

# We Belong

To start us out this morning, I want to share with y'all **a parable** that I wrote. We've been studying some of *Jesus'* parables recently in the book of Matthew, and I got inspired. So I wanted to attempt one of my own. I'm sure it won't be as good as the ones Jesus wrote, but y'all can let me know. Maybe this will be my first *and last* parable. But either way, here goes. You ready? Here it is.

In a certain place, a **man and a woman got married**. After about a year, the husband approached his wife and said to her, "I really love being married to you, but I don't really care for your voice. In fact, if your voice stays the way it is right now, I don't think I can stay married to you. Let me know what you plan to do about changing your voice." A couple weeks later, he approached his wife again and said, "I really love being married to you, but I don't like your personality. In fact, if your personality stays as it is, I don't really think I can stay married to you. Let me know what you plan to do about changing your personality." A *third* time the husband came to his wife and said, "I really love being married to you, but I don't much care for your *height*. In fact, if your *height* stays like it is, I don't think I can stay married to you. Let me know what you plan to do about changing your *height*."

The **wife, who was of course unable** to do much to change her voice, her personality, or her height—insisted to her husband that all of those things were the same as they always had been. That her voice, her personality, and her height weren't any different than they were the day that they fell in love. The husband responded, "maybe that's true. But I've grown *tired* of them. And unless you are willing to change them, I don't think our marriage is going to make it." So after pleading with her husband for a few more months, he eventually filed for divorce.

The now **ex-husband originally thought** he would get married *again*. Over the years, he dated a variety of women—some of them more interesting and attractive to him than others. But everytime the relationship got serious with one of those women, he found himself becoming less and less sure of it. He would think to himself, "sure, I like this woman *now*—but will I like her a *year* from now?" "I like her voice now—but it's a little high-pitched. If I have to hear that voice for a year, I bet I'm going to get tired of it." "I like her personality now, but she really likes to laugh—I wonder if I'm going to get tired of her laughing all of the time." "I like her height now, but she's a little on the short side. I wonder if my neck is going to get tired of hunching over through the years."

Eventually, he **came up with a solution**. He would date *multiple* women at the same time. He would date some women whose voices he liked, some women whose personalities

he liked, and some women whose *heights* he liked. He began piecing together, essentially, a *supergirlfriend* in his head: an imaginary woman made up of all the best traits of all his simultaneous girlfriends. But as soon as each girlfriend found out what he was doing, they broke up with him. So he grew older and older, more and more isolated, more and more frustrated that he couldn't ever find the perfect woman. And then he died.

...so **what do y'all think?** Decent parable? I know it's kind of a bummer at the end, but that's kind of how parables are—plenty of Jesus' parables end kinda dark. More specifically, how *awful* is this guy from the parable? Like he's the stuff of nightmares, right? Pretty horrible dude. Okay, but here is where I should also remind you of what parables are meant to do. When Jesus told parables, they generally weren't just cute stories to illustrate an interesting point. They were meant to evoke a reaction. They were sometimes meant to *expose* wrong postures and attitudes towards the kingdom of God. And sometimes, parables were aimed at doing that in the very people *listening* to the parable. In other words, when Jesus told parables, you had to be careful about what you were *feeling* in response to them, because it was at least possible that the parable was *about* you.

So **now that I've prepared you** for *that*...here's the point of *my* parable. You ready? **That parable is about people's posture—not necessarily towards marriage or dating (though it might be)—but about people's posture towards church.** More specifically, about their *involvement* in a church. Some people view *church* a lot like the husband in the story viewed relationships. *When we come around a church, we view it a little like a negotiation:* I really like this church, but they're going to need to get better at x, y, and z if I'm going to stick around. Which eventually gives way to what I've heard called a “buffet” approach to church. Going down the line and picking a little bit of this church, a little bit of that one, teaching from here, music from there, community from a third place—building a “super-church” in our minds, made up of all the best parts of several different churches. But all my cards on the table, I think that approach to church shortchanges both *us*, and the churches we're a part of. I think it leaves all of us more lonely and more isolated as a result. And I think there's a much better way out there of relating to the Church. And that's what I want to talk about today.

