

Good morning, Village Church, visitors. It's great to see you guys here this morning. Let's just continue worshipping the Lord by asking his blessing on this time and that we would bless him in what we're about to do.

Father God, thank you. Thank you for being our Sovereign Creator and yet being our Father and being personal. Lord, you have created every man and woman in this room. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, and it's as your creation who is longing and groaning for you. We come before you right now and ask you to continue to speak to us through the grace of your written Word, Lord, these very things you have spoken that have been recorded for us in the Bible.

Out of that, Lord, may we see to come and treasure Christ more fully and see his ultimate authority as we walk together as a church. I pray those things over us this morning. May your Holy Spirit superintend what happens here today as you bring us more and more into conformity with your Word, your decrees, your law that is light and life. Thank you, Father. It's in the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

If you guys would open up to Matthew 4, that's where we're going to begin this morning. Matthew 4:18: I'll give you just a moment to get there in your Bibles or on your devices, whichever you choose. What's happening here in this passage is Jesus has just come out of the desert after being tempted by Satan and in a sense has been commissioned to begin his ministry. What we're looking at here in Matthew 4:18 is the first thing he does out of this commissioning into ministry. Here we go.

"While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he [Jesus] saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."

Now it's important as we begin considering this passage and the passages to follow this morning that we put ourselves into the sandals of these first-century Jews, where we see this in a sense of a teacher, of a rabbi, calling disciples to himself or accepting disciples was not some new and radical thing to this culture. We're very unused to this method of education, but the Jews had for centuries, their rabbis... In fact, any

rabbi worth his salt would call disciples to himself or accept disciples in to learn from him. In fact, these were called *talmid*, disciple, or *talmidim*, which is disciples, the plural. These were student learner followers.

These rabbis would accept them. Many times these disciples would literally follow their rabbi from town to town, from teaching venue to teaching venue. They would walk behind their rabbi in a sense to show even in that posture, "This rabbi is a man in whom we see good things and we think he has a good way and we want to learn some of his teaching so we would emulate him in our lives and, hopefully, eventually in our teaching." In this, there's much more to this idea of *talmidim*, first-century disciples, than what we normally think of regarding a student or a learner.

When we think of students, we think of someone who basically wants to know what the teacher knows in order to get the grade or to pass the class or to get the degree or maybe even just to get out from underneath the teacher, whatever it takes. But generally, these *talmidim* would ask the rabbi if they could join. They would actually approach the teacher and say, "May we follow you for this time? We see you have a good way and we wish to emulate that, to learn from you." They wanted to be *like* the teacher, becoming in essence what the teacher himself was. These *talmidim* were fiercely devoted to the rabbi. They followed him, they sat in on all of his teaching, and they would record and note what he did, what he said, that they themselves might one day become teachers themselves.

Now this rabbi-*talmid* relationship is a very intense and personal system of education. We see here God, in his sovereignty and in his providence, had already allowed this system to play out for decades and centuries prior to Christ's coming here to this planet and calling disciples to himself. It's into this learning arena, this relationship of a rabbi and his *talmidim*, that the Lord Jesus would call to himself a community of disciples. That's what this New Testament is all about. It's a Book (it's actually books) written *by* disciples *about* disciples *for* disciples. That extends even today. It's preserved for us and calls us directly into this legacy of following Jesus in discipleship, of following Jesus in community.

Initially, it doesn't look like anything necessarily radical was going on here. This young rabbi, Jesus, is telling people, "Come follow me." What's radical is what he's actually asking them to do. Jesus is not simply inviting Peter, James, and John, and the further disciples he'll invite (Matthew being one of them) to come learn some good moral way or some good teaching so they might implement them and in a sense pass God's test. No, the radical part of what Jesus is doing here in Matthew 4 is he's calling these *talmidim* to himself, not only to follow him as teacher or pattern of the good life, but to follow him and worship him fully as the Son of God, as God himself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer shaped so much of my thinking about these early disciples. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he notes there's no fanfare when these men are called. No one applauds them. No one is down at the front to shake their hand. No one hold a parade for them. They're simply dragged out of relative security. If you look at the passage, they leave a very (what we understand of it) lucrative fishing business. They even leave family. Did you notice they're in the boat with their father? Matthew uses this term twice, *immediately*, to show the instant authority Jesus has to call us to immediately follow him.

