do I need to ask this guy? What do I need to talk about with this guy? Why? Because we've been on a journey together. So, when you're entering in, you will catch up, but you have to acknowledge. It takes time to build history, his story in your life with these people because they already have a history, his story in their life together. So, you have to push through a little bit of awkwardness. Remember, deny yourself. Pick up your cross. Remember what I told you, so at least you don't like it. I told you in the beginning, you weren't going to like it. And then, it requires vulnerability. Like, you actually have to be honest and real and humble and authentic because nobody cares about your victories. Does anybody in this church know your story? Not the highlight reel of your story, like your story.

Like, could anyone else here's could anyone else in this church tell your story, the good, the bad, and the ugly? If not, maybe there's an opportunity to practice community because it's through that brokenness that we actually connect with each other. And when you start acknowledging to me your log, or you start acknowledging to me your past life, I now understand why you have the log you have. I now have compassion for your log that keeps whacking me in the head because I know the last 20 years of your life and why you are the way you are, but now I'm going to love you enough not to leave you where you are, help you remove this log so you can see clearly to continue to become the kind of person God has created you to be. But you see this, community is not responsible. No one else is responsible for your practice of community. You are. Okay. So, that was good too, but we'll go to this. So, every week on these practices, we're ending with a practice plan. Okay. You can do it. You don't have to do it.

It's been totally optional. Here's your practice plan for this week. Reflect on your community at Valley Creek and take one step towards strengthening it this week. Reflect on your community at Valley Creek. It would be like this. Like, number one, do I have one? According to what we discussed today in Scripture, do I have one? And if I do, is it healthy? And is it strong? And does it carry the glory of God? And how could it be improved? Do I know the names? Like, reflect on your community. Yeah, yeah. I got community. Okay, if I just said to you then, what

are their names? Jesus could very quickly tell you, Peter, James, John, and Matthew, right? Could you actually say the names? Like, if you're in a circle with people and you don't know their name, that's not community. For a bunch of you, that meant nothing to you, but for some of you, that was really impactful right there because you're giving yourself the checkbox of I've got community. See, we're familiar with it, so we think we've mastered it, but you don't even know the name of the guy that sits across from you every other week in the coffee shop.

So, reflect on it and take one step towards strengthening it, which might be like, "Hey buddy, I'm embarrassed. We've been in this for three years together. I don't know your name. So, I'm going to humble myself right now and just tell you, I haven't valued you in this enough to know your name. That changes today though. Would you tell me your name and a little bit about your life?" It might be, you have a great community and you need to write everyone a note to thank them or bless them. It might be you acknowledge as a circle. Is this going the way we want? It might be you sit with a mentor and say, "I want to invest in this." It might be vulnerable. And you tell your story. Like, this is where you trust the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit, I reflected on my community. Here's how I see it. Is that accurate? And then, what's one thing I can do to strengthen it? That's called doing what Jesus did. So, I can do what Jesus did. And I get it. And I know I went long. I'm done.

Listen, if you don't want it, I get it. We're at this point in the year. We've outran our willpower. We're training, right? We use the example all year. At this point in the year, you've outrun your willpower. So, you've run further than yourself. Try, strive can take you. That's why if you feel like this feels fast and these practices are stacking, you've outrun your willpower. Don't do this in your own will. This isn't trying. This is training. And this is opening myself to God's grace. And we spent literally probably three months at the beginning of the year talking about a vision. If you do not have a vision to do what Jesus did, you have no interest in doing what Jesus did. Okay. So, if that's you and you're like, "I'm just not there." Here's the good news. We've got three practices left, a wrap-up of season four, and then we're moving on with this as a normal part of our life. Community, something Jesus, we prayed that we would practice so his glory could be manifested in our lives to the world around us.

And that we would become the kind of people that are able to love our enemy because we've spent so much time practicing, loving the brothers and sisters, the other parts of the body of Christ. That's what this will do for you. So, Holy Spirit, I just trust that you will move in our lives the way that you want to move. I pray for great community in this church, in this church, in this church, like the 12 disciples in Jesus's life. Help us be the body of Christ that is strong enough to carry your glory. I pray for every person who has a past experience, every person that has a brokenness, every person that has an objection, every person that has an obstacle, and every person that has nine reasons why this is not possible in their life.

I just submit and surrender them to you, Lord, the Holy Spirit. You would help us as individuals. Work these things out in our lives not just for community, but because you're leading us to be disciple of Jesus, living free as a person of love. In your name we pray. Amen.