

The Beauty of Membership

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[0:00] Friends, if you've got a Bible, you can turn to the book of Romans, Romans chapter 12. We're going to read from verse 3 to 16. The Apostle Paul writes this letter to the ancient church in the city of Rome.

This comes towards a shift in the book where he spent a lot of time unpacking the nature of the gospel and now he starts to get fairly practical with the congregation on how they might live in response to this glorious news of the gospel.

This is what he says in verse 3. 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 yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving, then serve. If it is teaching, then teach.

[1:16] If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. If it is giving, then give generously. If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. Love must be sincere.

Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.

Do not be conceited. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study this morning. Our Father, your word is truth.

[2:19] And what we ask this morning is that you would be merciful to us and take that truth off the pages of scripture and embed it in our hearts. We don't just want to know more about you. We want to know you in an intimate, relational sense.

As your spirit puts your word in our hearts. Help us to see your son Jesus and his wonder. Help us to see what he has done for us at the cross. And help us to be changed by what we see.

And we ask this in Jesus' holy name. Amen. So, next week we start a new series on the subject of work.

Something I've never preached on before. Something I've been reading furiously on. And I'm still trying to figure out where I'm going to go on one or two things. But I think we've got about five weeks or so as we think about a kind of a Christian theology of work.

Something we all do all the time as we go out of this place. Tomorrow we go to work and we want to think Christianly about that. And so I invite you to come along for that. But we had this one week then before the series started.

[3:17] And I thought, well, we're starting our Sunday seminars for this term tonight and next week. So let me have a go thinking about that. So tonight the book of Hebrews starts. Graham is teaching us the book of Hebrews.

So if you want to join that class. That starts tonight, five o'clock in this little hall on my right over here. And then next week the newcomers class starts.

For those of you who are relatively new to the church and you're trying to figure out, well, how do I get more involved? How do I find out more about this church? What it does? What it believes? Why

it does? What it does? Then the newcomers class is a great place to come and work through all of that stuff.

It's also the place you need to go if you're thinking about membership in the church. What would becoming a member mean? And so I thought, well, because we're going to start the newcomers class next week, I really want to encourage you to think about membership.

For those of you who maybe come here every Sunday and you're not a formal member of the church, to sort of challenge you to say, hey, here's a case, a biblical case for membership. Consider becoming a member.

[4:17] And that might be, you might just be here the last couple of weeks or you might have been here for a couple of years and not considered membership. I sort of want to just nudge you a little bit and say, maybe it's time for you to think about formal membership.

And then for those of you who are members already, to sort of recommit you in your convictions of what it is that it means to be a member and how you engage in membership.

So I hope this is helpful to you this morning on both those fronts. And so here's the question that sets up the sermon, and that is, do Christians need to be members of local churches, formal members of local churches?

And by formal, what I mean there is that there is some sort of structure in a particular local church that outlines and gives a level of accountability to the responsibilities of members to God, the responsibilities of members to each other, the responsibilities of members to their leaders, and the responsibilities of leaders to their members.

Is it required that Christians become members of a local church in that sense, that they enter into some sort of formal agreement like that? Now this is a pretty tricky subject to tackle, because we live in a time where we have rapidly, rapidly declining levels of trust in institutions.

[5:39] In 2021, the research network, the research network, the research network, Afro Barometer did a survey of South Africans measuring trust levels in institutions. Here are some of the findings.

Only 26% trust the police. 28% trust parliament. 38% trust the president. I don't know if that's changed a lot since 2021.

40% trust SARS. 42% trust religious leaders, so we're doing slightly better than the tax man. And the law courts get 43% trust.

This decline in institutional trust is across the board. It's a consistent global trend. We're in a culture that places extremely high freemium on individual freedom.

And so we're very suspicious of institutions that would seek to control institutional power. Anything that we think might place a constraint on us in some ways.

[6:45] And I must be honest, I am sympathetic to that instinct. Very sympathetic to that instinct. When you're constantly bombarded with corruption or the misuse of power or stories of abuse, that is going to erode your confidence in institutions.

And the local church is an institution. And so membership is a bit of a hard sell right now. Now what I could do is I could sort of make the biblical case for membership and then show you the verses and say, Look, the Bible requires formal membership, so don't be a bad Christian.

Be a good Christian and become a member. Stick it to the culture and say, I'm going to go upstream of the culture and I'm going to become a member of my church. I could do that, and I'm partly going to do that, but I want to try and take a slightly different tack this morning.