They're dragged out of this absolute security into what is seemingly insecure, at least by human standards. They're following this brand new, young, as-yet-unheard-of teacher in whom they recognize some authority. They're not even entirely fully aware of who this Man is, but they see in him, "There's an authority there unlike anything we've ever seen. We're going to follow him, and we're going to do it immediately."

Jesus is no mere teacher. Even though the first disciples would call him "Teacher," he's so much more than that. In fact, remember Jewish *talmidim* would actually usually invite themselves to study with the rabbi. Instead, Jesus calls these men into community with himself. That's something very different. No man can call himself to such a destiny as to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We do not walk up to Christ or speak to him and say, "I really think I have something to offer here. If you'll just take me and tutor me for awhile, I think I can help you out." No, no man can call himself to such a destiny.

Christ calls the disciple, and the disciple does not offer up his services. "What is man that God would be mindful of him?" to quote the Scriptures. It's certainly not because man, or these men, or you, got God's attention somehow, "For who has given a gift or done something for God that he should be repaid?" That's Romans 11. But God, in man, Jesus Christ, is very mindful of these men, of these disciples, and he still is of those whom he calls into discipleship with him.

All of you this morning sit here amidst the community of Christ. So many men and women in this very room have received this same invitation out of Matthew 4. **"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."** The call continues even today. The invitation to Peter, James, and John here is one to join Jesus in community at the outset of his mission. Even as he begins, from this point on in Matthew and in the rest of the Gospels, we don't read stories about Jesus alone; we read stories about Jesus and his small group, his community. Wherever he leads, they go. They will be present for all of the teaching and all of the episodes that are to follow here in Matthew's gospel.

It's in this gospel we see Matthew, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, weave for us an epic not only of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, but of his messianic community. The makeup of that community was not exactly lovely. These are ruddy, rugged, smelly fishermen. They weren't exactly who you would go to if you're

wanting to start a world-changing movement. In fact, they were very ordinary, very rough spoken. They weren't exactly who we would be attracted to if we were looking for a great small group or to gather a bunch of people around us who are like, "Hey, I want you to hold me accountable. I want to walk with you."

What this does (at least in my own heart, and I pray for you as well) is really begin to confront some of how we tend to think about Christian community even today. All of us are often very guilty about very romanticized views of Christian community. We look around and compare and contrast people and communities, deciding whether they measure up, if they're good enough for us, or maybe we feel like maybe they're too good for us. Either way, in doing this, we make ourselves the authority that determines what Christian community is instead of looking for Christ's calling and authority in the community he has placed around you.

As a part of the body of Christ called The Village Church, we are greatly blessed in that you sit here this morning with men and women who worship Jesus, the covenant members and Christ followers in this room. Look at what he has done in the history of just *this* body of Christ. Look at what he has done these last two weeks. Those of you who are regularly with us, we have seen the Spirit of God move in mighty ways as we have listened to Christ's own teachings here just in Matthew 5, one chapter later. We have been deeply affected by them, and out of that, we have seen God is on the move here, and certainly the community of God is expanding here in this church, and for that, to him be the praise.

How we facilitate this community here as a church is through groups. We are a church of groups, because this is a big room. There are thousands of you joining us here this weekend, and praise be to God for that. But it doesn't just end here. It's hard to go very deep today and actually be challenged outside of ourselves by another brother or sister. Certainly by the Word of God that's being proclaimed even now, but we need that in daily life.

