

Witness to the World

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You know, this morning there is a line in that song we just sang that says, "You're the wind in my sails" and it says, "You're the anchor in the midst of the waves." In other words, no matter what spectrum you're on this morning, whether you need the Lord to give you the purpose and the direction for your life or you need him to be the stabilizing factor in our life, isn't it good it doesn't matter where we are on the spectrum of life, he is the answer to wherever we are. Never get in the mindset or the framework that, "Well, God, you just don't get where I am." It doesn't matter where you are on that continuum, it doesn't matter where you are on that spectrum, whether you need him to be the wind in your sails or the anchor in the midst of the waves, isn't it good to know that he is so good?

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time where we have the opportunity not just to sing your praises but to hear directly from your throne room, Lord, we have recognized you for who you are, Lord, we have declared your goodness, we have declared the qualities of your forgiveness and your restoration, God, today we come to this moment and we're asking you to do spiritual surgery on our hearts. We're asking you to open us up and to take your word and to be the medicine that we need. Lord, some of us need conviction and we're praying that you would be the convictor. Some of us need to be consoled and we pray that you would be the consoler. Wherever we are, Lord, we just pray that it would be your word that would do the work in our life. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to two specific places both in the New Testament: the Gospel of John 15 and the Gospel of Mark 4. Now typically when I ask you to turn to two passages, one of them is primary and the other one is somewhat supplementary toward the end, and somewhat is the case today except that in Mark 4, we're actually going to turn back to it twice. So we're going to go back and forth between John 15 and Mark 4.

If you're a guest or visitor with us today, we're kind of on a journey as a family of faith and we're asking a very strategic question through this journey. The question is: what does a disciple in Jesus Christ really look like? You know, I know there are lots of books

that have been written, there are lots of conferences and ideas, but what does the word of God, more specifically, what did Jesus Christ himself say that a follower of his looked like?

John 15:5, he makes this statement, he says, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." And over the course of the last few weeks, we've been kind of building upon that concept, that idea of Jesus being in the center of everything in our life. We talked about that it is the word of God that secures us and gives us stability in life. It is our conversation with our prayer with the Lord that gives us direction both in the big and the little things of life.

Last week we talked about fellowship. What does it mean to be a part of the body of Christ? What does it mean to have a variety of gifts but yet one purpose? Today we're going to talk about what does it look like to share our faith, to speak of Jesus in the world that is around us. You see, when we talk about being a disciple of Jesus and a follower of Jesus, we cannot neglect this aspect because the very last thing Jesus told his followers was to go and share him with others.

So today as we turn to John 15, a very simple verse in verse 8, Jesus makes this statement, he says,

8 Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

Now when the Bible speaks of bearing fruit, there is a variety of aspects, one of which is found in Galatians 5, beginning in verse 22 where it says that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering and temperance. In other words, when we have the Holy Spirit in our lives, when we've come to believe upon Jesus and we've asked him for forgiveness and salvation and we're indwelt with the Holy Spirit, it is a natural response to love. It is a natural response to have peace in the midst of a storm. It's a natural response to have temperance when others are out of control.

That's one aspect of what we know as bearing fruit. The other aspect is to reproduce. The other aspect is to share our faith so that other people come to know the same Savior, Jesus Christ, as we are speaking of. And today we're going to address that aspect of fruit-bearing and, again, I want to thank our children's ministry who have come alongside of us in this journey together, given us a great image today of what it means to witness to the world or to reach the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, this one little verse here in John 15, three profound concepts that hopefully you will grasp from it. The first one is this: the process by which the Lord has commissioned us to share him with others. Notice it says, "Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit." What is that process? Now the first aspect is what I want to call total participation. Notice he said, "I want you to bear fruit." Now who are the "you" there? That Upper Room the night before Jesus' crucifixion, they are hours away from the nails being put in

his hands and his feet, the crown of thorns on his head. It is hours away from the sword being put into his side and what does he say? He says, "I want you to go and bear fruit. I want you to go and tell others about me."

