

Me and Mine

Privacy fence
no sidewalks
attached garage
personal entertainment center
frenetic schedule
half acre plot
individualized
living.
Lie of autonomy
deceit of self-sufficiency
delusion of self-righteousness.
Buy your way out of
need.
Endless amusement
pushes reality out of the way.
Never known
never knowing
never stepping beyond what is
comfortable
pleasurable
enjoyable
predictable
safe.
Door closed silence,
shrunken community
of me and mine.
Thinking I can do
what I was never designed
to do,
live
all by myself.



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Pursue Community

In his hit song, "Born to Run," all Bruce Springsteen thought he needed in life was a particular girl and a fast car, a combination that must show up in a hundred other pop songs. Helen Reddy was making a political statement as well as a personal declaration of independence when she sang:

If I have to, I can do anything
I am strong
I am invincible
I am woman¹

Down through the decades, countless songs have been built on such impassioned cries of independence, alienation, or self-reliance. Perhaps the best-known example is Frank Sinatra singing "My Way," which includes these memorable lines:

And now, the end is here
And so I face the final curtain
My friend, I'll say it clear
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain

I've lived a life that's full
 I traveled each and ev'ry highway
 And more, much more than this, I did it my way
 For what is a man, what has he got?
 If not himself, then he has naught
 To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one
 who kneels
 The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!²

Of course, pop music is popular because it so powerfully captures the reigning philosophy of the culture. This desire to go it alone; the will to gut it out and make your own mark in the world; to be free, independent, and accountable to no one, runs deep in our fallen nature. It can feel really good to pretend you are completely autonomous. It can be a rich, heady experience to imagine you don't need anyone or anything else (except maybe a girl and a fast car). Indeed, this philosophy has influenced us all, even shaping the way Christians think about walking with God through this fallen world.

Look at it another way. What is the most influential, archetypal image in Western culture? Is it not the self-made man? We love the story of the guy from the wrong side of the tracks who becomes hugely successful through sheer grit and determination, and "has no one but himself to thank for it." We admire the underdog who claws his way up some impossible slope. We are fascinated by the person who emerges victorious against ridiculous odds. And no matter how much we as Christians may embrace our dependence on God, we must also admit that the way we think about our faith has been significantly shaped by the individualism of the surrounding culture.

Let's consider a couple of ways that this emphasis on individualism is playing out. In the big cities, more and more people are choosing to live alone. In the suburbs, a preference for

1. Reddy, Helen and Ray Burton. "I Am Woman," 1972. From the album *I Am Woman* (Hollywood, CA: Capital Records, 1972).

2. Anka, Paul. "My Way," 1967. First appeared on Frank Sinatra album *My Way* (Los Angeles: Reprise Records, 1969).

isolation seems to be on the rise as well. I live in downtown Philadelphia, but just outside the city, huge suburbs have been built that have no sidewalks. This is not an oversight. Community development and planning are always philosophically driven. The way we build communities reveals what is important to us. "Sidewalks? Who would use them?"

I had a friend say to me, "You know what I like about the suburbs?" Now, when you hear a question like that you just know there's something important to be learned. So I said, "No, tell me." And he said, "I love the fact that when I get in my car to go somewhere the garage door is closed behind me. I push the button to open the door, go where I need to go, come back, and I don't have to get out of the car again until the garage door is once more closed behind me."

What does my friend like about the suburbs? It goes way beyond the simple personal privacy that we all need to some degree. He loves his individualism, his solo passage through much of life, his almost perfect isolation from the very neighborhood he chose to live in! He likes the fact that he doesn't have to navigate the little "goodbye" and "hello" conversations with neighbors that are part of being in a community. He simply doesn't have to be bothered.

We all prize our right to privacy and guard our personal lives. By the time we are seven or eight years old we have learned how to put on a public persona—the version of "me" that we want people to know and love—and how to protect the details of our lives that we would rather not be publicly seen. To some degree, of course, this is healthy and normal, and helps form us as individuals. But so much of society—from popular culture, to the workings of the Internet, to the very design of our suburbs—encourages something beyond individualism. It encourages isolation and *privatism*, which one dictionary defines as "being noncommittal to or uninvolved with anything other than one's own immediate interests and lifestyle."