And that is, I want to try and make the case to you that not only is formal membership biblical, but formal membership is actually beautiful and something you should really want. In the Bible, membership in a local church is an avenue into the beauty of selfless, loving, giving community. It does come with constraints. There's no two ways about that. It comes with obligations. It comes with responsibilities. It does come with, in that sense, a loss of freedom.

[8:06] But I suspect that when you find yourself truly in the grip of real biblical community, you discover, in that moment, the constraints that actually make you most free.

Free to flourish as a human being the way God designed you to be. So two things I want you to see this morning. Number one, the biblical case for membership. And then number two, the beauty of membership.

Here's the first one, the biblical case for membership. Now, most Christians tend to agree that there's an organic membership amongst believers in the church. So you look at that passage we

just read, Romans 12, verses 4 and 5.

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. So Paul explicitly describes Christians as members of a body.

Now, this should not be news to you because we looked at this idea about three weeks ago when we looked at one of our values as being community-based. We looked at this passage. It's a common metaphor that Paul uses throughout the Bible to describe Christians and their interrelatedness, that they are a body together.

[9:19] But a lot of people look at that in the New Testament, and they say, well, yes, but he's speaking in kind of a spiritual, organic way. As Christians, we're all members of Christ's body.

By faith in Jesus, we're brought into this spiritual relationship with God as our Father, and then so into some sort of spiritual relationship with each other. We're one body in that sense.

It doesn't mean we still have to be in formal membership agreement with the local church somewhere. And to that sort of thinking, I'd want to push back a little bit. So let me remind you actually what we saw a couple of weeks ago in that sermon, in case you've forgotten.

When you go to the other places in the New Testament where Paul does speak about this church as a body, he actually takes it a step beyond the organic. So he doesn't allow us to stay in the organic. So in Ephesians 4, you might remember this from a few weeks ago, be completely humble and gentle.

Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body.

[10:25] And then he goes on to articulate what that one body is. So he's saying, look, there is this, there's definitely this spiritual organic relationship that exists between Christians by virtue of our relationship with God through the gospel.

We are one. There's a spiritual unity. But before he tells us exactly what that is in chapter 4, he says this. He says, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.

Remember that? We emphasized that a few weeks ago. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. That is, this spiritual unity, this organic unity that we all have by believing in Christ, that membership has to be, it has to have a tangible reality connected to it.

It can't just stay in the realm of the spiritual. It can't stay in the realm of the organic. So Paul is basically coming to you and me and he's saying, you guys have got to make every effort to keep this spiritual organic unity that you have in a very practical, tangible way in your local church environment.

If you're going through your Bible and you are looking for a verse that says local churches must have formal membership.

[11:43] If you ask ChatGPT or Claude or someone to find you that verse, you're not going to find that verse. And that's not because AI is failing you. You won't find it because it's not there. But what you will find is this.

You will find a very, very deep assumption that there is some sort of formal membership in so many of the practices of the local church. As you watch and read and see how the local church interacts, you will see that underlying all of their interactions is this deep assumption that membership is a real, legitimate thing.

Because the organic spiritual reality of our oneness in Christ needs to have that tangible expression, like Paul says. So many of the instructions, so many of the commands that we find in the letters written to local churches that make up most of our New Testament just wouldn't make any sense.

That would be nonsense if there wasn't in existence some sort of formal membership in these churches. In fact, one of the reasons why you probably don't find that verse, you should become members in a local church, is because the writers of the New Testament took it for granted. They're like, of course you should be members in a local church. We know that synagogues had formal members. In Acts chapter 6, when Stephen, one of the early deacons, is stoned to death, that entire conflict arises, if you go back and you read in Acts 6, because members, it says, members of a local particular synagogue were arguing with him.

[13:11] So local synagogues in the time of Jesus had formal members. And we have ample evidence that the early church patterned a lot of its structure on how synagogues functioned.

So early Christians would have just assumed there'd be membership in the local church, as there was in the synagogue they were part of before that. But an even stronger case can be made when you look at several instructions given that order the life of local churches.

So let me just give you two examples here. The establishment of leaders and the issue of discipline. So think about elders. Consider the relationship of elders to a local church.

In the New Testament, local churches, as far as we can tell, and that's why we're Presbyterians, are to be led by groups of elders.