We have found as a church the best way we can help along with that is to facilitate groups, both Home Groups and Recovery Groups here at the church. These are places where community can get together outside of weekend services. They are in and of themselves...now listen to this...not explicit promises of community. I can't promise you, "Get into a Home Group, get into a Recovery Group...everything will be fine after that!" I can't make you that promise. But what these groups are is they are an opportunity to get together with the people of God and for the Holy Spirit to work in each and every one of you as you begin to share stories about our Savior, about the Master Teacher, Jesus.

Maybe you've struggled to connect to community here at the church for whatever reason...schedules, expectations (realistic or messy), or maybe just a frustration with what's required. I want to speak to you directly and ask you remain faithful to pursue Christ in the company of friends, to pursue Christ in the

company of the community he's calling to himself even today. These are fellow believers with whom you have the greatest thing in common. Hear that. You have the greatest thing in common with these men and women, because Christ has invaded your sinful life and their sinful life with his gospel story. It's overridden the broken story you were living in, your rebellion against God, and now it's the common story you together share and encourage one another in all the more as the day of Christ's return approaches.

We need reminders. We're so often forgetful of our true identity in Christ and we try and just go and try on other identities, whatever the culture is telling us, whatever our own crazy fallen minds and hearts are telling us. We try and adopt those identities. We need one another to remind us, "You are a son of light if you are in Christ. You are a daughter of the day if you belong to Jesus, and that is your true identity." We need those reminders.

We have Group Connect here. It's here at this campus. In fact, it's happening at all the campuses here at The Village Church. Out in our lobby this Sunday afternoon at 2:00, you're going to find over 40 Home Group leaders who want to open their homes to you, open their groups to you, open community to you, just to say, "This is what God is doing in our midst. Come and be a part of that." You come on if this call to community is resonating. There's an instant step out of today to get connected to a Home Group.

There are Recovery Groups every Thursday night here at the Flower Mound campus at 7:00 p.m. A Recovery Group is really just if you feel (maybe not even feel; it's reality) that you've just been walking in sin, hidden, unconfessed, or maybe even confessed for some time. Or perhaps you have had great sin done to you and you need to have a season, in a sense, of inventory and healing. There are men and women in Recovery Groups who will walk with you, who will share a story and show you you're not alone in this. They'll tell you of Christ's power in their own lives and they'll remind you of Christ's power in your present circumstances.

We hear this. We probably even want it. We know we need it, but far too many of us sulk. We just sulk because we feel getting out there and connecting to the community of the Christ is just going to require too much. It's going to require too much, and so we get critical, or we look around and compare, or maybe we just get lazy saying, "Well, God is sovereign. If he wants me to have friends, I'm going to sit right here on my couch and they'll come swinging through the window, and things will be amazing."

Or maybe it's not that you're critical or lazy, but maybe it's that you think, "I'm not good enough. I'm not good enough for the community of Christ. Who would want to join this madness? Who could see beyond this surface? Who would truly love me as I am?" Certainly, these first disciples should be encouraging to you.

I would invite you to do just a little further study...very easy to do...in just where these guys were coming from. They weren't outwardly or inwardly very lovely at all, and yet Christ looked at them and said, "You. I want you. You follow me. I will make you my disciple. I will make you a fisher of men, a fisher of souls." Jesus wants to overcome the madness that is our own fallen heart, and he wants to lead you directly into his created community. God's sovereignty doesn't negate our responsibility to pursue Christian community. You be faithful. You be faithful, church, with the opportunities presented you to get connected to the body of Christ and what he's doing.

Again, a Home Group that meets during the week or a Recovery Group on Thursday nights here at the campus are not *promises* of a community. It does take some effort. We're going to talk about that in a minute. For many of us (and I speak as a certified introvert), it takes a strength not of ourselves. It takes Christ's strength to sometimes step out there and to connect with the community he is knitting together. You press into Christ and you ask for his leading as you follow him in discipleship and you pursue Christian community.

