

A Vision for Small Groups
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Last Sunday and this Sunday we are focusing on two important aspects of ministry in this church. Last Sunday was an emphasis on ministry to children and youth. This Sunday is an emphasis on being involved in a small group. We have several small groups that meet at various places and various times throughout the week, and what I want to present to you this morning is a biblical vision for what we hope these groups will be and why they are so important.

I want us to be a God-glorifying, fruitful, passionate, vibrant church. I pray that God will revive us and strengthen us and use us to have a massive impact in this city. And none of those things will happen if we're not loving each other and helping each other and encouraging each other the way that the Bible instructs us to. It doesn't matter how knowledgeable we are of the Scriptures if we don't know how to love one another. It doesn't matter how well we can articulate the doctrines of grace if we don't know how to serve and care for each other. It doesn't matter how much head knowledge we have if we can't live it out in this local church in a way that edifies believers and is a witness to unbelievers.

This is how I hope this sermon will convict and encourage us. I want us to put our theology into practice. I want us to passionately live out our doctrinal convictions. I want us to delight in the truths we know about God and about salvation, and I want that delight to spill over in acts of kindness toward each other and acts of service toward others and evangelistic efforts within our various spheres of influence. I want us to cherish the fellowship we have in this body. I also want us to have a keen awareness of our own depravity and be deeply impressed with the need we each have to be accountable to others. If you really believe in total depravity, you will be in a small group. You will know that you are a miserable sinner who is prone to wander, and you will be convinced that you need others around you who will pray for you and encourage you and speak the truth in love to you and even rebuke you when you need it.

This is not going to be a typical sermon for me. Usually we're going verse-by-verse through a book of the Bible (and we'll be back to that in the Gospel of Mark next week). But this morning I have various points that I want to make that are all relevant to small groups, and these points come from a few different texts. So we'll be spending some time in a few different places this morning.

Let me start by reading our mission statement: Three Rivers Grace Church exists to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. To simplify this into three words, we can think of worship, word, and witness. Delighting the beauty of God's greatness is *worship*, and that's why we're here. That's why we exist, as individuals and as a church. God is glorified when we find pleasure in who He is and what He has done for us. That's worship.

Then *word*—we desire to be a people of the Book. We have God's revelation of Himself recorded in this amazing Book which was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is our authority, and we look to it for instruction and nourishment.

And then thirdly, *witness*. God did not place us here just so believers can study the Bible together and encourage each other, but also to be a witness to unbelievers. If we're truly *worshipping* God with our lives, and if we're truly being changed by the *Word*, then there will also be the desire that our actions and words would be a *witness* to those around us.

So now as we think specifically about small groups, I want you to know that the vision that the elders have for small groups is exactly the same as our vision for the church as a whole. Because when you meet together as a small group, that's the church. That's the real life of the church. This time of corporate worship is very important as well, but the nitty-gritty, life on life, relationships of the church and the struggles of the Christian life need to be dealt with in smaller settings. So we want the small groups to be places where each of us can build healthy and edifying relationships with each other that will foster worship, a love for the Word, and a desire to be a witness.

And now I want to look at this from two vantage points. First, what is the importance of this in terms of encouraging one another? Second, what is the importance of this in terms of serving and evangelizing others? So I want us to see the purpose of small groups as encouraging one another (in worship and the Word). And I also want us to see another purpose of small groups, which we have not emphasized as much in the past, that these groups can be a means of witness as well. There should be not only an inward focus of caring for one another (that is extremely important), but also an outward focus of working together to make a difference in the world around us for the glory of God.

Encouraging One Another

The Christian life is not to be lived alone. God has designed for us to be in community with one another. He has designed for us to have fellowship with each other. And this is both for God's glory and for our good. Our God is a Triune God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have enjoyed the fellowship of one another for all eternity, and so it's only fitting that God would command us to gather together in local bodies of believers and enjoy fellowship with one another.

