



Hopes for The Village

Travis Cunningham – December 30, 2018

My name is Travis Cunningham, and for the last three years I've been serving here as a Groups minister, and for the last year I've been one of your church planters. This morning was the second-to-last weekend that I walked into this building to worship with you all. On January 12, my family and I will be packing up all our stuff and moving to Southern California, specifically to Rancho Cucamonga to start a brand new church. Praise God.

We've had this cute little interaction with my 3-year-old daughter in the past couple of months. As she's getting older, we're seeing her ability to comprehend things and understand things continue to grow and flourish. So as we talk about moving, she really understands we're going to pack up all of our boxes. We're going to load them into a moving truck. We're going to drive across country. We're going to move to California. She says, "Californ-ee-a," so we're going to get that little Southern accent out of her by the time we get back to the West.

She knows we're going to move into a new house. She wants a pool. That's not going to happen. In the midst of all of it, what she doesn't understand is *why* we're moving. Dad has tried to explain to her that we're going to go out there and we're going to work to start a new church and to see new disciples made and all of those kinds of things, and she just argues back to me. She's like, "No, no, no. *This* is my church. This is the church building I go to. That's my class. Those are my teachers. This is where Daddy works, and that's not going to change." She just doesn't understand it.

It's really sweet, but it's also really sad for us. For us, as we think about moving to start a new church, what's *not* hard for us is picking up and leaving Flower Mound and leaving Texas, going back home to California. Frankly, that's just not hard for us, but what is really hard for us is leaving family, leaving this place, leaving our community, leaving our friends, leaving the formation of the Lord in my family and me these past three years.

We are so thankful to him that he would do that through you all, and in you all God has given us a vision or an aim for what we want to see happen in California. He has given us a clear picture of what a healthy church looks like, and we are praying that our church plant in Rancho will become what *this* place is to many people in the coming years. We are so prayerful and hopeful the Lord will do that.

So as I was considering, "This is one of my last couple of weeks here, Lord. What do you have for us this weekend? What do you want to say through me?" I got into a little bit of a prayerful wrestling match with the Lord. Typically, at The Village, what we're going to do is open up to a Bible verse, spend some time unpacking it, and then apply it to our lives, but honestly, the Lord just kept overwhelming me with my love for you and with my hopes for you.

What I mean is when you come onto staff at The Village, you get an email that says, "Hey, what is your testimony? What's your story? We're going to put that on the website, and then we want to know what your hopes are for this church during your time on staff here." As I consider the calendar flipping into 2019 and my last couple of weeks here, the Lord just overwhelmed me with my hopes for you. The Lord overwhelmed me with my desire for us, as a church body, to continue to grow to look like Jesus Christ and for our witness in this city to continue to expand.

So what we're going to do this morning is you're going to have the opportunity to hear my heart for you. If the Lord were to answer all of my prayers in the coming years, if we were to come back and have some conversation with you, I would love to see these few things done in our midst. The only way that can come about is by the Lord's transformative power.

Now let me caveat that with I want to share these hopes for you in the form of practices. Hopefully you've noticed in the past few months we started increasing our language around using the word *practice*. If you come to Encounter, you know we're talking about practicing the gifts and practicing encouragement and practicing faith-filled prayer. If you're involved in the Groups ministry, you know we're talking about practicing the "one anothers" or practicing and pursuing biblical friendship.

The reason we're using that language is because when you use the word *practice*, what you recognize is that perfection isn't going to happen. You recognize that this journey we're on with Jesus is about progress, not perfection, and you create an atmosphere where you're allowed to

attempt things and fail at them and be grown and stretched, and you're allowed to take risks, and you're allowed to do some things that are out of the ordinary, because it's practice.

Anyone who has learned a sport or an instrument or a new trade understands how essential practice is to growing at that sport or instrument. If we were able to bring that into our faith, I think we would feel so much freedom from the Lord to attempt some things we're a little bit scared to. So I want to just share with you guys a few practices that I would love to see The Village Church step into more fully in the coming years.

1. *Practice dependence*. That sounds really basic, doesn't it? *Dependence*. But as I think about the culture we're in and the time and place in which we operate in this world, what's incredibly clear to me is that self-independence and self-autonomy are in the waters. Dependence is increasingly frowned upon.

The prevailing mindset in the world we live in is "The aim of my life is to discover and free my true self. I want to do what I want to do. I want to be what I want to be. I want to study what I want to study, and anyone or anything that stands in the way of that is an evil oppressor that's trying to restrict me from my good." That's the prevailing mindset we see in our lives. The ultimate form of constraint is an authority figure that sets some rules and guidelines in place for you.