And those elders have a special responsibility of governing the church, providing spiritual oversight to the church. Now in Acts chapter 20, when the Apostle Paul comes and he meets with the elders of the church in Ephesus, he gives them this instruction in verse 28.

[14 : 18] He says, keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Now I want you to think for a second. Without some sort of formal membership, that would be an impossible task for the elders to carry out.

Because that command presupposes a defined body of people in Ephesus that the elders knew to be their flock.

That they were supposed to shepherd. Without some sort of formal membership, the idea of having a flock is nonsensical. How do they know who they're supposed to shepherd? Is it everybody in the city of Ephesus? What about the people in the town won over?

There's a Christian community there. Are we supposed to shepherd those guys too? Paul is presupposing that they know who's in their flock. Without membership, it would be impossible for elders to elder, really.

Which would in turn actually then make it impossible for ordinary Christians to obey a passage like Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17. Sorry.

[15 : 23] Which says, have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority. Because they keep watch over you as those who must give account. How would you know who your elders are?

Who your leaders are? That you need to submit to. Is that just kind of any mature Christian? The pastor down the road, the pastor over there, the pastor on TV, the pastor on your podcast. Like, who do I submit to? How do I obey that verse?

Because without local church membership, it's kind of hard to see how you would consistently obey those sorts of passages. Then think about the subject of discipline.

So consider the really kind of messy discipline situation that you find in 1 Corinthians chapter 5. Paul writes this to the Corinthian church. He says, it's actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate.

A man is sleeping with his father's wife and you are proud. Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? So there's some weird incestuous stuff happening in this church.

[16 : 31] I'm grateful we don't have problems quite as bad as the 1 Corinthians church does. Paul, though, says to them in light of this strange stuff that's going on, he's like, shouldn't you put this person out of your fellowship?

Shouldn't you put him out of the church? Now again, that presupposes that the Corinthian church had boundaries. That there were people who were in and there were people who should be out because of their unrepentant flagrant sin.

Doing crazy stuff. Even though they're like, please don't do that. No, no, I'm going to do it anyway. Maybe you should go and join another community that believes in that weird stuff, but not us. It really sounds like there's some sort of membership structure at play there that determines who's in and who's out.

If there's no membership, how do you put somebody out of your fellowship? As Paul says, you're supposed to do there. So I could give you many, many other examples like this in the New Testament that would only really make sense if there was some sort of formal membership at play in the life of the local church.

And so I think membership in the local church is just a really clear and logical implication of the text. There's one more reason. I'll give it a little bit later on. But I think it's really hard to read the New Testament and go, they had no sort of formal membership.

[17 : 44] It was just all organic. All like, well, I just know this guy and he knows this guy and he knows that girl and we just hang out together. It seems much more structured than that in the New Testament. So I think it's a clear and logical implication of the text.

But this is what I want you to see. I want you to see that the biblical reasoning for membership, whilst it's strong, needs to be set aside or set next to the beauty of membership in the Bible. So here's the second point, the beauty of membership. Let's go back to that main passage in Romans 12. Look at the vision of membership that we find here.

Selfless, loving, giving community. So Romans 12 verse 4. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy. In accordance with your faith, if it is serving, then serve. If it is teaching, then teach.

[18:54] If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. If it is giving, then give generously. If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. So here Paul talks about how members give to each other, actually.

And he talks about gifts. Gifts given by God to the church that they can put into practice in relationship to each other. So notice a couple of things here.

Number one, notice that each Christian has gifts. See that in verse 6. We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us.

Each of us has gifts. Not just some Christians. Each of us have gifts. It's not just the pastor or the elders or the deacons or the worship team. Each of us has been given gifts by God.

Now that means, I think, that there really shouldn't be consumers in the church. In our very heightened materialistic culture, we have very consumerist ways in which we engage with the society around us.

[20:00] We're very used to paying money. And then having our needs met from the money that we've paid, whether at a restaurant or a shopping mall or the doctor or the hairdresser or even apps on our phones.

We are set out to be and to think like consumers in the way that we approach institutions. Now you come along to church, having lived and swum in that culture all week long, right?

And you come to church and almost subconsciously that mindset then carries over into how we interact here.

And so without even thinking about it, you conceive of the church as a religious institution that offers you religious products for your consumption. As long as you pay your tithe, then you get these things back.