Notice what he did not do: he did not say, "You know, based on the last 3 ½ years, Peter, you're the best one with oratory skills. Why don't you speak on behalf of everybody." He didn't say that. He didn't say, "You know, James and John, y'all seem to have the best system of networking. Why don't y'all figure all this out and everybody else just fall in line." What did he say? He said, "You." That's right. Thaddeus, we haven't heard anything from you but you are a part of the "you."

When we get to the book of Revelation 2, there is a church entitled the church at Ephesus, and there in Ephesus the Lord makes a very stark statement about a group of people known as the Nicolaitans. He says, "I hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans. I hate them." You say, "Well, who are the Nicolaitans and what were they doing that was so horrible?" Well, if you take that compound word and you break it open, what it literally means is someone who lords over or triumphs over the everyday people, the laity. The concept of Nike, like we have in the clothing industry, which means victory. And the Nicolaitans were guilty because they said, "We're the preachers. We know what we're doing. Y'all just sit down and be quiet and don't worry. Please give money when the offering plate comes by. But we've got this." The Nicolaitans, the Lord said, "I hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans because they have created a gap between those that are doing the work of the ministry and those who are just supposed to sit down and be quiet."

I don't know if we have a Nicolaitan problem literally here in our culture today, but I do think we're eerily close to the reverse. You say, "The reverse?" Yeah, the reverse is this, "I'm not a preacher so I won't do it." How many times do we say, "You know, when it comes to sharing our faith, we're going to leave that up to Billy Graham." You can't say that anymore, can we? "That's the pastor's job. That's the preacher's job. That's their job because they are really good at this." No, no, no. You see, there was no delineation of, "Oh, those who can speak well or those who have a degree and are educated," he said, "I want you to go and to bear fruit."

So it's total participation. We do not have the ability to say, "Well, that's not my giftedness." You know, you can search the Bible from beginning to end, particularly the New Testament, people say, "Well, I don't have the spiritual gift of evangelism." That's not listed. It's not listed in the Scripture. In other words, we don't have the ability to say, "Well, that's just not how I'm wired. That's just not how I'm gifted." He said, "I want you to go and bear fruit." It's not only total participation, but it's total, what I want to call, penetration. The last statement Jesus gives us in Acts 1 before he ascends on high, he says, "When the Holy Spirit has come upon you." Pause. If you believe in Jesus Christ, if you've come to the place in your life where you've acknowledged, "I have sinned, I have messed up, I need a Savior. Jesus, save me," I've got news for you, the Holy Spirit has come upon you. If the Holy Spirit, he says, "when it comes upon you, you," there is that word again, "you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth."

Now there are two dimensions or two roads with that statement. One of them is what we might call a people road or a group road. You have the Jewish people that were there in Jerusalem and Judea, you have the Samaritans in the outlying area, and then we have the Gentiles, the uttermost parts of the earth. But we can also look at it geographically, that which in your locale or your city or your immediate city; that which is in your area or your region; that which is in your country; and the world at large.

You know, one of my heroes of the faith unfortunately passed away in 1994, a man by the name of Leonard Ravenhill. Leonard Ravenhill was from the continent of Europe. He was a student of and an expert in what we know as revival and spiritual awakenings, and when he taught and when he preached, just one of those men who I would hang on every word. Now, Leonard Ravenhill is attributed what I'm about to share with you. I don't know if he originated it but at least made it famous. He made this statement, he said, "How dare we cross the seas to share Jesus when we won't cross the street."

Now, he wasn't against mission trips and he wasn't against going to other continents, what he was saying is this: that how often do we get excited about, we spend a lot of resources, we get all geared up to go over there when we have a neighbor, a coworker, a friend, or even, yes, an enemy, who is lost without Jesus Christ. And what did Jesus tell them? He said, "Here is the Father glorified, that you bear much fruit." All of you. Everywhere you go. That's the process by which he gave us to share him with the world.