This is also glorifying to God because He gathers us from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, from different places all around the Pittsburgh area, and He brings us together in this place to show how powerful the Gospel is. From the world's perspective, many of us would appear to have absolutely nothing in common. And so the question arises, Why do you guys love each other the way that you do? Why does it seem like you're family? Why do you spend so much time together and help each other out? And the answer is: because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the reason we're together. Jesus died to forgive our sins, and God has called us to Himself and forgiven us, we are new creatures in Christ, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore we are truly family in a way that's even deeper and longer-lasting than blood relatives. Thus, God is glorified in our fellowship.

What I want to spend more time talking about is how this is a benefit to us. God is so good to command us to hang together in a local body of believers. We need this. I hope you can see that you need this. Every one of us needs this, because we're all sinners. Anyone who thinks they don't need the fellowship and accountability of a local church is both arrogant and foolish. We are so prone to wander, and therefore we need people in our lives who know us well and love us deeply and are willing to say the difficult things to us when needed. And we need the structure of a church where there are elders who shepherd the flock and members who are willing to walk through the difficult steps of church discipline when that's necessary.

There are to be no lone-ranger Christians. The Bible doesn't have a category for that. There are so many people who claim to be Christians, and yet don't see any need to be committed to a body of believers. They feel that they can wander from church to church or just worship God individually, and they don't seem to realize what they're missing of how God has commanded us to live out the Christian life.

We need the local church. We need to gather together in times of corporate worship and time in the Word. And we need to

know each other well enough to really care for each other and hold one another accountable in the fight of faith.

Let me read for you several of the “one another” commands of the New Testament. We’re commanded to be involved in each other’s lives, and not just in a superficial way.

Be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50)

Love one another. (John 13:34)

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:10)

Live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:16)

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

Care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:25)

Through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32)

Encourage one another and build one another up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. (James 5:16)

Love one another earnestly from a pure heart. (1 Peter 1:22)

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. (1 Peter 4:9)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11)

Are you getting the point? As believers we are not merely called to living out a life of faith personally and individually. We are called to live out a life of faith together with one another. We are to love one another, encourage one another, confess our sins to one another and pray for one another. Another way that this is glorifying to God and edifying to us is that it combats pride and fosters humility. Each one of us needs to acknowledge that we cannot make it on our own. None of us is strong enough spiritually to go off on our own and fight the fight of faith. That is a recipe for disaster. The world, the flesh and the devil will wage war against us, and we need the fellowship of other believers in order to withstand those attacks.

Let me say to you that some of you are exhibiting great pride in your refusal to open up and share your life with other believers. You may show up at church on Sunday mornings, you may know a lot of stuff about the Bible and theology, but if you

are not willing to confess your sins and share your struggles and admit your failures and ask others to pray for you, then you are effectively saying, “I’m strong enough on my own. I don’t need you guys.”

My wife and I have said of our 3-year-old daughter that she is oftentimes fiercely independent. There are certain things that she is determined to do herself, and she will get very upset if we try to help her. Even if she has her arms all tangled up in a dress that she’s trying to put on, and we’ll try to help, and she’ll get angry and say, “No, I do it myself!” That’s exactly what we try to do in the Christian life. We resist the help of others. We push others away, and insist that we can fix our own problems. Oh, how foolish and prideful we can be. We need to humble ourselves in order to depend on one another and receive help from each other.

You might respond to that and say, It’s not pride, it’s fear. I’m afraid of what others will think of me if I tell them what I’m really struggling with. If I tell them that I feel like a failure as a parent, or that my marriage is in shambles, or that I’m addicted to pornography, or that I’m tempted with same-sex attraction, or that I don’t read my Bible or pray, or that I’ve been deceptive—what will they think of me then, if I confess the deep dark secrets of my life? And I would say that this kind of fear is all wrapped up in pride. We have to have the courage and the humility to overcome the fear of what others will think, and we need to venture out into that vulnerable but freeing life of being honest and open. And I would say to us as well that when folks do confess these kinds of things, it’s an opportunity to speak the truth *in love*. It’s not a time to be condemning and judgmental, but to show love and concern and care and to pray for one another and also to follow up on the situation. Give the person a call during the week, or ask them at your next meeting, How are things going in that area of your life? Are you fighting against those temptations? Are you repenting and looking to Christ? Have you sought forgiveness from those you have hurt?