Now that's a word for those of you who are covenant members here as well as attendees. I want to speak now to just some of the visitors who I'm sure we have in this room (I've already heard testimonies of visitors we've had this weekend) and even to those who may be podcasting and listening in. As you listen, you're saying, "But Jared, you don't understand. I get this. I like what you're saying. I understand I need that, but here's what you need to know about my situation: I don't see this around me. There aren't any people like this around me. There aren't any churches like that around me. I have done my darndest to find gospel-centered community in a good Bible-believing church in my area. It's not there."

I would say to you you're likely right. I'll trust you've done the work and you've prayed and you've been faithful. It's true it may not even exist. Even across our country, there are places where there's a deficiency of Christian community, for sure. Let me speak to you directly and pastor you and offer a scary idea. *Move*. I don't say it flippantly. Not at all. I can assure you it's with great sobriety and, I pray, a great level of Christ-inspired pastoral wisdom. I commend to you the idea that you are to do whatever it takes to get with the people of God, to join them in community on mission for Christ. People move all the time for better jobs, better living situations. Why would you not pack up to pursue that which even our Lord Jesus in this passage refused to be without, that which is essential to the Christian life?

I'm privileged to get to serve on the board of a college ministry, and if there's one thing I can share with the guys who are going through this ministry, who are part of it in college, and they're juniors and seniors, and they're getting ready to go out into the world, they're looking at jobs, it's very exciting, they're looking where they want to move, where they want to live, I tell them in all of that they need to also be looking for, "Where am I going to go to church when I get there? Is there a Christ-exalting church in that area? Are

there churches that care about the Bible, that hold fast to the Scriptures and preach the truth undiluted? Are they there?" because Christian community is far too important.

Without it, the Christian rots and dies in disillusionment and discouragement because they don't have a fellow cloud of witnesses around them to keep reminding them of gospel truth. You may make it for a season. There are times even when there are dry seasons. God may lead you into those, but he will lead you out of them. He makes this community; not you. He provides it, but you are to be faithful in seeking him and seeking out Christ-believing community.

A community centered around God's Word is what you're looking for. Do everything possible to get there in the power Christ gives you. Don't ignore common graces. In this Internet age, there's really very little excuse for not doing your research. I realize there aren't perfect churches. I realize this is likely not your perfect church. I doubt you've found one. There are no perfect churches, because *you're* there and *I'm* here. The way of the Christian is not to spend their life coveting and criticizing every little thing about church life. Find a church that is about fishing for souls, about preaching Jesus, people who are on mission for the cause of Christ, and you press in with them.

Bonhoeffer, from his book *Life Together*, says (he's helpful here), "Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification." That is, the Christian's growth in godliness as they are led by the Holy Spirit. "It is a gift of God which we cannot claim. Only God knows the real state of our fellowship, of our sanctification. What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases."

In summary, Christian brotherhood, Christian discipleship, Christian community is not an ideal you can realize on your own. It's rather a reality created by God in Christ, and it's into that reality we are called to participate. God is faithful. He will provide for you as you seek his Christ in community. Let me also say that just because you've landed in a group or in a community or in a good church doesn't mean you've arrived. It doesn't mean you get to say, "Well, guess we're done here. I'm doing pretty good."

It doesn't mean you lose sight of your Father's work in this, his world. That was never the design, to just hunker and bunker in Bible study until the second coming. That's not the idea here of Christian community. It's an always active idea. It's an always active opening of yourself to what God wants to do, asking him continually, "Lord, what would you have with me? Have your way with me."

Part of this opening (at least in my own experience, and I see even in this calling of the disciples) is that we're called to sometimes leave stuff...our possessions. It gets us right where we live, doesn't it? What this means is that the call to follow Christ means my life no longer belongs to me anymore. In that, if we'll follow it out, that stuff of mine, my possessions, don't belong to me. They belong to Jesus and they're to be used for him. My house, my car, my boat (I don't have a boat; some of you do), the money, all of it, the job he has placed you in is to be seen through the lens of "I am a disciple blessed with these things. How can I use them for Jesus?"