As I have written elsewhere, this means for many of us that we live in interwoven networks of terminally casual relationships. We live with the delusion that we know one another, but we really don't. We call our easygoing, self-protective, and often theologically platitudinous conversations "fellowship," but they seldom ever reach the threshold of true fellowship. We know cold demographic details about one another (married or single, type of job, number of kids, general location of housing, etc.), but we know little about the struggle of faith that is waged every day behind well-maintained personal boundaries.

One of the things that still shocks me in counseling, even after all these years, is how little I often know about people I have counted as true friends. I can't tell you how many times, in talking with friends who have come to me for help, that I have been hit with details of difficulty and struggle far beyond anything I would have predicted. Privatism is not just practiced by the lonely unbeliever; it is rampant in the Church as well.

Beyond "Jesus and Me"

Can any of us truly claim that our view of what it means to live as a Christian is shaped completely and exclusively by the narrative, promises, principles, and perspectives of the Word of God? No, we can't, because we are always influenced by our environment. We always drag secular culture into our faith, and this affects how we read Scripture, listen to a sermon, or evaluate the evidence of God's faithfulness. So we must always be looking for the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that cultural assumptions have twisted how we think about and live out our faith.

We must face up to the fact that we have been influenced by the individualism and privatism of our culture, and that this influence can take a great many forms. Tim has harbored doubts about the love of God for years, but no one knows.

Sarah's three children under age five drive her to the edge of insanity, but no one is aware. Bill has said things to his teenager he would never want anyone else to hear about, and probably no one will. Anita's world is increasingly full of fear and dread, but nobody has a clue. Frank and Bonnie had another violent argument yesterday, but no one will find out. Jared once again visited shameful Internet sites last night, but not even his wife knows of his struggle. Jenny's decades-old bitterness toward her mom and dad has shaped every relationship in her life, but no one is even aware there's a problem. John's private world is one of consumption and debt, but his secret is well hidden. After her boyfriend walked away, Kimmy quit reading her Bible and praying, but she hasn't told anybody. Peter's Christianity has become a system of impossible-to-keep, guilt-producing rules, but he is afraid to admit it out loud.

Under the influence of Western culture, Christianity tends to take on a uniquely individualistic cast, a "Jesus and me" kind of faith. We talk much about a "personal relationship with Jesus." And it is certainly true that we are brought, by God's grace, into personal communion with Christ. But Christianity is equally a faith that is meant to be anchored in community.

Listen to the covenant promise made to Abram:

"I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

This wasn't just some private pact between Abram and God. No, God was calling Abram to be part of *a people*. God's purpose in working through Abram's life was corporate. He was raising up *a people* upon whom he would place his name and to whom he would show his grace. What we need to see is that *a people* is not just a collection of individuals. Individuals collect at a gate to catch a plane on Tuesday. But it is *a people* who gather to worship God on Sunday.

God's call to a people has its roots in Genesis 2, where we see that God has designed human beings to live in community, first with him and then with one another. When we read in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone," these words are not the lonely cry of Adam, but spoken by God as an expression of his creative design. From the outset, God designed men and women to be social beings. We only fulfill this particular intent of our Designer when we live in worshipful community with God and interdependent community with other human beings. If community was vital in the perfect world before sin bent and twisted us and our surroundings, how much more vital is it now that we live in this broken-down house!

Reflect with me on this summary of God's redemptive purpose in Jesus Christ, "who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself *a people* that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14, emphasis mine). Paul doesn't speak about the work of Christ in the individualistic way we often do. He recognizes that, although God is calling individuals to himself, he is gathering them together in order to form a "people for his own possession." The "Jesus and me" religion of modern Christianity is not the Christianity of the Bible. We have privatized and individualized a faith that is distinctly and inextricably rooted both in vertical community (between God and his people) and in horizontal community (among groups of Christians).

Remembering Is a Community Project

In Chapter 3 we examined the importance of living out of a biblical sense of identity, the two central components of that identity being that I am a *sinner*, and at the same time, a *child of grace*. Only when I hold these identities in their proper balance and tension can I ever be and do what God has designed and called me to be and do. Yet it is so easy either to emphasize one identity to the neglect of the other, or live as if I have forgotten them both. Because it's true that these identities really are an accurate picture of who I am in God, holding onto them is one of my most important spiritual battles. This is where biblical community comes in.

In this fallen world, where falsehood wars against truth and reality battles with delusion, it is hard to remember who I am. When I look into the perfect mirror of the Word of God I see myself accurately and am confronted with my true identity: sinner, yet child of grace. But there are other, less reliable, mirrors I look into as well.