In fact, nobody's even counting, so you maybe don't even need to pay your tithe. You get a freebie here. That's why I think we have so many consumerist tendencies in the way that people interact with churches today.

[21:05] That's why this present generation, I think, seems to be so big on church hopping. Moving from one church to another until you find what sort of fits you. So you don't quite like the worship at your church, well then you move to a church which has better worship.

You don't quite like the preaching at your church, you move to a church that you think has better preaching. If you want a church that fits you a sort of more expressive, over-the-top, flamboyant personality, then you go and you find a charismatic church.

If you want a church that's grumpy and introspective and judgmental like you are, then you come to a Presbyterian church. That sort of church hopping, it makes complete sense if we're all just consumers.

And the church is just offering religious goods for you to purchase. But this principle of gifts that you find not just here in Romans 12, but all the way through the New Testament, that cuts across that.

And it says that if you're a member of a local church, then you're not just a consumer, you're a contributor. You bring something. You give something for the other person. God has taken you from being a consumer in the gospel to being an intimate shareholder in this institution.

[22:18] You see that? There's a sense in which your spiritual health and your spiritual well-being is tied not in just to how well we preach and design our ministry programs, but in how you bring your gifts to serve and love and care for other people.

Each of us has gifts. And what membership does is it gives us a beautiful context in which those gifts can then be exercised. That's the first thing to notice there. The second thing to notice is that each is given different gifts.

So verse 6 again, we have different gifts, Paul says. And then he gives us a very diverse list of gifts. And he's actually got other lists that are even more diverse in other parts of the New Testament. You see, I think there's this beauty in diversity coming together in unity.

The difference, the diversity of our gifts sets among us with our different temperaments and all of our different experiences, life stages, means I think that it's intentional on God's part that each of us be unique in a way.

You see, we worry about binding ourselves to something like membership because we fear that, well, if I join this community, my unique identity is going to be squashed.

[23:38] It's all going to be about conformity, no personal expression. And I want to say biblical membership does the exact opposite of that. It brings out the uniqueness of each individual member. I think I've joked about this before, but every single Christian is a unique snowflake in God's economy.

You are. God has configured you in a unique, special way for this community. He has you with your gifts and your strengths and your weaknesses, the whole package, your experiences, here in this local church for a reason.

Listen, when you reject membership, when you hold commitment to the church at arm's length, you're inadvertently holding at arm's length your chance to uniquely love and serve others.

That's what you're doing. Really, actually, what you're holding at arm's length is your chance to flourish as a unique individual, the way that God's designed you to be, the way that He's wired you to be.

So you tend to think, well, if I throw off all constraint, then I'll be free. If I throw off all the rules and regulations, I'll be free to express myself. I want to say this to you. Without the constraint of local church membership, you might never truly be free to express who you are supposed to be, who God designed you to be.

[25:02] Let me show you even more about the beauty of membership. Verse 9 of Romans 12. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil.

Cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn.

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Paul says in this body of membership, what you've got to have is you've got to have sincere love and be devoted to each other in love.

And then he lists all the practical outworkings of this love. So honoring one another, practicing hospitality, rejoicing with each other, mourning with each other, keeping harmony, associating yourself with people different from you.

[26:07] All of this is driven by love. Love. Love. And there are actually two types of love that he mentions here. In verse 9, the original literally reads, let love be without hypocrisy.

That is love without the mask on. We talked about that quite a bit a couple of weeks ago in that sermon. But there's a second type of love that he mentions in verse 10.

There the word that he uses for love is the word Philadelphia. Brotherly love. Familial love. The sort of love that you have for someone who is of the same blood as you.

Both loves, the sincere love, the unhypocritical love, and the brotherly love, both loves emphasize something about the nature of love that you need to be a really good functioning church member. They both push very, very strongly against selfishness. Think about that hypocritical love that Paul is railing against here, that love with a mask on.

[27:12] We talked quite a lot about this, so this should be pretty fresh. But insincere love is where your outer posture appears loving, but your internal motives are following something else.

So you can do loving things for a person. You can serve them. You can say affirming things to them without your inner self truly loving them, having their best interests at heart. And why would you do that? Well, like we said a couple of weeks ago, you would do that to get stuff.

That's really why you do it. You can outwardly love people in order to get their favor. You can outwardly love people in order to get acclaim from others. Look how much he loves those people.