Now the next thing I want to share with you is simply this: what is the potential or the possibility? What is the possibility? What would it look like if we took this seriously? What would it look like if you and I said, "Do you know what? I want to be a follower of Jesus. I want to be a disciple of Jesus. It's more than Bible study. It's more than prayer. It's more than coming to church. It's about telling people about Jesus." What would that possibly look like?

Well, the first thing I want to talk about is probability. You see, possibility is when I share the Gospel with somebody, what is the possibility that they will get saved? What is the possibility that they will receive the message in the affirmative? It's 50/50. They either reject it or they receive it. They either mock me or they believe in the Jesus I'm speaking of. You see, where the possibility is 50/50, probability is a whole different animal. You see, probability addresses the fact that how likely are they in the continuum of life to hear what I'm saying today?

Let me put it into numbers for you. When I was a young person, when I was a teenager, those that were experts in the field made this statement. This is about our culture here in the North American continent. They said that for every person who came to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, on average they did so on the seventh Gospel presentation. What that means is the probability of them receiving and affirming Jesus in their life was on average the seventh time they heard the message. In other words, they heard it from somebody and then somebody else and it didn't quite click or maybe they weren't ready or whatever it was, but on average it took seven Gospel presentations. By

the time I was in seminary, it had gotten up to 1 in 15 and now these same experts are telling us it's 1 in 22. What that means is we have a culture that has become hardened and inoculated to the message of Jesus Christ that it actually takes more presentations, more speaking of and more sharing than ever before in our context today.

So when we talk about the probability, I mean, what's going to happen if I begin to do this in my life? I've got news for you: probability states more times than not, they will not accept. More times than not, it will be rejected. But somebody has got to be number 22 and I want to share with you a story. It's my favorite Master Life story and if you're a guest or visitor with us, Master Life is a Bible study that over 1,000 of our folks are walking through right now and our leaders have heard this story and I'm going to share it with you as a church body and I'm going to sterilize it a little bit. When I do the little quotes in the air, you'll know what I mean, because there's an aspect of this story that young ears may not need to hear certain language, so to speak, but this is my favorite Master Life story because it took place during this week of the Bible study. Those that are walking through the Bible study, they are being encouraged this week to befriend someone who they are of the belief is not a believer in Jesus Christ for the sole purpose of sharing the Gospel with them.

When I was 18 years of age and I was walking through this Bible study for the very first time, this week in the Bible study is where this story comes from. I found myself, and I was there in Waco, Texas, and I volunteered at a place there in town. We were a ministry that helped the down-and-out. If you didn't have a job and needed a job, we helped you find a job. We helped you get the education you might need to get a certain job. If you didn't have clothes, we helped clothe you. If you didn't have food, we helped feed you and that was my department. I worked in the back in the food sorting area. That was my volunteer position. That's what I did.

Now let me describe to you what food sorting looks like at a place like this in a day like this. We would have grocery stores and even individuals, they would bring food to the back door. We would spread it on this huge stainless steel table and we would inspect it to see if we should give it to people to eat. You say, "Well, what was the criteria? What did you do?" It's real simple. Let me share with you what we did: we stared at the food, if it moved, we threw it away. If it didn't, we kept it. That's how we did it.

Now, I want you to know I've got this on my resume. At one point in my life of this ministry, I had made it all the way up to head food sorter. I know what you're thinking, "How do you become head food sorter?" Show up for three weeks and don't miss a day. You're the head food sorter. That's how it works. But because I had that "title," I had access to make sure that everybody that was supposed to be there was there or communicate if they were not. You say, "Well, why would you have to communicate?" There were only two people that worked back there with the food sorting. Folks like me who had some type of ministerial call in their life just wanted to help their community, or people that judges in the community had told them they had to come and sort out food. I mean, those were the only two types of people. So it was either those that were willingly there or those that were there by court injunction.

Well, there was a young lady who walked in one day to the food sorting department and as an old coach I used to have said, she was a rough tide woman. That's what he used to call it. This woman, she was in her early 20s and she just looked rough. Everything about her looked rough but when you began to have a conversation with her, you could just tell there was so much more to her and as I was going through that Bible study of Master Life this specific week, the Lord impressed it upon me, he said, "That's who you need to go and share with. That's who you need to go and talk to."