**If you've got a bible,** turn with me to **Romans 12.** We've been in a series called *Church Matters* for the past month and a half. And we've been talking, at length, about the importance of gathering with other followers of Jesus, on a regular basis. We've talked about a lot of the things we *do* when we gather together—we teach, we sing, we give, we eat, we serve. All of those things are vitally important to our discipleship to Jesus. But this morning, I want to *close out* our series by taking it all one step *further*. I want to

discuss how, to fully understand why “church matters,” you need not just to regularly be *around* a church—you actually need to *belong* to one.

Now, I’ve chosen that word “belong” very intentionally. That’s the language that the New Testament often uses to talk about our relationship with church: *belonging*. It doesn’t primarily talk about us “attending” a church, or “being around” a church, “liking” a church, or even “loving” a church. Rather, it talks about us *belonging* to one. For instance, take a look with me at Romans 12, starting in v. 3:

*[3] For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. [4] For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, [5] so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

So here’s what’s happening. At this point in the book of Romans, Paul has just laid out eleven full chapters of dense, theologically rich teaching on humanity and sin and what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. And then, at the beginning of chapter 12, he transitions to talking about the practical *implications* of all that. And here, *one* of the implications he lays out is **how we think about our individual relationship to the church.**

He says that none of us should think of ourselves more *highly* than we ought, but that we should think of ourselves with “sober,” accurate, judgment. We should understand that we are a part of a “body”—one of Paul’s favorite metaphors for talking about the church. He says just like a human body has many different parts, and all those parts do different things—so also we should understand that we are a part of a “body,” and that implies that each of us *belongs* to one another. **Being a part of a church, at least as God intended it, means *belonging* to that church.** To put it another way, there is a *reciprocity* in our relationship with the church: **we need it, and it needs us.** We need others, and others need us. And without that reciprocity—that mutual commitment and belonging to one another—the church can’t be what it was meant to be. *And we individually, you can’t become who God made you to become.*

To help further unpack this idea, I want to teach you about two different types of relationships. The first is what we might call a *consumer relationship*. A consumer relationship is precisely what it sounds like: a relationship where I am the *consumer*. So I personally have a *consumer* relationship with the grocery store, Kroger. ~~Notice I didn’t say “Krogers” because that’s not its name. Kroger.~~ I shop at Kroger because there’s one

close to my house, and they offer decent products at low prices. But I know that it's a *consumer* relationship, because if Kroger moved a lot *further* from my house, or all of a sudden decided to *double* all their prices, I would let Kroger know that I've decided to see other people. That's how a *consumer* relationship works. And a lot of relationships are *meant* to be *consumer* relationships. But not *all* relationships.

**Certain relationships** are meant to be **covenant relationships**. So imagine with me for a second that I start treating my *wife* like I treat *Kroger*. Imagine with me that I say to Ana, "okay—here's the deal. I agree to live with you and share a bank account with you and raise kids with you. But I expect a certain level of service in return. I expect that you treat me like this, serve me like this, meet my expectations like this. And obviously, if anything about our relationship becomes more difficult or inconvenient, you will understand if I need to explore other options."

**Would you consider that** to be a *healthy* marriage or an *unhealthy* marriage? I think at least most of us would say that that's a wildly *unhealthy* marriage. There's just something within us that *knows* that's not how a marriage was supposed to work. **A marriage isn't a consumer relationship; it's a covenant relationship.** A healthy marriage is not primarily about the other person meeting your needs in satisfactory ways. It's about you committing to the other person, for life. Which is why we say things in wedding vows like, "in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer...", right? It's about committing to loving the other person, *regardless* of how convenient or inconvenient it is. **You don't enter into a marriage as a consumer, you enter into marriage as a covenant partner.**

Okay—**here's where all of that connects** to our topic for today. **The bible talks about our relationship to church much more like a covenant relationship than a consumer one.** Remember Paul's language: "each member *belongs* to the others." Not "maintains a loose *commitment* to the others until they find something better." *Belongs*. **Once we have committed to a church, we aren't paying customers evaluating our options; we are partners.** Members of a *body*. *We need* the church, and the church *needs* us. And when we *neglect* to interact with the church that *way*—when we treat it like a dispenser of religious goods and services, like our spiritual grocery store—we miss out on a lot of things. But we see the church *rightly*—when we understand it as a *covenant* relationship—that *changes* quite a few things.

