



## Growing Healthy Community

### Introduction

Healthy communities grow from healthy nutrients added to relational soil by healthy leaders. Like a carefully cultivated garden produces mature plants bearing good fruit, so community is born out of careful cultivation. Jesus modeled this by showing his disciples how to live in the Kingdom of God. He showed them **joy**, true **love**, brought them into a **family identity** of God, and corrected them with **grace and truth**. In the end, he laid his life down for them, serving them ultimately. The result was a community so committed to the way of life that Jesus taught, that many gave their lives for it, sparking the blaze of the early church spreading throughout the ancient world.

Today, healthy communities grow in the same way, whether it's a soccer team, a small group, a sales team, or your own family. As kingdom nutrients saturate the soil, the result is vibrant kingdom growth forming the supernatural oneness that Jesus, John, and Paul spoke of so often in scripture.

### Objectives:

- Assess how well your own hearts soil conditions are for a healthy community
- Clarifying the essential nutrients for a healthy community of disciples
- Cultivating Joy, Steadfast Love, Family Identity, and Grace in yourself.
- Developing practices that build these nutrients with others.

### Deepen your Character: Dependability

Jesus was the most consistent leader in words and actions that ever walked the earth. He was wholly integrated, as in every facet of his life blended with the next - there was no compartmentalization, no switching of hats, *he was who he was*. The question is not "What would Jesus do?" because by the time we ask that question it is too late (our brains have already determined a course subconsciously). Instead, the question is "Who would Jesus be?" Life moves fast and the decisions we need to make come too furiously, and being like Jesus all the time seems like an impossible task. The good news is that Jesus *is who he is*, and we can become like Jesus if we slow down, and *allow Him* to work in our lives.

Jesus tells us that being obedient to his commands is how we grow in love for him (John 15). Abiding in his love (aka being obedient to his words) leads to fruitfulness which leads to great joy - His joy. This joy of the Lord is our strength and attractational presence in this life, enabling



us to say enthusiastically, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” Quite literally, this not joy *in* the Lord, but the joy *of* the Lord that surrounded Christ saturating all he did; and so too it saturates the lives of his followers. King David wrote, “You have revealed to me the path of life; before your face is fullness of joy, at your right-hand pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). There was nothing more joy-giving for David, nothing more worthy in this life than to bask in the approval of God’s smiling face.

In order to live *like* Christ we must live *with* Christ (just as the disciples did), that is, growing in dependence on him daily. Our healthy leadership will flow in correlation to our dependence on his power in and through our lives. As he transforms us, he will transform the people around us by working in their lives. This is what the vine and branch metaphor is all about: Kingdom fruit that promotes Kingdom transformation. It has always been God’s strategy for bringing the Kingdom to bear on earth.

And so our dependability is really a measure of our dependence on Jesus. As our reliance on Christ grows, the people around us will begin to trust us more. We will become dependable like Christ because we are in Him and He is in us. Our leadership influence will grow because Jesus is empowering it, just as God has done with countless leaders throughout time, he will lead us down the path of Kingdom influence - it’s His joy to do so – and His glory.

A word of caution, this joy of Jesus manifest in us is not to be confused with pseudo-joys that life is filled with. Momentary pleasures (endorphins from sex, drugs, thrills, etc.) are not the Joy of the Lord. Jesus never peddled cheap thrills in the Gospels, but was calling his followers into a way of life that mirrored his own thoughtful, intentional, disciplined and peaceful spiritual journey.

### **Scripture**

Meditate on the following scriptures and think about what is truly being communicated, then answer the questions.

Nehemiah 8:10

*Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*



John 15:4-11

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

- **Describe in your own words the relationship that Jesus was explaining.**
- **What are some of the responses people may have to Jesus' description of life in the Kingdom of God?**
- **What essential leadership realities are revealed in this passage?**
- **What are some reasons that leaders often struggle with this passage?**
- **Which of the following do you find yourself most often doing?**
  - Experiencing spiritual growth for a season, followed by long periods of stagnation or withering
  - Struggling to accomplish on your own without relying on Jesus
  - Asking for things that are out of alignment with Kingdom purposes
  - Desiring to experience the joy of the Lord without wanting to be obedient to his commands
  - Not knowing His word well enough to follow



**Develop your Competency: Cultivating Healthy Community**

Before continuing, take the following assessment and grade yourself from A through E. Giving yourself an A indicates you are a model to follow while E indicates no mastery.