For many of us, this may mean opening up our very own homes. Turn with me to Matthew 9, as we look at a very impromptu first-century home group meeting. Here in Matthew 9, Jesus has been teaching from some time. Still early in his ministry, but has begun to attract some substantial passion, curiosity, some skepticism, and even some desperation from people throughout this region. Does he not still bring out these most colorful and powerful human emotions in us still today? Christ still unites and divides. It's at this point in the story we catch up with his small group. Christ and his disciples are ministering out of their home base in Capernaum, Peter's own house to be specific.

I'm reading out of Matthew, but this account is actually recorded in some greater detail in Mark 2 and Luke 5. You can look that up a little later if you want to see where I'm getting some of this. Let's read what Matthew records. He records, **"And getting into a boat [Jesus] crossed over and came to his own city [his hometown]. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.'**

And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.' But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Rise and walk"? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he then said to the paralytic—'Rise, pick up your bed and go home.' And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men."

What happened here (we know this from Mark and Luke) is this impromptu home group has gathered in Peter's house. Peter has opened his own home for people to come in and basically hear the teaching of Jesus. They're packed in. They're out the door, out the window. There's no more room in the living room, which was really one room in these first-century homes. These four friends are actually bringing their friend (the paralytic who's mentioned here), and they come to the house just desperate for Jesus to do something. They've tried everything else. "Maybe Jesus, this young rabbi we've heard about, can do something."

They bring him. They can't get in the door. It's crowded. Can't get in the windows. People are just coming out of the house. Does it sound like any Home Group meeting you've ever had before? If you've been in the crowded house before, you're not alone. This happened here too. These men can't get in. They go to the Jewish equivalent of a fire escape, go up the side of the house onto the clay roof, and they begin pounding away at it, chipping away at it, pulling back chunks of roof until there's a hole big enough to lower their paralytic friend down on his stretcher to the feet of Jesus.

If we're sitting here as first-century Jews in this room, we've heard about this great rabbi. We've even heard he does some miracles. He has healed some people. We see a man with debilitating palsy lowered down to his feet, and what are we thinking? "Oh good. We're here. We're going to get to see this. We're going to be eyewitnesses to this spectacle." Then what does Jesus do? He first pronounces the crippled man's sins forgiven. **"Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."**

"That's not what we were expecting, Jesus. That's not really what some of us came here to get." What they didn't realize was the great miracle that was actually happening here. Christ dealt first with the foremost infirmity. He displayed in the midst of this home meeting that the greatest issue is not our physical ailments, but it's our fallen human hearts, subject to monstrous deceptions. Our own sinful heart is in rebellion against God. It is our greatest illness and it's the most extraordinary threat to Christian community. Christ takes it on right here in the authority he is given as the Son of God.

This speaks very much to some of our own hearts. We have to acknowledge our hearts are fallen and don't want God outside of him invading our life with the story of Christ. We want community on our terms, not Jesus'. We, much like some who are undoubtedly in this spontaneous first-century home group, go in hoping for a spectacle that will serve our curiosities or some of our preconceived notions.

The motivations of a fallen heart walking into Christian community is, "These people had better show me some love, and if they don't love me on my terms or they do anything outside of my expectations or ask me to get out of my comfort zone, I'm done. I'm done. But hey, Pastor, I went for two weeks, and I tried. What else do you have?" I say, "You're showing up to be served. You're showing up to be served and not to serve the people for whom Christ came to die and then rise again, victor over death once for all."