We see this on display everywhere. For goodness' sake. Isn't social media kind of a temple to self? Like, Instagram. "Here's a picture of me on the beach with my shirt off." Like, "I don't want to see that, bro." "Here's my tweet about the amazing meal I just cooked. I never mess up those meals." Or "Here's my Facebook post with a picture of my kids perfectly dressed and perfectly behaved," when we all know that really doesn't always happen.

I follow a lot of you guys on social media. It's true of all of us. We have turned social media into a shrine to self. We see this on a grand scale in the conversation or public discourse around marriage and sexuality. "I want to be what I want to be. I want to be with who I want to be with. You can't stand in the way of that. For you to ask a question is for you to be an evil, bigoted tyrant. I want to be completely independent from any form of rules."

But it's not just out *there* in culture; it's in the midst of *us*. It's in the church. Who knows who the comedian John Crist is? He is a Christian comedian who in the past year has grown a lot in

popularity. The reason he's so funny is because he is riffing on the utter nonsense we see in the American church. One of the most recent videos I saw was the one called "Virtual Reality Church."

In this one you put on one of those VR headsets, and you're able to swipe and select your entire church experience. You get to choose the building you're in, the denomination it's a part of. You get to choose what famous band leads songs for you. You get to choose the very songs they sing. You get to choose what outfit you wear, and you also get to choose something called the *introverted experience* where you don't get greeted on the way in.

He closes it with, "And the best part about this is you get to do this from the comfort of your own couch, so falling asleep is not frowned upon. And guess what? We also have an alarm on this that will notify you when the football game is starting so you can take church off and start watching football." We're all laughing at it because it's funny, but it's also kind of sad, because we have come to believe that church is about *me*. Not *us*; it's about *me*.

"Pastor, why are you talking about giving so much? Pastor, why are you talking about my sin so much?" I've actually gotten that email before. "Pastor, can't you create some kind of program that perfectly fits my life stage, my schedule, and my interest groups? Can't you do that for me? Pastor, I don't want to sing those songs. Can I choose the songs? I don't really like when *that* person leads. Can't someone else lead?"

We've come to believe that church is about *me* and I need to be independent of anyone else, yet the Bible does not teach that. To adopt that worldview is to oppose the worldview of the Bible. The Bible would tell us that, as humanity, we are completely dependent upon God and, as Christians, we are completely dependent upon one another. So in an age where self-autonomy and independence reign supreme, let us together, Village Church, practice corporate dependence.

I very specifically choose this word *dependence*, because I really believe that when Satan sees humanity clamoring for independence he savors that, but when we go after dependence he cowers in fear. Isn't that the essence of what we see in Genesis 3 in the fall? God created this perfect garden where Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with him and with each other, and God set some rules in place. The primary rule was just, "Don't go eat of that tree. I promise you it's for your good."

Yet the Serpent comes in and plays on our bent toward independence and says, "No, no, no. God is just trying to withhold from you. He's trying to hold you back. He's trying to restrict you. You can

experience true freedom, true autonomy, true independence, and you can become like God if you eat that piece of fruit." At that moment, sin was ushered into the world and all things were fractured.

God has designed us to be dependent. I believe, as a church, one of the best ways we can practice this corporate dependence upon God and one another is through pursuing sincere biblical friendships. I believe godly friendships are simply a horizontal display of our vertical realities in Christ Jesus. Look with me to Romans 16. I'm going to read verses 1-16 over us.

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church in their house.

Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion.

Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you."

We really love the book of Romans, and rightly so, but how many of us get to chapter 16 and are like, "All right. That's a lot of names. Let's flip the page to 1 Corinthians. Those are hard to pronounce. This is a lot of greetings in here." But I think it's really important for us to spend a moment just thinking about what we just read.

When we read and think about the apostle Paul, the picture we've painted in our minds of him is typically that he's kind of this John Wayne type. He's a lone ranger. He's a man's man. He's a pioneer. He needs little to no resources, and he certainly doesn't need help to go accomplish this mission he's given. But what's clear from Romans 16 is that is just not true. If we read the span of Paul's literature, what we will come to see is that Paul is a man of deep dependence and deep friendship.

He calls these people his *kinsmen*, his *family*, his *beloved*. He even says Rufus' mother is a mother to him. He is so sincere in his affection for this list of people that he says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." That's a little bit gross, but we get it. Paul loves these people dearly. In this list of friends, we can see Paul declaring war on isolation and independence, and with his life and his words what Paul is saying is, "I'm too weak alone. I am insufficient alone. I can't handle this alone. I need you. And just as much as I need *you*, you need *me*. We need to be dependent upon one another."