You can outwardly love people in order to make yourself feel good about who you are. Look how good I am. Look how much I love my spouse. All of those are ultimately selfish reasons. All of those are not really sincere love because they're not really giving of yourself without your own self-interest being served.

You are giving to get. I will love you if I get something out of this giving that I am doing. Now that is selfishness. And friends, selfishness, it's not hard to make this case, but selfishness is easily the supreme cause of pain and suffering between human beings.

[28 : 26] It's at the heart of the breakdown of so many marriages that end in divorce. It's at the heart of the breakdown in nations and societies between ethnicities and racial groups and war and conflict and all those sorts of things.

Selfishness is absolutely, absolutely deadly to us as human beings. Like it is, we should declare a state of national disaster over the issue of selfishness.

We think that prioritizing getting over giving is going to make things go well for us, but it never does. It actually, we think it's going to make us happier, but it actually kills us in the end. Sometimes quite literally kills us in the end.

A love that is built on getting, a love that only loves when there's a possibility of receiving, well, that's the love of the mask. That's insincere love. And so that's actually why you need the other type of love that Paul speaks about here, brotherly love, familial love.

When you are urging somebody to embrace brotherly love, what you're essentially doing is you're saying, I'm trying to get this person to love others who are not family. In such a way that they show the strength and unconditional nature of love that you sometimes find in families.

[29 : 44] Now having kids has really helped me understand something of this. There is something unique about the love that you give to very small children as parents.

So obviously when they're older, then you just give them smartphones and a Netflix account and leave them to themselves. But when they're very small, when your kids are very young, like pooping and sleeping young, there are often times where you just have to kind of pour out love at them relentlessly without any form of reciprocation.

They're doing nothing back for you. They're incapable of returning that love and yet you have to relentlessly love them in word and deed every single day. There is something supremely, supremely unselfish about parental love when it's done well.

There's something about familial love, this brotherly love that undercuts selfishness and betters us as people. Now that's what Paul's calling for. He said, have that love.

Bind yourself to your fellow Christians like a mother is bound to her child. Now friends, imagine committing yourself to a community like that, with a love like that.

[30 : 58] A community where you are giving love and you're receiving love. A community where you are giving and receiving love without a mask. A love that comes along and it says, this deed that I'm doing for you, this word of encouragement that I'm giving you, this sacrifice that I'm making for you, it's not for my benefit.

I'm not giving to get. I'm just giving. There's no mask hiding something else underneath here. Or imagine being part of a community where you're giving and receiving brotherly love.

A love that says, I'm going to give even when there isn't really any problem. I'm giving the prospect of you being able to give back to me. I'm not giving so that it'll be reciprocated. I'm giving love on the basis of this unbreakable relationship that we have with each other.

We're a spiritual family. Imagine committing to a community of love like that. Friends, I think that can be incredibly beautiful. Incredibly beautiful.

In a world of relational breakdown and selfishness, I think that can be incredibly beautiful. But it will take commitment. It will. It will take a serious binding of ourselves to each other.

[32 : 15] Membership is the tool to that end. It's the biblical way to help us, to strengthen us in our commitment to each other and to the church so that together we might all get to taste and see and experience what Paul's describing here.

And that does take real commitment. And commitment is hard. I know this. I've had a gym membership before. Commitment is hard.

Maybe you look at this and you see the beauty of what could be. But you think to yourself, I know myself.

And I know I will never get to experience that. Because my commitment levels are so weak. I'm suspicious of institutions. I'm nervous of giving up my freedoms and submitting myself to formal membership.

I know my weaknesses. I know my fears. And those fears and those weaknesses, they feel insurmountable to me. Like I can't get over them. Or I'm not reasonably going to get over them. Where do I find the level of commitment I need to give myself to this?

[33 : 23] You know what the clearest example of membership is in the New Testament? It's what we saw this morning, actually. Baptism. In that volatile, first century world of the early Christians, baptism was a very firm, very visible sign and formal commitment to joining the church.

When that water is poured over you, symbolizing and sealing the forgiveness of your sins, the death of your old life, the beginning of a new life, the life of resurrection, it is an unambiguous statement that you now belong to and are committed to a new community, the church.

And with all the pressures that those early Christians faced, how did they find the strength to do that, the courage to make that commitment? How did they overcome their fears?

How did they overcome their weaknesses? What drove them to be baptized in that culture? It was the baptism of another. The commitment of another.

