

Training Session 12 - BLESS Rhythms: Eat with a Purpose

Objective

Love people who are both near and far from God through a monthly meal with the purpose of experiencing Christ-centered community and seeing friends coming to know Christ.

Key Scripture

Acts 2:42

BLESS Rhythms

Each week, we're exploring in depth one of the particular habits of the heart that we're seeking to develop through the BLESS rhythms. The BLESS rhythms, in short, are an attempt to help us flourish. God's goal for us isn't surviving. It's thriving. Irenaeus, an early church father, wrote, "*Gloria Dei vivens homo*," which has been translated to mean, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." Fully alive. Thriving. Flourishing. Our hearts stir as we read these words, almost as if we are a hibernating bear awakening to the smell of honey. Yet, is thriving really possible? Given all the brokenness and pain and hurt in our lives and the world, can we flourish?

Thankfully, not only is it possible for us to thrive, but God expects us to thrive as we begin to encounter the fullness of the Holy Spirit. His intentions are clear. He has plans to prosper us (Jeremiah 29:11), much like a prospering tree planted by streams of water that never fails to bear fruit (Jeremiah 17:7-8). As a master Gardener, He is rooting and establishing us in the soil of His love. Picture yourself entering the most beautiful garden you've ever seen with flowers of all types and orchards and vineyards and over the archway a sign is hung, written by the Master Gardener himself, "Planted in the house of the Lord, they will **flourish**" (Psalm 92:13). Planted. That's the secret to flourishing. Not blown to and fro like a tumbleweed rolling across the plains of Kansas. Planted, like an oak of righteousness in the house of the Lord. BLESS rhythms are ways for the roots of our faith to deepen and stretch down toward the stream of living water that we might FLOURISH!

Eat with the Purpose of Loving Those who are Drawing Near to Christ

This week, we're exploring the "E" in BLESS rhythms, which stands for eating with a purpose. Specifically, we're going to examine two particular Biblical purposes involved with eating in the Bible. The first involves meals that were centered around drawing near to Christ and one another to experience the richness of a Christ-centered community; the second involves meals that were centered around loving those far from God with the purpose of loving them for love's sake and for Christ's sake.

The first Biblical purpose for eating a meal involves intentionally seeking to love and be loved in a Christ-centered community by sharing a meal with those who are drawing near to Christ. In Acts 2:42 we read, "All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer." In this verse, we see that the early followers of Jesus had an intentionality during their meals. They devoted themselves, meaning it was a regular rhythm in their lives. To what? They devoted themselves to 4 things in verse 42:

1. **The Bible:** God spoke authoritatively through the apostles to the early church. We now have the apostles' teaching written down for us in the Bible. Our Christ-centered community, like the early church, should center around reading and studying and applying the word of God in our lives.
2. **Friendship:** Friendship (or fellowship) with others seeking to follow God was integral, not incidental, to the mission of the early church and it should be for us too.
3. **Sharing meals:** They knew that friendship happens over meals, so they devoted themselves to eating meals together, including the Lord's Supper.
4. **Prayer:** A Christ-centered community seeking to love God and one another like the early followers of Christ will, inevitably, reach out to God, who is love, to empower them to love. We do this the same that the early church did: through prayer.

These four things were central to the life of the early church. This list isn't exhaustive because they also cared for the poor (v43), worshipped together (v46), gave thanks like it was continually Thanksgiving Day (v47), and shared the love of Christ with those who were far from God (v47). Yet, all of these things will come if you get the first 4 in place (the Bible, friendship, a meal, and prayer) in a monthly meal. So let's begin with the first 4 and watch how the others follow.