In this list, we see men, women, rich, poor, Greek, Jew, young, old. This is an incredible view into Paul's life. Even deeper than all of that is Paul is okay confessing all of this, because Paul does not feel any shame or any condemnation. He knows that he is truly loved and truly known by the Lord and by his friends. If it's true of Paul, it must be true of us. We must, along with Paul, declare war on independence and autonomy, and we must pledge our allegiance to dependence upon one another.

I know you're kind of sitting out there saying, "But you just don't know my life. Come on, Travis. I work really far away. I have a long commute. I have long hours. My home life is a wreck. My kids are misbehaved a lot. By the way, we don't have the money, the house, the stuff to impress anyone, and if I was to be honest with all the junk going on in my heart, I'd probably be rejected, not accepted."

There's good news for all of us: Jesus has already outed that at the cross. Jesus has outed all of us. All of us, at times, are barely hanging on by a thread. All of us, at times, feel like a failure or a fraud. All of us, our homelives, are a wreck and we're barely getting along, which is precisely why we need each other. None of us have the ability to impress anyone in this room, so rest easy. You don't have to be impressive. Jesus in you is impressive.

One of the core elements of the gospel is that Jesus took his enemies and called them *friends*. Through his work, he has reconciled us back to the Father and called us *friends*. He didn't punish us; rather, he took his punishment for us. He didn't hold his arm out, keeping us away from him; rather, he drew near to us, and he calls us *friends*. No shame. No scorekeeping. No hanging our past,

present, or future over our heads. We are freed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I used to make fun of the song where the lyrics go like this: "I am a friend of God; he calls me friend." (That's why I preach and don't sing, but I had to sing it because of the rhythm.) I used to make fun of those lyrics, but in recent years, God has made those lyrics so sweet to my soul. To think about this... The living creator God of the universe doesn't just love me but *likes* me. I am his friend. Past, present, future, he knows it all, and he still calls me friend? You've got to be kidding me!

What that does is it frees me up in the gospel to pursue the risk of trying to have friends here and now. If God doesn't hold anything over my head, why do I have fear anyone else can? We need to be friends and dependent upon one another. C.S. Lewis has this phenomenal quote about friendship. He says, "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'"

How freeing is that? We're all a wreck. We're all hanging on by a thread. We've all made mistakes. We're all feeling shame, but to sit across from someone else and to hear *that* response... "What? You too? I get it, and let me tell you about Jesus in it." That's what we need, and I hope our church will step into that in the coming years.

2. *Practice obedience.* I get it. Obedience is not a practice in terms of it's a demand from God. It's a command by God. God deserves nothing but utter and complete obedience from all of his creation, but how many of us are nailing it? We're honest in here at least. Think about practicing obedience in the framework of training up a child or training up someone who's new to the faith and doesn't understand how this thing works.

I like to think about my son Owen. He's 1 year old, and he is completely without fear. We want him to have a little bit of healthy fear, but he has no fear at all. He is not allowed on our bed because he *will* jump off of it. He's not allowed in the kitchen when Mama is cooking because he has tried to climb into the oven before. Not a joke. It's crazy. His bed is basically a cage behind two sets of closed doors because he *has* escaped before.

Even just this past week, he grabbed three or four ornaments off of Mama's tree and smashed them and then was just walking on the glass like it was funny. It's like, "What is wrong with you, kid?" I promise we try to be really good parents. He's just insane. He really is, and I love him. In that, what Mom and Dad have had to do is set some rules in place that he needs to be obedient to, because we

want a healthy amount of fear within him.

What he also needs to understand is that our rules are put in place for his good and his joy. He needs to know that Mom and Dad make rules motivated by our love for him, and he needs to desire to be obedient to those rules because he understands our love and he loves us back. It's no different with the Lord. God demands of us in 1 Peter, "Be holy, for I am holy." He tells us that, and then he says we become holy by becoming like obedient children. That's what 1 Peter 1 would tell us.

This is what we call *sanctification*. Sanctification is moved along by our obedience and is stalled by our disobedience. Here's a problem I have, and you could probably identify with me in it. Obedience is hard. I have this natural streak within me that desires to flee from rules and authority. Maybe my son is a little bit like me. Just a little bit.

So I have *that* going for me, and then I've had a couple of experiences in my life where I've *tried* to be obedient to rules and it went badly. So I put those two things together and I put that experience over the Bible and I read the commands of God, and my natural inclination is not obedience; my natural inclination is disobedience. Not to *all* of the commands of God. Some of them are really easy, but the other ones that are really hard and rub up against me, I'm just like, "I'm not going to do that. That's hard."