Sometimes I see myself in the carnival mirror of culture and its twisted image of what a successful human being looks like. Sometimes I see myself in the distorted mirror of my own self-righteousness, portraying me as more godly and mature than I actually am. Sometimes I see myself in the crazy funhouse mirror, which is the overly positive appraisal of well-intentioned friends. Sometimes I see myself in the cracked mirror of daily home life, where what God emphasizes as important is not always practiced. Each of these mirrors offers a representation of me, but with crucial and unbiblical distortions that can drive me to make unbiblical, sinful, harmful decisions.

So, with the tendency to identity distortion within and the danger of it without, I need help remembering who I really am. If I receive that help, I can live with a more cogent awareness of sin and grace, with radically different results than if I seek to live this inherently communitarian life on my own.

I will only know myself accurately when I know myself in biblical community. My walk with God really is a community project.

The Call to Biblical Community

Many passages in the New Testament call us to practice biblical community, but I want to look at two that are particularly powerful. The first is Hebrews 3:12–13. “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” I have commented extensively on this passage in other books, so I won’t do so here. Rather, I want to focus on the struggle and the solution we find embedded in the passage.

The *struggle* is revealed in our need for daily mutual encouragement, without which we can become hardened and turn away from God. As long as I am a sinner living in this fallen world, it will be impossible to see myself with anything approaching perfect accuracy. In fact, left to myself, I will only tend to become more and more deceived. It is time that we gave up the delusion that we have anything like the accurate perspective on ourselves that we think we do. It is time we humbly admit that our view of ourselves is blurred by the distorted lens of our own sin and the assortment of faulty mirrors we encounter daily in the culture. Sure, as you mature in your faith you will gradually come to see yourself more accurately, but as long as sin still lives in your heart there will be significant distortions in your self-perspective.

But this passage also holds out the *solution* to our struggle. It is a solution both humbling and frightening: I must come to admit that I desperately need the very people I can work so hard to hide from. The powerful truth found in this passage is that personal spiritual insight—an accurate knowledge of self—can *only* come when I am actively engaged in community.

You can’t get it any other way! It’s true that this insight cannot be achieved without the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your heart, but this Spirit upon whom you and I depend happens to be telling us in this passage that he uses instruments: one another. My tendency to personal blindness is so deep and pervasive that I need the intervention of other Christians who know me. What’s more, I need them “as long as it is called Today”—in other words, every day! In protecting myself from other people, I only keep myself from knowing me. I keep myself from seeing myself with the accuracy that produces a God-honoring life in the middle of a terribly broken world.

The second passage is equally powerful. It is also from the book of Hebrews:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,”

and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

—Hebrews 10:19–31 (passage divisions mine)

The flow of this passage is a bit curious until you focus in on what it is saying. It falls into three distinct parts. Verses 19–23 contain one of the New Testament’s clearest calls to live with the courage and confidence that can only come when you acknowledge your identity as a *child of grace*. This section talks of drawing near to God in “full assurance of faith.” It calls us to “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,” being sure that “he who promised is faithful.” It is a call to live where the rubber meets the road in your daily life—as if you really do believe that you have been given, by God’s grace, a whole new identity, and with it a bright new potential.

Let’s skip ahead to the third section of the passage, verses 26–31. These verses involve my identity as a *sinner*, and contain one of the Bible’s strongest calls to be serious about sin. Phrases about trampling the Son of God under foot, insulting the Spirit of grace, and falling dreadfully into the hands of the living God alert me to how seriously I should view the sin that lives within me and is so easy to give way to. It’s true: every time you and I minimize, justify, rationalize, or explain away our sin, we insult the Spirit of grace. This is the same Holy Spirit who controlled the course of history so that at the right time the Son of God would come to suffer and die. Why? To deliver us from the sin that we can suggest is really not all that important!

Now, back to the middle section of this powerful passage. Between part one, an encouragement to grasp boldly the resources available to me as a *child of grace*, and part three, a call to live in humble recognition of myself as a *sinner*, appear two little verses. At first glance they don’t seem to fit the context. What are these two verses about community doing in the middle of this discussion on identity? The word “us” is certainly peppered through this whole passage, but why this

mention of the obviously collective, interdependent “us” in a passage that seems to be about “us” as simply a number of individuals? What is the church-as-a-unity doing in here, when otherwise this section seems basically to be about the identity of me, the reader?

