KINGDOM OF COUCHES • CHAPTER EXCERPT

Community is not simply another ministry activity; it is the context for all ministry activities. It is the environment in which spiritual growth takes place. And since community is central to our model for spiritual growth, a few planned socials are not going to get the job done. We needed a resource to elevate community, encourage it, and teach it.

Will Walker’s book is probably the best apologetic written for why community is the matrix for spiritual growth. But the content goes well beyond theological reasoning, providing extremely practical how’s and why’s for living out our faith in community. Through excellent writing and reasoning, personal examples and stories, the book creates a hunger and desire for communal living.

Content of Book: Why We Pursue Independence; Why We Need Community; Repentance; Community and the Word-Communal Quiet Times, Community and Confession; Group Prayer; Godly Speech and Conversation, and A Commitment to Live Communally.

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On one hand the imagery of marriage and the call to missional community sounds pretty glamorous. On the other hand there is still the question of what we are to do in the course of our everyday lives. So far I have only suggested that you do two things: break up with the notion that life is about you and give yourself to Jesus, as in marriage, in order to discover a life that is about others. Jesus said in one sentence what I have taken four chapters to say: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.”

WE PRACTICE TO PLAY

Community is not an application point—something we need to do in spiritual life. Rather, it is the context in which all the stuff we do finds its proper place in spiritual life. Consider the stuff you do, things you probably would not do if you did not believe in God: go to church, read the Bible, confess your faults, sing out loud around other people. Such things are often used as indicators. When we see people raise their hands during worship or lead a small group, we tend to assume something about their spiritual

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1 See John 12:25
maturity, and likewise when we see someone sin. In circles where
the “most important” indicators are well defined, they usually
become ends in and of themselves. In other words, following Jesus
becomes less and less about living for others and more and more
about our faithfulness to certain activities. Now these activities are
not bad—they are in fact very good—but they are means toward
an end and not the end, in and of themselves. So we do not throw
out the activities. We simply put them in their proper place. Com-
munity enables us to redeem the activities of daily life for their
purpose in discipleship.

I recently watched a documentary on ESPN about the 2004
Michigan State basketball team. There was a scene after a grueling
practice where all the guys had gathered around the coach, worn
out and hunched over, focused on breathing. They looked miser-
able, like they would quit that day. What do you tell a bunch of
guys working their butts off while their buddies are taking it easy
on the couch all day? I only remember one thing he said: “This is
hard work, but it will be worth it when we’re the National Cham-
ions.” I thought maybe they believed him, if not about being the
National Champions, then at least that the mere pursuit of it was
better than lying on the couch all day. The rest of the story is that
they surprised most people by making it to the Final Four. When
they made it, I thought of that moment after practice that day.

We should tell each other that following Jesus is hard, but that
it is worth it. If you think it’s not hard then you might be following
someone or something else, maybe the currents of fashionable Chris-
tianity. It’s not that I don’t experience grace and joy and peace, but I
am telling you that dying to yourself and loving people you don’t like
is hard. Just thinking about it makes me want to take a nap.

Paul and Peter used the language of citizenship to help us under-
stand the nature of following Jesus: our citizenship is in heaven;2
we are aliens and strangers in the world.3 The idea is that if you are

2 See Philippians 3:20; 3 See 1 Peter 2:11
going to settle down as a citizen of this world that it will demand all of your energy and time and desire. You’ll have to play by the rules of the earth-life in order to succeed. If on the other hand you want to take up citizenship in the kingdom of God, that too will demand all of your time and energy and desire. The rules are different: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” This is why you can’t apply for dual citizenship. You can’t sit on the couch and be National Champions.

To settle into this world—to take up residence here—means that you have come to want basically the same things that everyone else wants: money, approval from peers, control, security, health, comfort and ease, physical pleasure, and so on. Unfortunately, what I find in my life is that these still have a hold on my motives even as I try to live out my Christian faith. I desperately want community, for example, which kingdom-citizens are deeply concerned with, but even here my motives are littered with seeking approval from people’s opinions, controlling others to get my way, and only wanting community with people I like. Just because I decide that life is about others does not mean that I will not wrestle with the desire to still somehow make life about me. I must constantly be reminded that this is not my home.

To want something badly, like, say, being the National Champion, requires hard work, often referred to as practice. But practice for the sake of practice is futile. It will drive you to the couch eventually—daydreaming about the good life. The aim of practice must be to play, to be ready to act for good. Community is designed to help us become such people, which we do through “practicing” together. I don’t want to imply that you can’t experience God on your own. You certainly can. In basketball, there are times when a player works on individual skills (jump shot, ballhandling, conditioning). But these things are merely aspects of the game itself, which unfolds artfully as each does his part in

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4 Matthew 5:43, NIV
the context of the team. There is clearly a personal aspect of our relationship with God that is important to nurture. But your relationship with God is not private. What you experience personally must find expression in community. That is what spiritual growth is all about—the growth of the Body. Paul illustrates this wonderfully in his letter to the Ephesians:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 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 and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.⁵

⁵ Ephesians 4:1-7,11-16, NIV
The Body is what gets built up. We have a part to play, but the work we do is not so we can feel better about ourselves. It’s for the growth of the Body, unveiling the beauty of Christ’s bride.

**PRACTICING TOGETHER**

Remember how I told you Debbie doesn’t like conversations that involve hypothetical scenarios? In some ways, that is how the book feels to her up to this point—nice, but impractical. I, on the other hand, am fine with being impractical. That just means I can sit in the coffee shop with Brett and talk about stuff without having to actually do anything. I cannot imagine a better life. But God can, which is why He lovingly put Debbie and Bob in my life. They want to know what to do already.

So that will be the rest of the book. Part one, which you just finished, was an argument and vision for biblical community. In part two we will explore some spiritual disciplines that are critical to discipleship and show how a communal approach to these disciplines accomplishes what self-help and isolated effort simply cannot.