What I have a misunderstanding of is the love God has for me. If I understand how much God loves me, my desire for obedience just continues to grow, and I understand that those commands are put in place as guardrails for my joy and my flourishing. Listen to pastor/teacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones on obedience. He says, "Love is not just a sentiment. Love is a great controlling passion and it always expresses itself in terms of obedience." Love worked out results in obedience.

So we must, church, become passionate about the God of the Bible. We must understand the love of the God of the Bible. In the words of Jen (she says it often), the heart cannot love what the mind does not know, so we must go to the Scriptures and know this God. What we will discover when we learn to know this God is that this God is entirely lovely and lovable and he loves *us*.

We go to this Word and discover some truths about God, that he is for us not against us. We discover that he has stored up no condemnation, no wrath, no punishment for those of us who are in Christ Jesus, and in him we have already been judged innocent. We discover that we are chosen, not forsaken. We discover that God has called us his prized possession. In other words, we discover

that this God loves us. This is incredible.

That should inform how we view his Word and his commands. As we become enamored with this holy God, our love for him grows beyond our perceived capacities, and as our love grows our ability and willingness to be obedient grows, and as our obedience grows our holiness grows, and as our holiness grows our joy grows, and this cycle just keeps going into perpetuity. We must love the God of the Bible and be obedient to him.

My hope for you to practice obedience, simply put, could just be said: *practice the love of God*. Understand the height and the depth and the width and the length of the love of God for you in Christ Jesus, that he would come on a rescue mission to save us from Satan and death. That's how much God loves us. How can we be anything other than obedient to him?

3. *Practice mission*. "Travis is going to tell us to go make disciples again." Yep. I want to do it a little differently, though. My hope is that as we pledge our dependence upon God and one another and as we become more faithfully obedient to him, the natural overflow of that would be mission.

This is why Jesus would call us the *salt of the earth* or a *city set on a hill*, because these things...obedience, dependence, joy, satisfaction, and happiness in the Lord...are so countercultural they become attractive to the point that we have to give an account for the hope that is within us. *That* is mission, and it is natural, and it comes from our obedience and our dependence. Let's read Matthew 4:18-20 together.

"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."

When I came to faith about a decade ago, I had a really fundamental misunderstanding about what missionaries were. I used to think missionaries were exclusively those who were living in third-world countries or those who were standing on a street corner. Those people *can* be and *are* missionaries, but what I misunderstood is that when Christ renews our hearts and we become new creations, our fundamental identity is that of missionary.

What I misunderstood is that the call to be a missionary is a call to follow Jesus in all of life. Think

about those two words: *follow me*. In the word *follow* we have our word *obedience*, and in the word *me* we have our word *dependence*. So mission can simply be obedience to Jesus, obedience dependent upon Jesus. That is what I want us to be. When I say *missional*, I want us to be people who follow Jesus in utter obedience and complete dependence in all of life.

Any good missionary is always thinking about ways in which they can engage their city or their culture and bring the gospel to bear on it in specific ways, so as I was thinking about the time and place we live in, America 2019, some of the words that came to mind for me were *hurried, frantic, angry, hostile, lonely, individual, and private*. Some of those words were coming to mind. I started thinking through, "Okay, Lord. How can we, as a church body, bring the gospel to bear on people like that?" The word *hospitality* came to me. I want to offer up a couple of ways in which we can be a hospitable people that results in great mission.

A. *Physical hospitality*. Nothing will intersect with the hurriedness and frantic nature of our lives like hospitality in our homes, because if we are faithful to set an environment in our homes where there is peace and safety and restfulness, that will slow people down. Hospitality is simply getting around a table, eating a meal together, sharing stories, laughing with one another, crying with one another, praying with one another, encouraging one another. That could be so powerful in our day and age.

My wife and I live in this janky 900-square-foot apartment, and our dining room table is like six years old and cost \$50, and if you sit on it for longer than 30 minutes it's going to take a dive. If you walk into our house, there are toys that are like daggers coming up from the carpet everywhere. So we were always like, "Aw man, we can't really host here. Maybe they'll invite us to *their* house. It's a little bit awkward coming in here. Owen is screaming anyway and trying to climb into the oven."

Yet what we have discovered is that our most life-giving moments in the past three years were when we were faithful to say, "Here's our home. Here's our mess. Come on in," and we invited them in. It wasn't about the house or the setting or the table or the meal we were eating; it was entirely about who was around the table and the atmosphere we set. Friends, let us practice physical hospitality.