So I prayed about it and I was all excited. I was going to go the next day and I was going to share the Gospel with this young lady. She didn't show up. I said, "Well, maybe there's a next day." I went the next day and she wasn't there but because I had the position I did, I had access to phone numbers. So I gave her a call one day and I said, "Is there a reason that you haven't been coming in?" She said, "Yeah, I'm done with my community service. I'm not going back." I said, "That's a good reason." But the Lord had shared with me to share with her and so I asked a very simple question. I said, "Ma'am, is there any way that you would give me a few moments of your life? There's something I really want to share with you." She kind of went back and forth and she said, "Okay." So we made arrangements and a few days later, I went by her apartment complex, picked her up, and I told her that I was willing to give her food in exchange for a few moments.

So I'm 18 years old, I'm a college student and I took her to a fast food restaurant. That's all I had. So we ordered a combo meal, because that's what you do, and we sat down at the table. I was nervous. Woo, I was nervous. I didn't really know who this person was. I didn't know much about her and here I'm going to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with her. I pulled out a napkin and a pen and I began to draw as I was talking and sharing with her that we are in our sins and we're lost but Jesus bridges the gap. I mean, I shared the whole Gospel with her.

She was silent. She didn't say a word. She looked up at me and I'm in the middle of eating french fries, she looked up at me and she said, "Is this what you want to talk to me about?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Do it again. Do it again." I pulled out another napkin and went through the same presentation. I said, "Have you got any questions?" She said, "I've got a question." This is where I sterilize it. She goes, "You mean you don't want to be with me?" I said, "Excuse me?" Y'all can read between the quotes, right? I said, "What are you talking about?" She goes, "Well, you bought me... This is why you want to talk to me?" I said, "I just want to talk to you about Jesus." She said, "Do it again." I said, "You're on. Here we go." Got a third napkin. I did the whole thing. She said, "How much time have you got tonight?" I said, "What are you interested in?" She said, "Would you come back to my apartment and share this with my roommates?" I said, "Sure, no problem."

So I go back to her apartment. She calls out two of her roommates, there were three young ladies that all lived together and most likely had the same profession, sterilized. They gathered around the living room table and here's what she said. She said, "Girls, this guy just went and bought me dinner and didn't want to be with me. Listen to what he has

to say. Do it again." So I grabbed a fourth napkin and I shared the Gospel with them. I know what some of you are thinking, "Woo, you had three young ladies all get saved right there in the living room." No. I wish that was the story. Not one of them that night, even one having heard four times, received the Gospel of Jesus Christ that night, but you do realize somebody's got to be the one, right? And somebody's got to be number two. And somebody's got to be number three. And we were living in a community at the time per capita had more churches than any other city in America and they had never heard about Jesus.

We live in a world today that we think, "Oh, everybody's heard about Jesus because we've heard about Jesus." Not necessarily. You see, the probability is it takes 22 Gospel presentations on average in our culture today, and that means statistically more times than not, you're not going to get to see the fruit right in front of you. But what did Jesus say in John 4? He said, "Those who reap and those who sow shall rejoice together." You see, the probability is most likely you're not going to be person 22, but the Lord needs you to be person 21 or 19, or in that story's case, sometimes you're number 1 even in our culture today.

Now I want you to go back to Mark 4 and I want you to see the potential of this. Mark 4 is the story, the parable of the sower and the parable of the sower goes a little something like this. Jesus tells a story about a man who goes and he sows the seed and that seed lands on four different types of ground representative of the human heart and the human condition. The first seed lands on hardened ground. In fact, in his interpretation, Jesus says that it's Satan himself that comes and grabs the seed out of their heart and they never receive it or believe it. The second ground, it looks good at the beginning, it kind of shoots up, but it says because there was no root in it, it went by the wayside. The third seed, we'll talk about that more in just a moment, is one that becomes unfruitful. I want you to see the potential of the fourth seed. What does it look like when we're good ground? What does it look like when we allow the Lord to bear much fruit in our lives?