The truth is we reveal in our criticisms a lot of our own hearts and we say much more about ourselves and our spiritual state than we think we're saying. It's easier to wallow in criticisms. It's easier to wallow in our own failings and foibles than put our efforts into pursuing Christ and pursuing Christ in the midst of community. But Christ is the tie that binds Christian community. Notice Jesus calls this man a *son*. He just met him. He says, **"Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."**

This designation, calling him a son, places this man firmly in the forever family of God. He's pronounced forgiven of his sins and his crippled soul is healed by Jesus. Jesus would later heal his physical infirmity as proof to those who doubted around. He said, "It's so you would believe the Son of Man has authority to heal sins I say to this man, 'Rise and walk.'" A man who had had debilitating palsy his entire life got up, walked, and went out praising the name of Jesus.

The profound truth of this moment and what Christ brings out to us and what we need to remember walking into Christian community is this man, us, we cannot commune with God, we cannot commune with God's people unless we are first pronounced forgiven by his Son, pronounced forgiven by the only One who has the authority to forgive sins, and that is Jesus Christ. We who are forgiven have this at the forefront of our minds as we pursue Christian community, that we commune with believers over the miracle of our own healed hearts. We're to be constant reminders of this. We're to yearn together to see this same gospel spread in the hearts of those we have in our homes.

I say have in our homes because I've been greatly affected by these passages of Jesus meeting people personally where they live. I've seen this in my own life as God has pulled me out of my shell, in a sense, and allowed me to see the greater work he is doing here in the world and what living under Christ and being open with what he has given us, first with salvation and then even with just piddly things like houses and possessions.

I find great biblical wisdom and thought on this aspect of the Christian life in the writings of Francis Schaeffer. He writes, "...a compassionate open home is a part of their Christian responsibility, and should practice it *up to the level of their capacity*." What this means is that we don't as a church need to start up another program or reallocate church budget or build more education space to create an atmosphere of community. The community exists right here. We're called to start personally and start in our home. Begin by opening your home to community.

Schaeffer writes in his book *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, "...there is no place in God's world where there are no people who will come and share a home as long as it is a real home." "If you have never done these things or things of this nature, if you have been married for years and years and had a home (or even a room) and none of this has ever occurred, if you have been quiet, especially as our culture [our neighbors] is crumbling about is, if this is so – do you really believe that people are going to Hell?" That fellow believers are also suffering. "And if you really believe that, how can you stand and say, 'I have never paid the price to open my living place and do the things that I can do on my own level'" to present Christ as all-lovely, all-powerful, ultimate authority over heaven and earth and circumstances?

Just as Christ is the center figure in this episode of the healing of the paralytic, so may he also be in your Home Group, in your Recovery Group, in your Christian community, because it's a costly business to have a sense of community. It is a costly business. Your wedding presents will get wiped out. Your floors will get scuffed. People will stay at your home a little longer than you'd like for them to do. Or you get your roof busted open. Maybe a biblical mandate for skylights, I don't know. But the call of Christ is to open ourselves and to be actively loving our way out of his power, love our way into another's world by opening ourselves to his heart-changing work in us, in them.

May what is said of this home group meeting here in Matthew 9 be said of your Home Group. When the crowd saw Jesus' power, they were afraid, they feared God, and they glorified God. May those who enter through your front doors see Jesus. May they leave forever changed by the gospel lived out in your homes. This won't just stay with visitors. This will affect your children as your children begin to see you paying the price in this way in your homes. We'll see it affect their generation.

When that happens, it begins to move into our churches, and a lot of the unreality and the "playing church" that has plagued and been a blight and a cancer on so many Christian churches (far too many) will begin to dissipate as Christ becomes the authority in the community, as he becomes the driving force to us opening our homes. He becomes all-lovely, all-knowing, all-powerful, as he already is in those home meetings you have. In your Christian community he becomes the focus of our love and effort. It has incredible discipleship ramifications.