Go back and read again verses 19–23, and then verses 24–25, and notice what happens. As we get to verses 24–25 we stop looking straight ahead, as if we are marching to a glorious destination in God all by ourselves. Instead, we turn our heads to the right and to the left, and we realize there are brothers and sisters with whom we are marching and upon whom we are desperately dependent. That reality and the message of these two verses couldn’t be more important to those of us who have been chosen by God to live as Christians in this broken-down house.

The point of that middle section is clear. There is only one way you and I will ever hold onto the two identities—*child of grace*, yet *sinner*—that propel a godly life in this fallen and idolatrous world. It can only happen when we are living in functional, biblical community with people who will again and again remind us of who we are. I need people in my life who will lovingly hold the mirror of the Word of God in front of me so that I can see how deep my struggle with sin still is. I need people who will confront my timidity and avoidance with the comforting, encouraging, emboldening realities of faith: I am a child of the amazing grace of Emmanuel, God ever with me. I was not wired to walk this walk of faith by myself. I was not created and then recreated to live on my own. I must admit to my constant tendency to minimize both the grace I have been given and the sin that is the reason I need it so. I must face the fact that many times I simply forget who I am.

The central lesson of this passage is that we need one another daily in order to avoid identity amnesia. Yet we have essentially reduced the passage to a single command: “Make sure you go to church on Sunday.” Faithful church attendance is cer-

tainly part of this passage, but it is also a call to much, much more. It is a call to community that is *intentionally intrusive*, *Christ-centered*, *grace-driven*, and *redemptive*. Let me take apart this phrase for you.

Intentionally intrusive means I have invited fellow Christians to intrude into the private spaces of my life in order to help me see myself with biblical accuracy. This does not mean I gush out my sin to everyone who comes my way. That wouldn't be helpful to anyone. But I must be in some kind of web of godly, intentional relationships that can produce the personal insight I so desperately need.

Christ-centered means that the hope and goal of these relationships is Christ. We do not build these relationships for self-centered purposes. Personal happiness and fulfillment are byproducts of a healthy Christian life, but they cannot be the focus. We pursue such relationships because we know how much we need Christ and we know that what we offer one another is not just *our love*, but *his grace*.

Grace-driven means we do not try to function as private detectives or self-appointed prosecutors. The purpose of the relationship is not to *catch* the other person doing wrong, but to motivate and encourage him or her to do what is right. We minister to one another knowing that while the law is able to reveal sin, only grace can deliver us from it!

Redemptive relationships means we recognize that change is a process, not a quick leap to sinless perfection. *We have been* redeemed, *we are being* redeemed, and *we will be* redeemed. We love God and one another enough to want to be part of the good that God is doing in that person's life right here, right now, even though sin still remains, and sometimes quite obviously. We reject the selfish "I love you and have a wonderful plan for your life" agenda that causes us to turn fellow Christians into personal projects. Instead, we have taken up God's agenda of radical personal change for ourselves, change so fundamental that it causes rebels like you and me to become "partakers of [his] divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4, ESV). ♦

No More Hiding

Let me suggest you take a moment right now and be perfectly honest with yourself as you answer this question:

Are you still hiding?

Don't let yourself weasel out of it by rationalizing that no one is ever perfectly, completely transparent. That wasn't the question. With the help of your conscience, you probably know exactly what I mean. Are there fellow Christians in your life who you are confident, and rightly so, that they are aware of the major areas of spiritual difficulty and temptation in your life, and you are willing to discuss these areas with them in ways that are open and helpful? After more than two decades in ministry, I have to say with sadness that unless you are part of a very small minority among Christians in this culture, your honest answer is probably no.

Could the fact that you are still hiding explain why there are struggles you can't seem to get consistently under control? Are you still holding onto the belief that you really do know yourself better than anyone else? Are you still imagining that you are wiser, more sanctified, and spiritually stronger than you actually are?

It is time to face the fact that your walk with God is a community project. It is time to come out of hiding. The Christians around you struggle just like you, and the God who is your hope is not surprised by your struggle or theirs. He knows every challenge and temptation of your heart. That's why he sent his Son to live, die, and rise again.

Step out of where you are hiding and into the kind of community that Scripture clearly says you need. Where will you find that intentionally intrusive, Christ-centered, grace-driven, redemptive community?

You're not designed to live without it. Life in this broken-down house really is a community project.