This is real church life. You may find it pretty comfortable to observe church life from the sidelines. But it’s just that. If you’re coming to a worship service once a week, but not really connected to the lives of other believers, then you are on the sidelines. You’re not really a part of what the church is meant to be.

Let me now briefly take us through four passages that emphasize the importance of what we’re trying to do in small groups. The first two are in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 3:12-14

The clear application for small groups is in verse 13, in the “one another” command. We are to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today.’” Then the purpose clause, “that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Notice that there are two imperatives in verses 12-13. In verse 12, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” It’s a command to be vigilant in fighting sin. Then the command of verse 13 is to exhort one another. Then notice the word “for” at the beginning of verse 14.

Fight sin, and exhort one another! Why? That’s the question that verse 14 answers. And it’s a weighty answer. It’s a shocking answer. The foundation for these commands involves a very severe warning for those who do not heed them.

Verse 14 says, “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” This is essentially what the verse is saying, “We have become Christians, if we trust in Christ until the end.” The first phrase in the verse is clearly referring to Christians: “we have come to share in Christ,” This is what it means to be a Christian. We are united to Christ. We have a relationship with Him.

The second half of the verse is very similar to verse 6 in the same chapter. It says, “but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” Both of these verses are talking about perseverance. Continuing in the faith. Trusting in Christ all the way to the end, whether that be death or Christ’s return. So verse 14 is saying, “We have become Christians, if we persevere in faith all the way to the end.”

Can you see the crucial point that this verse is making? Perseverance is absolutely essential. Those who do not persevere in faith are not true believers. There may be individuals who make a profession of faith, get baptized, and attend church regularly. They may even seem to be very fruitful in ministry. But if they turn away from the faith, or fall into unrepentant sin, and if they persist in that, they are showing that they were never truly saved. It’s a perfect tense verb at the beginning of verse 14 which communicates a past action that has continuing effects in the present. Therefore the verse is saying, “We have become Christians (in the past), if we continue trusting in the future (to the end).”

What is the implication of this verse for those who do not persevere to the end? Some say that those individuals will lose their salvation. Some think it’s possible for a true believer to lose his or her salvation. But if we look at the wording of this verse

carefully, we cannot come to that conclusion. The verse says, “We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” Therefore, if we DO NOT hold our original confidence firm to the end, the implication is we HAVE NOT come to share in Christ. If we do not persevere in faith, then we have not become Christians. True believers will never lose their salvation. But for those who seem to make a start in the Christian life and then fall away from the fellowship and continue in unrepentant sin, their lives serve as evidence that they never were truly saved.

We need to be vigilant in fighting sin in our personal lives, as verse 12 commands us to do. And then we also need to be involved in the community of believers in a way that enables us to live out verse 13. We need to be exhorting one another every day so that none of us will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Take note of that last phrase, “the deceitfulness of sin.” Sin is deceitful. Sin lies to us. It presents us with some pleasure and says, This is better than Christ. And that is a lie, because nothing is more exciting or joyful or satisfying than living a life for the glory of God. That’s why we so desperately need each other for encouragement.

Hebrews 10:24-25

The command in verse 24 is, “consider one another.” The translation says, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” It’s difficult to bring out in an English translation the fact that “one another” is the direct object of “consider.” A more literal, but awkward, translation would be, “And let us consider one another unto the stirring up of love and good works.” To consider one another is not just to notice one another. It’s studying one another. The writer of Hebrews uses this word in 3:1, “consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.” We are to give close attention to Jesus. Consider Him closely. Study Him. And now we’re instructed to consider one another.

Do you do this? Do you take the time to think about other people? Do you consider your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you pray for them? Do you think about evidences of grace in their lives, areas of weakness, joys, struggles, triumphs, temptations? This is how we should consider one another. We need to know each other. We need to share life together. And since there’s only a certain amount of time in each day and in each week, it’s not possible to have this kind of relationship with every Christian you know. Therefore we need to be intentional about meeting together in smaller groups in order to do this.