So **with the rest of our time this morning**, I want to lay out four **things that I think change** when we start *belonging* to a church. When we see church the way the Scriptures talk about church, it shifts several things in us for the better. Four things *belonging* does in the life of a follower of Jesus. First...

## Belonging changes how we view ourselves.

This is what Paul is trying to get across in the *first* part of the passage we read earlier, from Romans 12. He says:

*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not **think of yourself more highly than you ought**, but rather **think of (view) yourself with sober judgment**, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.<sup>1</sup>*

**The unhealthy alternative** to seeing yourself as a member of a church body, Paul suggests, is “thinking of yourself more *highly* than you ought.” Having an incorrectly *arrogant* view of yourself. Not having an appropriate amount of *self-awareness*. That’s one thing that belonging to a community is meant to mediate in us: our self-awareness. When we belong to each other, it helps us see ourselves with “sober judgment.” It helps us see ourselves more accurately than we would have otherwise. There’s a quote by a guy named Joseph Hellerman that I think elaborates on this idea well. He wrote a book we reference quite a bit around here called *When the Church Was a Family*. In that book, he puts it like this:

*Spiritual formation* (i.e. the process of growing and maturing as a follower of Jesus) *occurs primarily in the context of community*. People who **remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in** (notice this language) **self-understanding**, and they **mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings**. [...] **Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life**. People who **stay** also **grow**. People who **leave** do **not** grow. We all know people who are consumed with **spiritual wanderlust**. But we never get to **know** them very well because they cannot seem to **stay put**. They move along from church to church, ever searching for a congregation that will better satisfy their **felt needs**. Like **trees repeatedly transplanted from soil to soil**, these **spiritual nomads fail to put down roots and seldom experience lasting and fruitful growth in their Christian lives**.<sup>2</sup>

So I find **the agricultural imagery** he uses at the end of that quote so very helpful. **Think about it: what happens if you continually pull up a plant by its roots, over and over again, and continue replanting it in different places? Generally speaking, it dies**. But even if it doesn’t *die*, it *certainly* never *grows* very much. Right? Because for plants to grow, they need *time* for their roots to sink down deep into the soil. And generally, the longer they

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 12:3

<sup>2</sup> Hellerman, Joseph. *When the Church Was a Family*, p. 1.

get to do that, the stronger and more vibrant they become. That's how it works. So why would we think it's any different with *spiritual* growth? Why would we think that continually digging up our roots and replanting them somewhere else would be good for us over the long haul?

But **on the other hand**, if we stick around the same group of people for an extended amount of time, we start to see ourselves with *sober judgment*. We start to see ourselves more accurately. We allow people to notice, and point out, our blindspots. We allow people to encourage us in the things we're doing well. And we become *formed*, over time, into who God made us to be.

I've **seen this play out in my own life**. Before we started City Church, I served on staff with the same group of guys for close to eight years. Some of them knew me better than most anybody else has in my entire life. And *because* of that, they were able to speak directly and openly with me about the things I was doing well, and the things I was doing poorly. They could identify not just my *actions*, but many of the motives *underlying* my actions, because they *knew* me. And because I was *rooted* in that community for that many years, and they did that, I grew *tremendously* in my view of myself during those years. To be honest, **when I first came around them, I thought of myself very highly; more highly than I should have. I thought I was pretty fantastic, pretty gifted, pretty special. But after eight years, I was able to see myself with much more sober judgment.** And I had become more of who God made me to be. It changed how I viewed myself, for the better.

And **I'm telling you, that is what belonging to a community can do** for you too, if you give it the time necessary for it to happen. It changes how we *view ourselves* for the better.. Second...

## **Belonging changes how we see our problems.**

Belonging to a community shifts how we see our problems and difficulties, and that of others. **Galatians 6** uses the language of "bearing one another's burdens."<sup>3</sup> **That could mean a lot of different things. Could mean life circumstances, suffering, financial hardship, losing a job**—you name it. If it is a true *burden*, the Scriptures teach us that we should look for ways to help *shoulder* that burden for one another.