In the Gospels in Mark chapter 10, two of Jesus' most committed disciples, John and James, come to him and they ask him something. They make a request of him. Now these guys are known as the sons of thunder.

[34 : 45] The reason being, on one occasion, when Jesus was traveling through the villages in Samaria, he faced a whole bunch of opposition from the people there.

And he couldn't find housing for the night from the people. And so James and John come to Jesus, full of zeal, and they say, righteous indignation. They kind of go, should we call on God to send fire from heaven and destroy this town?

So these guys are like super committed. These are the sons of thunder. They are Jesus' wingmen. They are going to fight anybody for him. They're hotheads, and they're totally committed to the cause. But in Mark 10, they come to Jesus with a request.

And they say, Jesus, can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in glory? Now I don't know exactly what they were thinking when they asked that.

Maybe they looked at the rest of the disciples that are around them, and they thought, you know what? We're so much more committed than these other guys. So much more. This is not a request for anything more than we deserve.

[35 : 46] We're all in. We really follow Jesus, like real Christians. And Jesus, he turns to them and he says, I'm not sure you actually know what you're asking.

And then he leans in and he says, can you be baptized with the baptism I'm baptized with? Can you?

Now what's he talking about when he says that? He's talking about commitment. Not their commitment. Not your commitment.

His commitment. His commitment to death. His commitment not to be baptized with life-giving water, but rather to be baptized under the wrath of God and the curse of death.

His commitment to die so that you can live. To be forsaken so that you can be loved. To be cast out so that you can get brought in. He's talking about his commitment to go to the cross.

[36 : 48] To bear your sin and to bring you into the family of God. That's his baptism. In effect, he's saying to his two most committed disciples, you have no idea.

No idea. No idea the level of commitment I'm going to undertake to bring you into this community. Membership is going to take a lot of commitment from us.

Creating this beautiful, loving, giving, selfless community is going to take a lot of commitment. Commitment that exceeds your abilities. Exceeds your strength.

Exceeds your willpower. But because of the commitment of Christ on the cross, it is not actually out of reach for us. The more that you place your faith in him, the more that you root your identity and your hope for freedom in him, the more that you realize that you actually only truly find your full flourishing in him, the more that you cling to him, you will find yourself more and more able and willing to bind yourself to his people.

Those who, just like you, he purchased through his costly commitment. And if he would commit himself to them like that, why would you not?

[38:11] You yourself, having been an undeserving recipient of that committed love, why would you not then, in turn, commit yourself to membership in Christ's church with others that Christ has brought with incredible commitment?

So I hope you can see there's a hard call. It's not a simple, easy thing. It's not just signing a name on a paper or saying some membership vows. It's a commitment to a communal life.

But it's a beautiful commitment. Earned for us by the commitment of Christ to the cross. Why don't you give yourself to that commitment? Let's pray now.

Our Father and our King, we need you. Because we want this community.

We want to be part of a loving community when the masks are taken off, where real brotherly love is shared, real commitment and care is given. We want to give that love and we want to experience that love.

[39:18] We want to know what it's like to be in a community like that. But we are, all of us, carrying the scars of selfishness, of broken love, broken community in different ways.

And so we want to be in a new community that in one sense rises above all that hurt and that brokenness. But Lord, we bring our own selfishness into this community.

And so we wonder how we would ever achieve something like that, this side of heaven. And it is only when we look upon the commitment of Christ on the cross that we are strengthened and empowered and built up to try and create this new community.

When we see Him who loved us at such cost, then we realize that every single other member around us is a precious, precious member in His sight. And that cost was paid out for them too.

And so we bind ourselves to them. Father, I pray for any person who's sitting here this morning who's maybe struggling with this idea of commitment and membership, that You'd help them to think through it biblically, theologically, and in terms of its beauty, that they might be prepared and have the courage to bind themselves to local membership in serving You.

[40:31] I pray for any person who's new, who's maybe hearing these gospel promises of God for the first time, about how they even get to come into this community in the first place, how they even get that spiritual, organic relationship in the first place.

I pray that You would open their hearts and their minds to receive Christ this morning, to turn away from sin and to trust in Him. Grant Him that special blessing, Lord. And then make us a loving community.

Make us a community like Romans 12, Lord. May people who come here and join this community experience Romans 12 in all its fullness, we pray. We ask this for Christ's sake and His glory.

Amen.

Amen.