Know this too, church, you don't do this alone. You're not called to just do this on your own. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Christ, who has now risen... He has been to cross, he has been dead in a tomb for three days...dead. God has miraculously raised him as he said he would. Now Christ is seen in his glory before his small group. They're meeting him as he is ascending to be with the Father in heaven, and he is giving them their commission. Turn with me to Matthew 28:16. We read Christ's Great Commission, not just to those followers of that time, but to you.

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some [even at this stage] doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And [know this], I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

This Great Commission shows us how we are to function as a Christian community. It's what we go back to. It's well known for a reason. Let us not lose the gravity of this. Jesus is with us. *Jesus is with us*. Don't gloss

over it or allow your familiarity with the passage to let you miss that. His presence is the power by which we commune together, by which we do community, and out of which we go on mission together.

The disciples were there at the giving of the Great Commission. They'd experienced three years with their Rabbi-Savior, their Savior-Rabbi. They had grown close with one another. This sense of fraternity had grown between them. They had seen Jesus do incredible things. He had directed their community for these three years. Now they see him go on to be with the Father. I'm sure they find themselves, as he has departed, wanting to stay together. Many of them made a go of it. We know from the book of Acts many of them settled in Jerusalem and mostly decided to gather up among themselves and do Bible study until Jesus came back. "Well, he said he's coming back, so let's just ride this thing out, guys. He'll come back and take care of this."

But that was not God's plan. It still isn't. You don't get to keep Christian community all to yourself. What happened to these first-century Jesus followers who decided they were going to kind of "holy huddle" up in Jerusalem is God allowed persecution to come to that city, persecution that pressed them so much most of them had to leave for fear of their own lives. God will not allow his gospel message to just stay with one people in one place. No, there is a global initiative happening here. His will will be done. In this case, he sent persecution to that city. It pushed the believers out, and what it also did is it disbanded some really great home groups. They discovered, even in this persecution, as God allowed it, the grace of God and of his higher calling for his community to be on mission together.

Can I just share with you? I've been in groups, been part of accountability groups, home groups, life groups, whatever you want to call them, or really just trying to do Christian community together. Man, the Lord lit me up about 10 years ago to this truth I've kind of always prayed for and always wanted. When I got a taste of it first in college, it was *amazing*. I loved the community I got to walk in. I still do. It's why I get to do what I do, and praise be to God for allowing me to serve you, to serve his church in such a way. I'm so thankful for that.

But even in my own heart, I'm very prone to want to keep my community to myself and not share them. What happened was about four or five years ago I was reading through the book of Acts. I didn't go in looking for this, but what I saw and what God was so graceful to reveal to me is there is this repeating pattern in Acts as he is building his church of God bringing his people together in groups for a time, for seasons, to accomplish kingdom work, and then some of them do stay together. Others are called out to do other work. This is still the ebb and flow of healthy Christian community.

The truth is, godly people hold one another with an open hand. What God was so graceful to do in my own heart through Acts and through considering this Great Commission in a new light, in a sense, is being able

to take my closed fist where, "These are my friends, God. This is who I need to track with you. They speak into my life. We've been through a lot together. I'm not letting them go." What God slowly did is he began leading these people out of this group, and even today he still leads people out of our Home Group into kingdom work. He has so gracefully just pried my hand open to say, "O God, these brothers and sisters don't belong to me. I'm not the master of their destiny; Jesus is."

Even in the community of my own family, my wife and my son, Jesus commands their destiny. "God, they are not mine to do with and to direct as I please. Under your leadership I will lead them, but Lord, you have your way with them." Truth is, godly people hold one another with an open hand. Godly people who are about the gospel say goodbye often, confident in our stance together in the family of God and confident that we will celebrate again. We will see one another again at the marriage supper of the Lamb. We will be with God forever.

But now, just for a little while, we have little time to waste. The Great Commission overrides any attempts to build our own little castle of community we want to rule over. God is so much bigger than that. We're called to hold one another with an open hand. This is the legacy of discipleship and disciple-making into which these disciples were called, and that call still resounds for you. It still resounds. You are part of an ages-old, ongoing, epic work of the Creator God, our Father, whose image you bear, who is transforming you still by his work in Christ through your Christian community. We need one another.