A **couple in our LifeGroup** recently had a baby. And up until about two weeks ago, it looked like the husband was going to have to be *deployed* for a few months right after their daughter was born. And I don't know how much you know about the first few

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 6:2

months of becoming a parent—but that is a *lot* for a new mom to have to navigate alone. Like, almost *too much*. Having to do that *alone* is a type of *burden*. So the ladies in our LifeGroup had already begun working up a schedule so that each of them could take turns staying the night at this new mom’s house to help her navigate the first few months of parenting, so she wouldn’t have to go it alone. And they did that because they saw her situation, not just as *her* problem to solve—but as *their* problem to help solve. See that’s what it looks like to bear one another’s burdens.

In our church, there have been **so many stories** of people helping bear **financial burdens** for each other that I can’t even keep up with them all anymore. LifeGroups chipping in to buy cars for people that need cars, giving money do major repairs on people’s houses that needed those repairs done. Just a month ago, my wife and I were getting ready to rally people to help support a family in our LifeGroup, and as we were preparing to help *them*, *that very family* that needed help was secretly rallying our group to help *my family*. That’s what it looks like to bear one another’s burdens.

**This is the type of thing Galatians is talking about:** when someone is going through something heavy and difficult, we don’t just say to them, “oh I’m sorry to hear that—I’ll pray for you.” Definitely *pray*—prayer is great. And also, if you’re at all able to, *help*. That’s what belonging looks like. I love the way the book of 1 John puts this:

*If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*<sup>4</sup>

Now, I do want to offer **a quick clarification on this** before moving on. And this is important for us to get: Galatians 6 doesn’t say “insist that other people bear *your* burdens.” It says “look for ways to bear *other* people’s burdens.” So if you heard that instruction and immediately started thinking of all the times that your LifeGroup or community *didn’t* meet needs *you* had in the way you wanted them met, you actually read the passage wrong. **Burden-bearing doesn’t work when it’s demanded from others; only when it’s freely offered to others.** So I would encourage you right now: what *needs* exist in your LifeGroup, that you can help meet? What burdens exist in the community around you, that you can help shoulder? Chances are there *are* some—you just have to do the work to notice them and discern what they are.

Okay, next: *belonging also...*

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<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:17-18

## Belonging changes how we navigate conflict.

I'll try **not to spend long** on this one, because we touched on it briefly a couple weeks ago—but *belonging* changes the way we view *conflict*. **The human tendency, most anytime there is conflict or tension in a relationship, is to push away from the relationship**, right? That's just what we do. **Someone hurts us, so we emotionally detach from relationship with them. Someone annoys us, so we avoid them. Someone is difficult to be around, so we just choose not to be around them anymore. And to make matters worse, sometimes we think we're completely justified in responding that way.** It feels completely normal to do in our society. And many of us *instinctively* do this with the *church* we're a part of too. I think Joseph Hellerman is helpful again on this. He says:

*Running away [from conflict] does provide immediate relief from the awkwardness of a hurtful relationship. It is the easy way out in the short term, and there are legitimate reasons to leave a local church. But people who leave to escape the hard work of conflict resolution are often destined to repeat the cycle of relational dysfunction with another person in another church somewhere else in town.*

**I've known people** that just bounce from church to church every year or two; they stay there long enough to start experiencing conflict. And then, as soon as they do, sure enough, they're off to the next church. And listen, I get it: *bailing* in difficult moments of relationships is by far the *easiest* thing to do. But that doesn't mean it's the *best* thing to do, particularly for followers of Jesus. For instance, *contrast that* mentality with something like what *Paul* says in Ephesians 4:

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with (do what? Bear with...) each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*<sup>5</sup>

**Do you hear the difference**—the *contrast*—in how Paul says we should navigate relationships, and the way the world often trains us to navigate relationships? It's pretty much a total 180. And here's the *reason* for the difference. **As followers of Jesus, we believe that Jesus went to the cross, not just to save us from *sin*, but also to knit us together into a *family*.** And *because* of that, we don't look for the easy way *out* of those relationships. **We look at the other person—even if we're in conflict with them—and we don't see them primarily as an adversary, or an opponent, or a nuisance—we see them as a *brother* or *sister* that Jesus died for.** Which means that

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<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:12-13



**severing the relationship is a *last resort, if that; not the first inclination.* *Belonging* changes the way we navigate conflict with each other.**

And finally...