The verse goes on to show us the purpose of considering one another. The command is: consider one another. And as we consider one another, as we spend time with each other and learn more about one another, our responsibility as fellow believers is to stir up one another to love and good works. We need to study one another with the intention of stirring up love, stirring up good works. This is done in a general way in the preaching and teaching of the church, but it is also done so powerfully in personal relationships where a dialogue can happen and specific encouragement can be given.

To do this, we have to meet together, which is what verse 25 says, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.” It certainly is the habit of some, both then and now, to neglect meeting together with other believers. That is a very scary position to be in. It leaves a person susceptible to sin and to Satan. Therefore one of the key ways that we can stir up one another to love and good works is simply by making sure we don’t neglect meeting together. If you notice that someone has been missing from corporate worship, has been missing from small group, don’t ignore that! Go after that person. Let them know that they have been missed. Warn them of the danger they are in if they neglect meeting together with other believers.

Verse 25 concludes in an interesting way. We are given these instructions to consider one another and stir up one another to love and good works, not to neglect meeting together, but to encourage one another. And then it says, “and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” The Day is the final Day of Judgment that will happen at the end of the age when Christ returns. And as we see that Day drawing near, which every generation of Christians must see—we must always be looking with anticipation to that great Day—we will see the importance of meeting together. We will realize the impossibility of making it on our own. As we see the increasing evil on the earth, we will want to be meeting together more and more.

In Mark 13, which we studied recently, Jesus warns His disciples, “See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.” And Jesus says, “be on your guard,” and He says, “stay awake.” These are the things we must do, and do so increasingly as we see the Day approaching. We must see all the more how important it is for us to meet together for encouragement and edification, so that our love will not grow cold, so that we will not be led astray.

Serving Others

The mention of love and good works in Hebrews 10:24 ties in with the second thing I want to say about small groups, and that

is service to others. We exist as a church, and our small groups exist so that we might worship God and study His Word together, so that we might encourage one another in these ways. But we also exist to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. We exist to serve others and witness to others who are not yet among us.

John 13:34-35

I want to close by pointing to two other texts to highlight this. The first is John 13:34-35 where Jesus says to His disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Here is a one another command from the lips of Jesus, and we see that the intended result is not only to have an impact on those who are showing love to one another, but it’s also to have an impact on others who are observing this. This is one of the reasons I think it’s good to invite unbelievers to this church, to Sunday school, to our small groups, to our fellowship gatherings, because it’s an opportunity for others to see the loving community that exists here because of what Jesus has done in our lives. The way that we love one another can be a powerful means of evangelism. Others may look at us and see how we care for each other, and they may realize that they’ve never seen that kind of love anywhere else. And then we can tell them that it’s all because of Jesus’ love for us that we love one another the way we do.

One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, wrote about how others viewed the Christian church. The church was being persecuted severely at that time, as it is today as well in certain parts of the world. And people were impacted by the way that Christians loved each other even in the face of trials and persecution. Tertullian records that people were saying of the Christians, “See how they love one another! . . . how they are ready even to die for one another.”¹ So our love for one another can be a witness to unbelievers.

The last passage I want to read is the Great Commission, and I simply want to make the point that this is a community project. Jesus declared these things to a group of disciples, and it is intended for all of us, in connection with one another, not just individually. These are commands that we should be working together to obey.

"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

¹ Tertullian, *Apology* 39.7, quoted in D. A. Carson, *John*, page 485 note 1.

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” (Matthew 28:18-20, ESV)

Jesus didn't give these commands only to those who have the gift of evangelism. He didn't give these commands only to those who are well-read in theology. He didn't give these commands only to those who are extroverts. He gave these commands to the church. So I want to encourage us in our small groups to pursue all of these things in our fellowship with one another. Let's exhort one another and spur one another on, and let's also think intentionally about how our love for each other can be a witness to others and how we can labor together in the Great Commission. I don't presume to know exactly what that might look like for your small group, but I'm encouraging you to think and pray and dream about how God may be leading your group to really live out what Christian community is supposed to be.