Proficiency	Preassessment
Unify a team around a common purpose	
Consistently walk in trust and obedience to Jesus' word	
Experience joy in your life regularly despite difficult circumstances	
Experience God's love even when you fail	
Feel a strong sense of belonging to God's family through people you are close with	
Receive grace and give it in kind	

**What is the best community you have ever been involved in?**

**What made it so life-giving?**

**Growing Healthy Community**

**JOY**

Healthy communities first need the right ingredients to thrive: Joy, Steadfast Love, Family Identity, and Grace in healthy correction. No doubt, in thinking back on your best experiences in community, they all included a healthy level of joy with one another. If joy is lacking (either due to a person's past experiences or lack of establishment within the group), it must be added in order to have a community experience the type of relationship God desires for us. In Numbers 6, we see an ancient blessing that God taught his people to use:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;  
 the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;  
 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*  
 -Numbers 6:24-26

Wilder & Hendricks say that joy is routinely connected to God's face in Scripture and that in neurological terms, the shining of someone's face (a person smiling at us or delighting in us) corresponds to the joy we receive in our brains through endorphin release. Our brains are wired



for joy at a functional level. It's no wonder we spend the first 9 months of our lives basking in the joy of our parents' faces. Consider the following:

*When our children were infants, we would put them to sleep early in the evening. Later, before going to bed I would tiptoe in to look at them as they slept. In the darkness of their room, my face would beam the light of joy as I watched them sleep. I could hardly contain my pleasure as I drank in how precious they were to me. If I imagine my heavenly Father doing that to me, I can feel joy in my stomach. I can feel my body react to my Father's face. The physical human body was designed to respond to joy.<sup>1</sup>*

What we see in Numbers is God teaching His people to practice blessing each other with joy. He knows the path of life that was revealed to David in Psalm 16, and He is leading his people to it as well.

Healthy communities, if they are to be healthy, must first practice building joy together (examples will be given in the next section) if they are to experience the love, identity, grace, and oneness that Jesus called us to.

**What does it feel like to experience joy?**

**Why would God use joy as a main motivator for our obedience?**

**How much of communicating joy is non-verbal?**

## **STEADFAST LOVE**

Naturally built upon joy is God's steadfast love (the Hebrew word *Hesed* in scripture) and it's this love which is an essential nutrient for community to thrive. Jesus showed his disciples love faithfully. He also showed them how to love others faithfully, no matter their reputation. He didn't just give a teaching on love, he showed them what love looks like. We all need a model or an image to replicate.

When a child wants to emulate their favorite star athlete, they go out and get the same equipment and try to move like they see their idol doing on TV. But it's not enough to adopt dress and mannerisms alone. If they really are seeking to become a standout in their sport, they must

---

<sup>1</sup> Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), 58.



commit to the rigorous training regimens off the field that made those athletes great. The same is true of Jesus. If we are to love like Jesus, we must abide with Jesus, when its “showtime” and especially when it’s not.

*We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. - 2 Thess. 3:9*

*Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. - Phil 3:17*

When we demonstrate love to others, showing them how to do it, they will have a better idea of how to emulate that behavior. It will begin to make sense on multiple levels, not just cognitively but experientially and habitually.

**How do you see Joy and Steadfast Love working within healthy communities?**

**What are signs that they are present? What are indicators that they are lacking in a community?**

**Where/how has it been hard to love like Jesus (unconditionally) in your own life?**

### **FAMILY IDENTITY**

Everyone who grew up in a family (whether biological or not) has a family identity. Our families of origin have baked into us preset biases, perspectives, and often habitual behavior. Whether our family was religious, whether they were hardworking, enjoyed good fun or good food, all of these experiences define the way we interpret the world around us. Our experiences with our neighbors at the BBQ, other parents at practice, and of course holiday get-togethers all shaped the way we interact with people today. A family identity answers the question “*What kind of people are we? How do we act?*”

When we meet Jesus and trust Him with our lives, then we are adopted into God’s family through His blood. Our old family identity must be, on many levels, updated and replaced with a new family identity, arranged with Kingdom values. We then ask ourselves the question “As followers of Jesus, what kind of people are we? How do the people of God act?”



As groups are formed within the Church, their unity and love will correlate to how they embrace God's values for his household, his body, his family. There is no better place to look than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to find God's new family identity.

**We are a people who...**

- take God's commands seriously.*
- reconcile as quickly as possible.*
- are careful to obey God in our sexuality, even with glances and thoughts.*
- remain faithful to our spouses.*
- keep our word and have no need to make oaths.*
- love our enemies and pray for them.*
- seek to be rewarded by God instead of by people.*
- forgive others because we have been forgiven so much by our Father.<sup>2</sup>*

Paul continues to shape God's family identity within the Church throughout all his letters (notably in Ephesians 4 & 5), and he is clearly attempting to give people explicit reminders on how to live as God's people. The effect of all of these scriptures is to reveal a model of the character of Jesus for us to follow as his disciples. These are repeated chapter after chapter, book after book, with memory jogging narratives added in for effect.