## **Belonging changes the way we relate to Jesus.**

**Titus 2** says that Jesus “gave himself for us...to redeem us...and to purify for himself a *people* (that’s *plural*) that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”<sup>6</sup> A *people*. So we say often, especially here in the South, that Jesus is our “personal savior.” And in a sense, that’s true. Jesus is a personal savior. *Deeply personal*. But we also desperately need to understand Jesus didn’t die to save a bunch of isolated individuals for himself. He died to redeem a *people*—a reconciled *group* of people—who are his very own.

And when you belong to a church, **you begin understanding that** about Jesus. You begin to see God’s people—the Church—not as an optional *addition to your faith*, but as a **necessary, integral part of it**. Not as something we can choose to participate in when we need a little extra spiritual boost, but a *necessary good*. As something God has put into place for our benefit, so we might fully understand what it means to follow Jesus.

**When we neglect to belong** to a church, we’re actually boxing ourselves out of encouragement, of growth, of maturity, and of a means of grace in our lives. But when we see community *rightly*—as something to *belong* to—we also begin to see *Jesus* more clearly as a result. We see him, not just as *our* savior, but as our *brother’s* savior, our *sister’s* savior. We begin to see that he cares not just about our *personal holiness*, but about our *interpersonal relationships*.

So **here’s my pitch** to you (that may not sound like much of a pitch). If you’re here at City Church just thinking we might provide a slightly better church experience than your last church—slightly more interesting teaching, slightly better music, slightly better programming—if that’s why you’re here, I’m gonna save you some time and say you might just want to go ahead and try somewhere else. There are lots of churches in Knoxville that do any and all of those things much better than we do here.

**But if you’re here** because you want to live in close-knit relationships with others like the Scriptures call us to? If you’re here because you want to sink your roots deep into long-term friendships with others that can change you, change *us*, and ultimately, change the world? If you want to, together, become the very hands and feet of Jesus to

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<sup>6</sup> Titus 2:14

a broken world? If you're here, not just to *attend* or to *consume*, but to *belong*? If *that's* what you're after, hop on in and let's do this thing together. Because that is precisely why we're here. That is *precisely* what it looks like to be the Church.

So **if that's you**, and you want to belong, I'll end by making it *super* practical for you. Two steps for you to take (if you haven't already) to begin *belonging* here at City Church:

## Join a LifeGroup

Being a part of a LifeGroup is where a lot of this starts. That's where you can actually know others and *be known* by others in a way that creates and reinforces *belonging*. We've actually got a LifeGroup Basics class happening today, right after the Gathering downstairs. If you've got 45 minutes to spare, you can show up there, hear about what LifeGroups are, and get connected to one right after the class.

That's one solid step towards *belonging* to our church family. The second one is this...

## Take the City Church Class

If you want to **make it official and say** "this is the church I want to *belong* to," the way we do that is through something called *membership*. To become a member, you go through a three-week class that covers the basics of who we are as a church, and then at the end, you have the opportunity to agree to the membership covenant and become an official part of City Church. The date for the next class isn't set yet, but there's an interest form you can fill out over at [citychurchknox.com/membership](http://citychurchknox.com/membership). Fill that out, and we'll shoot you a link when the dates for the next class get set.

And just real quickly—because I **hear this question** often: you might be thinking "why do I need to go through a class and sign something, just to say I belong here?" And I understand the question. But I would maybe flip the question back around and say to you, "if you are truly committed to *belonging* here, why *wouldn't* you be willing to do something as simple as taking a class and signing your name to it?" That, to me, feels like the *floor* of belonging—not the ceiling. Right?

But that said, those are **two very doable**, practical things if you want to take the next steps towards belonging to a church family for your good, and the good of the kingdom. Join a LifeGroup, take the City Church Class.

We're going to **respond this morning** by going to the tables and taking communion. As we do, we are remembering and celebrating that Jesus went to the cross to "purify for himself a *people eager* for good works," a people who belong to *him*, and to each other.

So as we sing, if that's true of you, you're invited to come to the table on your own or—even better—with a group of people you do life with, and celebrate that reality through the bread and the cup.

Let me pray for us and we'll do that.