This gospel-centered community doesn't take place only when you preach the gospel to one another, although we need to be gospel reminders to one another, but also when we preach the gospel together to the lost and dying world around us. For many of us who may be in community right now, this Great Commission is a challenge because right now we think Christian community only exists in our living room around our coffee table, but it doesn't. We need to begin by getting a bigger perspective.

One of the reasons we so encourage groups here at the church...Home Groups, Recovery Groups, Christian community, to be a part of elder prayer here the first Wednesday night of every month at the Flower Mound... In fact, all the campuses of The Village have this where the elders come before the body of Christ, and they lay out their prayer requests. Sometimes it's for people specifically within our body or families within our body, church plants we have going out across this nation, missionaries who are sent out across this nation and the world.

It can get real specific, it can get big and audacious, but what it is is a constant reminder we are on mission together. This room is filled with men and women, and we pray for God to have his will and to fulfill his Great Commission to use us. That he would allow us to partner with him on this is such a grace, such a miracle really. We need to be reminded of that. That's one way to begin thinking about the larger life of the

church and to be challenged constantly...to be with the believers and praying together for God's work in and through us.

Then as groups be praying consistently for your neighbors and how you're going to be faithful to connect them to the cause of Christ. Maybe this just means spending time in the front yard to create an opportunity to catch them when they come home from work, or something along those lines. Now I know, some of you are saying, "Well, Jared, I'm kind of past the expiration date on asking my neighbors their name. It's been five years; it's going to be awkward." Find a creative way. Read their mail... (Don't read their mail; that is a federal offense.) But better yet, why don't you go up and ask them and say, "Hey, I just wanted to talk you. I know we've been living next to each other for awhile." Just admit the awkwardness. Just admit it. Tell them, "I care about you guys. We're here. We're on this street together. I just want to let you know, we're here."

Or maybe you get creative. Maybe you have a cake walk in the driveway this Halloween. Just as neighborhood kids and parents are coming up and down the street, that's an opportunity to create some conversation, to ask them what their name is, to tell them about you, to tell them about Christ, or at least to begin that conversation. All of this is about being open to God's using you as you share his story of life change with them. We are to be on mission doing this together as groups.

For some of you, this will mean your group heads out on mission together. Mission trips here at The Village are conducted through Home Groups. It's to our Home Groups we want to connect those who are being sent out for continued prayer and encouragement. It's our own groups we want to equip and encourage continually so they may go out together on short-term trips to spread the gospel and get the global perspective of what God is doing in this, his world. He has preserved this planet as an arena for this work.

The fact that you are still here, that your heart is beating, that you are sitting here today breathing air is a grace of God and a reminder to us all that he is not done with us. He is not finished with you. He still has work for you to do. The direction out of today is you pray out of this Word of God and the authority of Christ he has shown over this community and over our own sinful hearts. You pray and ask the Father what it is he has for you as you pursue his Son in community. As you have this Great Commission, you ask him, "Father, how would you have me fulfill this? How would you have me press in with your people for the cause of Christ?" and then you do that very thing.

He who holds all authority in heaven and earth is with you always...always...to the end of the age. You have that promise, so let us be fiercely devoted to the Savior and his call on our lives together. This is what keeps us going. It's why we're still here. It's this that bonds us together across these aisles, across

continents. This is the community's call: Make disciples. Make disciples. Make disciples. This is our task. This is our shared charge. Let's wear ourselves out.

I pause to just pray and end in this way, praying a prayer from the Scriptures in reminding you that the Lord will go before you. May the Lord go before you in your efforts to connect to his community and to be on mission. May he go before you and me. He will be with you. He is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. Let's continue worshiping him.

© 2012 The Village Church