Sadly, while we all need a Christ-centered community like this, few of us are experiencing community itself, much less a Christ-centered community. According to a new study done in 2018, 54% of Americans feel like no one actually knows them well, 56% said the people they surround themselves with are not necessarily with them, and 40% feel isolated.¹ Ironically, the most technologically *connected* people in human history are also the most relationally *disconnected* people. Our world is a place where "Facebook Depression" is a real thing and countries (like Great Britain) feel a need to appoint a "Minister of Loneliness."²

The problem of isolation is without question a clear and present danger, but what do we do about it? One answer to address our loneliness and isolation is to turn to a myriad of affinity groups to meet our need for community. In an interesting article in the New York Times entitled *When Some Turn to Church, Others go to Crossfit*, one crossfit enthusiast stated, "Crossfit is family, laughter, love, and community." Some of you who know me well probably think I made that statement, and if not me, then certainly it was our very own Crossfit guru Michelle Crawford.

While both Michelle and I have benefited tremendously from our Crossfit community in the ways described in the quote, we would also unequivocally champion the need for a Christ-centered community. As hard as it is to accomplish, all of us, without exception, need a band of brothers and sisters around us to pray with, cry with, celebrate with, and journey with towards Christ. The benefits of walking in Christ-centered community are unending--our gifts are better utilized (1 Corinthians 12); when we fall down we have brothers and sisters to pick us up (Ecclesiastes 4:10); we spur one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25); we bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2); we have truth-tellers in our life who will help us see our sin and turn from it (Galatians 6:1); and our joy is multiplied (2 Timothy 1:3-4).

Sage theologian Stanley Hauerwas rightly points out that we need a Christ-centered community to teach us the things that really matter in life. Learning the secret of being content in all

circumstances is a skill that is learned in Christian community. Learning to rejoice continually and give thanks in all circumstance is learned, Hauerwas argues, in an apprenticeship, much like laying brick is learned in an apprenticeship. At some point we need someone who has had a trowel in his hand and can mentor us in the process, and so is it with faith, hope, and love—we need to walk with those who have laid a path of faith, hope, and love in Christ through the successes and failures of life.³ Life paralyzes us all at times and we need friends who have enough faith and courage to do whatever it takes to get us to Jesus, even if that means digging a hole in someone's roof and dropping us in special forces style (See Mark 2:1-12).

William Wilberforce knew this well. He knew God was calling him to strain and struggle toward the abolition of the slave trade and he was wise enough to know he had absolutely no shot apart from a Christ-centered community. Thus, he lived by a creed: choose a neighbor before you choose a house. As a result, he chose to intentionally live in close proximity to brothers and sisters in Christ who could fuel his hope and faith in Christ in the neighborhood of Clapham, which later resulted in this community being labeled the Clapham sect or Clapham saints.

Yet, just as the heroic, grandiose life of William Wilberforce seems so distant from us, so does his experience of community. For ordinary humans like most of us, experiencing Christ-centered community feels like a great idea in theory but an incredibly elusive one in practice. It's like eating right and exercising. It sounds great and I know it would be good for me, but actually pulling it off is another story. Many of us have tried and it didn't work out. We joined a small group at church and found it utterly unsatisfying. We opened our hearts to a few friends, only to have them betray our trust and wound us deeply. On top of the painful fits and starts, there are all the complexities of our demanding work schedules, kids activities that are out of control, and an enemy who loves to paint us into a corner of isolation.

In defiance of our isolating enemy and with hearts full of faith, we are boldly encouraging one another to take the first step toward Christ-centered community by beginning to pray and talk about gathering (or joining) a group of friends to share a meal together (at least monthly) with the hope of sharing life, praying for one another, and orienting your life towards Christ and His word. It may only be for a season or it may be for a lifetime, but in either case you will experience Christ through His body and that is a win.

Finally, a word of caution for all of us, lest we destroy the very thing we are setting out to build. As we move into a Christ-centered community, take heed of the sage advice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote one of the classic books on Christian community entitled *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer, who himself chose to live in an intentional community, notes,

“Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.

“God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly.

“Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive.... We do not complain about what God does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily.”⁴

Bonhoeffer wisely points out a prevalent pitfall that many of us have stepped headlong into. Far too often, we love a utopian dream of community and shy away from gritty, real-life communities full of broken, hurting, needy, and insecure people (like us!). Sadly, this utopian dream of community destroys our actual community, leaving us with a *reality* that never lives up to our dream. We grumble and fixate on the failures of others to meet our expectations and our precious community slips through our balled up hands like air.

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer saw something quite different among those who know that “God already has laid the only foundation of our community” through our union with Christ and his eternal community. In the gospel, we see Jesus, who experienced an eternal, Trinitarian community far greater than our utopian dreams, and we watch him give up what all of us are desperately seeking. He hung in isolation on the cross and was utterly abandoned so that He could welcome us into the community He had always known. As the gospel awakens our hearts to this heavenly community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Bonhoeffer notes that we are now enabled to enter back into life together with people in a whole new way, not as people constantly making demands, but rather as people constantly rejoicing. Rather than consuming community, we create community, wherever we go. Liberated from the unrealistic demands we place on our proximate communities here on earth, we are set free to love broken and hurting people, far more intent on giving than receiving. How true it is: “The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.”⁵

In seeking to eat a monthly meal with other Christ followers, we hope to become creators of community by loving hurting people like us in all their pain and possibility. One action step in the right direction of love is reaching out to some friends who are seeking to follow Christ and see if they are interested in meeting together for a monthly meal with the purpose of connecting, praying with one another, and rooting ourselves in the word of God. This is by no means the answer to building the community of your dreams, but it does provide a chance to love and be loved and take hold of by faith the heavenly Trinitarian community here on earth in some proximate way.

Eat with the Purpose of Loving Those who are Far from God

As we establish BLESS rhythms for our lives, we’re going to hold one another accountable to not only loving people who are seeking to follow Christ but to also loving people who feel really far from God. We are going to intentionally pursue having a meal with someone who is not actively following Jesus at least once a month. The idea, again, is that we’re creating community by loving others, not just consuming it.

You see this modeled through the Bible. Jesus intentionally ate in the home of shady characters like Levi and a whole bunch of his buddies who were far from God because He wanted to see them, like Levi, begin to follow Him (Mark 2:13-17). He ate a meal in the home of a whole group of devout church goers (or temple goers at that time). While they were moral and “good” people, their self-righteousness left them far from a life-giving relationship with God (Luke 11:37-54). The early church indiscriminately loved those who were both near and far from God, and, as a result, “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Much like Jesus, don’t be concerned about whether or not this person would consider themselves to be a Christian (or in His case a good Jew). Instead, seek to love and value friends who are not actively following Jesus. The idea is not that you will necessarily share the gospel with this friend of yours at lunch (relax!), but rather that you will love for love’s sake a person not actively following Jesus. They are not a project to save but a person to love, so start by getting to know them over a meal. Pray for them and pursue ways to love them. As you create community for them, then you can apply the principles we discussed under loving and valuing people with the gospel message. Remember, the first step happens over BBQ, so fire up the grill or head to your local BBQ joint.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Acts 2:42-47. Describe the key elements of the early Christian community. Have you ever experienced anything like it?
2. Do you have a Christ-centered community where you are sharing at least a monthly meal together that encompasses the four key foundations of community?
3. What are the barriers keeping you from experiencing a Christ-centered community?
4. Discuss this statement from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.”
5. William Wilberforce lived by the following creed: choose a neighbor before you choose a house. Discuss.
6. All of us eat with non-Christians and with those who are far from God, but not all of us do it with intention. Discuss the difference.
7. How are you doing when it comes to intentionally loving those who are not actively following Jesus through things like scheduling at least one meal a month?

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1. <http://fortune.com/2018/05/01/americans-lonely-cigna-study/>
 2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html>
 3. Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 121.
 4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 27-28.
 5. Ibid., 27.