Verse 20 of Mark 4, "And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred." And what the Lord is saying there is that when we are faithful, when we are committed to bearing fruit in our lives, the potential is 30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold. But based on the probability, most likely that doesn't mean you get to be person 22 100 times. Now, it can be but what this also can mean, 30, 60, 100, I've got one for you, how about 1,000 fold? And the idea that you get from the Lord here when Jesus is interpreting is there is no limit to the potential of what the Lord can do in your life when you just allow the ground of your life to be good soil and share and bear fruit in your life. So when we talk about what is the possibility here? The possibility is that if we are faithful to bear fruit, if we're faithful to share the Gospel, we leave the results up to him and we just stand back and watch what he does in people's lives.

Now back to John 15. I want you to see the promise that the Lord gives. Verse 8, he says, "Herein is my Father glorified that if you bear much fruit, so ye shall be my disciples." The promise is that there is praise received. He says, "Here is my Father glorified." Have

you ever gone through a day and said, "I wonder if the Lord was pleased with me today? I wonder as I put my head on the pillow, have I lived today where the Lord would smile upon my life?" You know, I've got a guaranteed way to answer that in the affirmative: bear much fruit. When we share Jesus with the world around us, according to this passage, he is honored and he is glorified.

You know, there is something that is very familiar to the larger Christian context, not so much in Baptist circles, it's known as a catechism. If you're not familiar with what that is, and by the way, that is a word you can say in church. I promise you. But catechism is a Bible study, it's a series of question and answers that's been utilized for hundreds of years in the Christian community where sometimes it's parents to the children, sometimes it's even pastors to a church, Bible study, whatever it is, where questions are asked and it's not really rhetorical but there is a prescribed answer that is given because it is for the purpose of teaching us the message of the word of God. They come in short versions and long versions but it deals with the Ten Commandments, it deals with the commissions of God, the nature of Scripture, who Jesus is, etc. But the very first question of the catechism is: what is the chief purpose of man? Do you know what the answer is? To glorify God. That's right.

How many times have you looked at that and said, "Wow, what does that really mean? What does it really mean to glorify God?" What did Jesus say? "Herein is my Father glorified, you bear much fruit." If you've ever questioned, "Am I really doing this Christianity thing right?" When we share Jesus with the lost and dying world, I promise you you're doing it right. I promise you you are giving the Father honor and glory.

But what's the problem? You say, "What do you mean, what's the problem? That's a good thing. That means praise is received. This is good." No. You see, the problem is that you and I live in a world today with all the resources at our beck and call. We live in a world particularly even in the Baptist community, if you allow me to say that, we are known as the most evangelistic, mission-minded, evangelical community in all of North America and congratulations, for the last 10 years we have steadily seen less and less people come to know Jesus. You say, "But we need more resources." We don't need more resources. "We need more stuff." That may be part of our problem. What's the problem? Why is it that in America today every single county, every county per capita has less born-again Christians today than it did 10 years ago? Why is that?

Go back to Mark 4 for just a moment and I want to end today on the third piece of ground. This is the ground that becomes unfruitful. Now again, I wasn't an English major in college but the last time I checked if you become unfruitful, that means at one point you were fruitful. In other words, there was a time in this person's life in this parable where they were being and doing what they were supposed to, but notice what verse 18 says, "And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." Let me put it in 21st century verbiage here: we miss the forest for the trees. We're so caught up with getting from Point A to Point B, we're so busy accomplishing this or rising the ladder in this, we're so consumed with the

things of this world that we miss the whole commission to tell people about Jesus and we become unfruitful.