As a healthy church comes together and experiences life together, the natural outpouring is Christ-like character transformation. Our lives as followers of Jesus, within His family, are to be devoted to the building up of one another unto full maturity in Christ. This is the only measure we are to use (Ephesians 4) and it manifests through the collective body of Jesus' followers living in fellowship with one another. Through being adopted into God's family, our family identities are replaced with His vision of who we are and how we act.

**Think back on distinctive qualities (kindness, honesty, hard-working, fun-loving, food-loving etc) of the family of your youth. How many of them were demonstrated vs explicitly named?**

**How do norms like the one listed above from the Sermon on the Mount work to shape our behavior in daily life? In community?**

---

<sup>2</sup> Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020).



## GRACE AND TRUTH

As Jesus encountered people of all stripes, he was consistent in his posture toward them. He loved people for who they were as image-bearers of God but also gave them a new direction to walk in the light of truth. He was full of grace *and* truth.

As we cultivate kingdom community, we must too be able to experience and deal in healthy correction or grace and truth. Sadly, when many people have negative experiences in community, especially within the Church, they have experienced shame from toxic correction or abuse. They've come into a gathering of people and someone well-intentioned attempted to speak into their lives (usually without the relational foundation of joy, steadfast love, and family identity—often with truth but without love). This leads them to distance themselves from the very community that would give them real life. It is a vicious cycle repeating itself thousands of times a week around the globe.

*Read John 4:1-42*

In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, we see by all accounts a meeting that should never have happened. Jews didn't associate with Samaritans and Jewish men didn't speak with women, especially women who chose the lifestyle she had. But Jesus *had* to speak with her because he *had* to give her grace and truth. This marginalized woman who was viewed as less-than by her neighbors and lived a life of isolation, was brought into fellowship of the living God. He was both all truthful and all loving, and it changed her life forever.

**Knowing Jesus knew all about this woman, what surprises you about the way approaches her? What do you suspect he was showing her?**

**How does showing someone grace before sharing truth, communicate value, love and joy?**

## Put It Into Practice

These concepts may seem far-reaching and challenging to apply but there are several ways to put them into practice in daily life. Wilder & Hendricks speak to the power of facial expression and body language in our communication. We must pay attention to what our bodies are saying just as much as the words we use. Just as we learn to be attuned to what our physical bodies are





telling us about health, we must practice becoming attuned to what our physical bodies are saying when we speak.

### **Growing Joy**

#### ***- Have Fun Together –***

Whether a family, a work team, or a group, practice joy by intentionally planning to have fun together.

- Go on a fun outing together: hiking, putt-putt, frisbee golf, or plan a board game night
- Focus on enjoying each other's company
- Share favorite moments from your time together
- Groups can plan a dinner together where you just share stories

#### ***- Gratitude Memories –***

*Gratitude is an on-ramp for raising joy in our lives, this is why we're told to give thanks so many times in scripture. This practice can be done individually, but it is even more meaningful when you do it as group.*

Think of a memory in your life for which you are grateful. It can be big (the birth of a child) or small (a beautiful sunset). It doesn't matter, as long as you feel a sense of gratitude when you think about it.

- Give it a two- to three- word title (ie. "Dan and Dave," "Shining Goldfinch" or "Balloon Soccer")
- Taking several moments of quiet, go back to this memory and relive it for a minute and imagine fully that you are back in that moment.
- Now ask:
  - What did you feel in your body? Maybe "peace" or "lightness" (it doesn't matter as long as you feel something).
  - What might God be communicating to you through the memory and the peace you feel? For example you may see hear God saying, "I am with you and I like to share my goodness and beauty with you."



### **- Showing Joy -**

So much of our communication is actually non-verbal. Neurologically, our brains operate on joy more powerfully than any other emotion and this joy can override prior negative pathways. There is something Biblical about the way God intended us to experience joy through the “lighting up” of our faces. A baby reciprocates this joy as others smile with their mouths and eyes at it. We tend to shed this beneficial habit when we grow older.

- In groups of 3+ OR just as you go about your day, practice communicating joy before or without using words.
- You could begin your group time by smiling with your mouths and eyes at one another.
- Then add a phrase of gratitude for being with the other “It’s so good to see you Tom” or “I’m glad you’re here, Janet.”
- This will seem silly, but after some practice, you will notice it feeling more normal AND you will notice its effects in your mood.
  - What do you feel when someone greets you with joy?
  - What do you feel when you intentionally show someone else joy with your face?