B. *Emotional hospitality*. Here's what I mean by that. We live in a lonely and individualistic world where most of our lives are worked out in our minds. Studies show that we are more anxious than ever. Clinical depression continues to be on the rise. Suicide continues to be on the rise. So what if

we were to take this idea of hospitality and extend it to an emotional place?

What if we were to sit across from someone and give them the safety and the space to be honest with us? What if we were to give them time to process what's really going on in their mind and their heart? What if we gave a peaceful environment where they know they're not going to get an overreaction from us? Friends, imagine the mission that could happen *there*. In essence, emotional hospitality is simply extending the listening ear of God to others.

C. Intellectual hospitality. Again, take this same idea of hospitality and move it into an intellectual or conversational space. We are more hostile and angry than ever before. Spend four minutes on Twitter and you're going to walk away furious. That's just clear. It has happened to me. Oftentimes, it feels like in the world we live in true conversation doesn't exist anymore.

What happens way too often is we take someone who has a differing point of view from us, we completely twist what they're saying, and then we launch verbal grenades at them. Our goal is to tell them they're wrong, not to love them. What if we were to take the posture of Jesus and seek to truly understand and listen to that person, to understand, "How did they come to this point of view? What's their logic? What's their history? What's their story? What informs this?" and we were to patiently, like Jesus, listen to them and, instead of verbal vitriol, have gracious conversation with them? Imagine the mission. Imagine what the Lord could do in our city through that.

Here's what happens if we pursue that, if we pursue this dependent, obedient mission in our lives. People will notice. If you leave your job, your old colleagues are going to be sad to see you go. If you leave a neighborhood, your old neighbor is going to ask you to come on back. If you leave this church, it's with tears that we're going to send you. Why? Because we know you love us, and more importantly, we know the Savior *in* you loves us. That's what could happen if we're obedient, dependent missionaries.

Sometimes, stepping into a pulpit, I kind of feel this tug to be witty or funny or charismatic or mind-blowing or complex or something like that. This past week, as I prayed through what the Lord had for us, I was like, "Really, Lord? That's it? You don't have something crazy, mind-blowing for everyone? You just want me to basically flesh out my own journey over the past few years and the basic tenets of our faith? You want us to be dependent. Okay. You want us to be obedient. We got it. You want us to be missional. Sure. That's all over the Bible. We get it."

That's where God met me. As I was wrestling with him, he ministered to me and showed me that God never asked me and never asked any one of us to be fancy or complex or charismatic or funny or mind-blowing, because in that we become the point and distract from Jesus. Think about this. In our simple dependence upon him, we have no room to boast in ourselves. It has everything to do about Jesus.

In our faithful obedience to his command, we cannot steal the glory that is due God alone. In our heralding of the good news of Jesus Christ, we fade into the background and Jesus takes center stage. That is the goal of the Christian life, friends. So in a sense, if I could sum up all of my hopes, all of my desire, all of my dreams for this church body, if the Lord were to answer every one of my prayers for you, it would be summed up like this. John 3:28-30:

"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

This is my hope for The Village in the coming years: as we practice obedience and dependence and mission, that Jesus in us would increase and we would decrease, that we would rejoice greatly at the coming of Jesus Christ and our joy in him alone would be complete. Not what's going on around us, not the circumstances of our lives, not the lies we're believing about ourselves, but our joy would be in him alone.

My prayer for The Village is that God would increase in you, that God would increase in this church, that God would increase in this city, that God would increase in this world, and that our joy would be in him alone, and my hope and prayer is that that would come about through us practicing dependence, obedience, and mission. Let's pray.

Father, we love you. We bless your name for meeting us here this afternoon. We thank you that you did not leave us to our own sin and death but sent your Son on a rescue mission for us. God, I pray for this church body that I love so dearly. I pray, God, that we would truly and fully understand the love you have for us in Christ Jesus. God, I pray you would help us understand that and receive that, and I pray that very love would be the fuel by which we are able to be dependent and be obedient and be on mission.

God, this isn't about us. We are not the point; you are the point. So help us, God, to get out of the way and make you the point. God, help us to relate to you rightly and relate to others rightly. Father, as we prepare to sing, I pray you would truly cause our hearts to burst with joyous celebration at all you've done, and as we prepare for next year, God, I pray that you would give us vision and aim for life that has nothing to do with attaining our own goals but everything to do with attaining the goals you have set for us. We pray these things in Christ's name and for his sake, amen.

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