This week in the physical world, we lost an incredibly respected communicator of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a man by the name of Billy Graham, 99 years of age. If you began to do a study of the movement of God throughout the last few centuries, he is one of many high-profile individuals who shared the Gospel to large audiences. One of those individuals, one of my favorites, a man by the name of Dale Moody. Dale Moody was known for sharing the Gospel both overseas in Europe as well as the North American continent. He died in the year 1899, but some years before his death, there was a friend of his that called him up. He said, "Mr. Moody, I just don't understand it. We're not seeing people believe on Jesus like we used to. We're just not seeing people rushing to the altar like we used to. We're just, something's wrong and I don't know what it is. Would you be willing to come and help us and talk to us and listen to us? In other words, would you do a consultation? Could you come and do a review of our evangelistic processes?" He said, "Sure, I'd be glad to."

So he showed up to this man's home in his town and it was a very urban environment, downtown environment. He said, "Let's take a walk to the balcony." They went to the balcony and they were overlooking a busy street and I want you to hear this story from the life of Dale Moody, one of the great communicators of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He asked his friend, "Tell me what you see." He said, "Well, I see a young mom pushing her child in a stroller. I see an older couple, it looks like they've been married a very long time, holding hands and possibly going to lunch. I see a businessman who looks like he's late for a meeting and he's stressed out. Why do you ask?" He said, "There's your problem because you see them for what they're doing and not who they are. I see a young woman and I wonder does she know Jesus? I see a couple long in their age and I wonder do they know the Jesus they're about to meet? I see a man rushing to a business meeting and I wonder has he missed Jesus chasing the almighty dollar?"

You see, the problem isn't that the world has become hardened, the problem isn't that they've become inoculated, the problem is we've gotten caught up with the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things. We've missed the forest for the trees, folks, and we need to just get back to telling people about Jesus.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, this morning we've talked a lot about sharing Jesus but maybe you're that person saying, "Yeah, but I need to be the recipient thereof. I'm the one that is lost. I'm the one who's gone down the wayward path. I'm the one who's sinking in sin and struggling." I've got good news for you. When we talk about Jesus, it's not about signing up for a course, it's not about jumping through a bunch of hoops, it's not about checking off a bunch of boxes. You see, we're not talking about religion, we're talking about relationship here.

If you're here this morning, whether you're here in person or on the other side of that camera, and you've come to an understanding, a realization that none of your own endeavors and works will ever satisfy God's standard and you realize how desperately

you need Jesus, can I just encourage you to do something? Have a conversation with him. I know technically we call it prayer. You don't have to have this conversation out loud. In fact, you don't even have to say the same words that I might say but maybe your talk with the Lord would go something a little something like this. You say, "God, today I just want you to know what you already know about me. I've done things I shouldn't have done. Lord, I've been places I shouldn't have been. I've said things I shouldn't have said. And I've thought things I shouldn't have thought. God, I've tried to mask it. I've tried to be better. I've tried to in my flesh pay some type of penance or something. But Lord, I know and you know it, it falls woefully short. God, I've come to an understanding today that the only solution is Jesus. Lord, today I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to pay the price for my sin on the cross and raise from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems but I do know that Jesus is the answer to my sin problem. So in the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

If that's the conversation you had with the Lord today, we want to celebrate with you. We just want to talk with you. We just want to celebrate what God is doing in your life. Maybe you had that conversation years ago and you realize that there are a lot of people in your life that need to have that same conversation. Maybe there are a lot of people that you work with or go to school with or hang out with or live next to, that need to have the same realization and conversation with Jesus. Maybe today, maybe today it's not about coming and having a conversation with one of us, maybe today is about when you leave you're going and having a conversation with somebody else.

Lord, as we come to this time in our service, thank you that somehow, some way in your infinite wisdom you decided to use us as your hands and your feet, as the instruments of the Gospel of grace; that you have allowed us the privilege of sharing with others the ability to be forgiven, the ability to be saved. God, I pray for those today who are struggling with that decision, contemplating that decision. Lord, I know we can use all kinds of metrics and we can question was this the 4th time or the 20th time, but God, I'm asking you to throw all that out and, God, I'm praying that you would speak to them that this is the time to make that decision. Heavenly Father, today thank you for grace and mercy. Thank you for forgiveness and salvation. This day, may we not take it for granted. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever and any decision, I'll be here at the front.