

On Mission Together: *Following Jesus Together*

For the next several weeks we are going to be in a series I've entitled *On Mission Together*. Now we did a series a year ago that we called *On Mission*, but this series will be a little different because what I want to do is focus not just on our mission, but our mission *together*. Not just *what* God has called us to do, but *who* He's called us to do it with, because the Bible tells us that we can only do what God has called us to do when we do it together. Now the fact is we live in a radically individualistic culture. It's all around us: we instinctively process life through a very personal, individualistic filter. I do it. You do it. It's in us; it's what we've been brought up with. We naturally ask questions like what's good for *me*? What do I want? What am I going to do? What does God want me to do?

When we read God's word or listen to sermons I think it's kind of built into us to read or listen as if it was written to me personally. What is God saying to *me*? What am I supposed to get out of this? How do I apply this to my life? That's good, we need to do that. But we can miss a key component to God's word which is that most of the Bible is God speaking to His *people*. The OT is written to Israel, and speaks to them as a nation, and the NT is written to the church and speaks to them as congregations and as a people. While there are a few letters written to individuals, most of it is written to the churches and meant to be read, heard, and obeyed by the community of God. So many of the biblical exhortations towards about ministry and mission actually have more power when we hear them corporately. When we think of ourselves more as a team than a solo act.

Big idea: God has designed the church such that we can bring Him more glory together than we ever could alone

Matt. 4:18-22; Matt. 28:16-20

What we have just read is essentially the beginning and the end of Jesus' earthly ministry and there are some common threads or themes to how Jesus began his earthly ministry with his disciples and how he ended his earthly ministry with his disciples. These themes are at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry because they are intrinsic to what it means to be a disciple. What it means to be a follower of Jesus. These are common threads that continue to this day.

1. Disciples are to be radically Jesus-centered

Jesus is walking along the seashore and he sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew, and he calls them to follow him and they leave everything to follow. Then he saw James and John and called them to follow him and they left their father and their boats to follow Jesus. In that moment they became Jesus' disciples and to this day discipleship is, at its core, following Jesus. In Matt. 28 Jesus gives his disciples what we call the "Great Commission" – go to all nations. But the emphasis isn't on the disciples "going", it's on the disciples being sent in the authority of Christ: *All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore...* So they are to go in Jesus' name because Jesus is over all things. And that is true to this day: discipleship is following Jesus and going in Jesus' name because he is Lord over all. Disciples are radically Jesus-centered – it's all about Jesus.

2. Disciples are to be on mission (fishers, go)

The second common thread is that disciples have a mission. In Matt 4 Jesus says he will make them fishers of men. In Matt 28 he's fulfilling his promise to Peter and Andrew by sending them out as fishers

of men. Basically in Matt. 4 he promises to make them fishers of men, in chap 28 he tells them it's time to go fishing!

Two basic truths about discipleship: Jesus-centered and on mission. And we can read this with our individualistic glasses on. *Yeah, I'm to be Jesus-centered, and yeah, I'm to go and be a fisher of men. Now, give me a message that tells me how to do it.* And I think often these passages are preached emphasizing our individual need to hear and obey. And don't get me wrong, that's good and necessary. We do relate to God's word individually and need to hear and obey it personally. But what we can easily miss is that the far bigger thrust of the NT is that we do these things *together*. So let's take these two points – disciples are to be radically Jesus-centered and disciples are to be on mission and relook at them in reverse order, only this time with our *corporate* glasses on.

3. Disciples are to be on mission *together*

This is a common thread in these passages too, but it's not seen so much in something Jesus says, but in what he does: in Matt. 4 as Jesus called his disciples to follow him, they were inescapably connected to each other. There was no way for Peter and Andrew to follow Jesus without walking with James and John. Think about this: for three years they lived together, learned from Jesus together, ate together, traveled together, argued with each other, went through scary situations together – all the kinds of shared experiences that bond people together. They must have grown very close over the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry, and then they continued relating with other disciples for the rest of their days – with the exception of Judas who departed from them to betray Jesus.

In Matt. 28 when Jesus sends his disciples to the ends of the earth, he sends them to gather other people from every nation to follow him – which means they too become relationally connected with one another. In fact, the gospel so connects believers that we are called brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of our nationality.

Relationship is intrinsically a big part of discipleship. God calls us together because we need each other. ***We can bring God more glory together than we ever could alone!***

Over the next several weeks we will consider how, by the direction of God's word and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are love one another, grow as disciples together, multiply ministry together and protect one another. Let me share why this is on my heart at this time (and if you're visiting us from another church, I'm going to share some specific thoughts re GCC but they apply to your church as well so I hope this will stir vision and a fire in your heart for what God wants to do in your local church as you hear this). I believe that this is a pivotal time in our history as a church. Warren Boettcher, the pastor of SGC in NJ and a dear friend of this church (who I hope to have come back soon), often said when he'd visit us that he felt like this church was like a diamond in the rough. Even as we met in various schools with no real exposure or presence in the community there was a dynamic of grace that he said was ready to explode. I agree – I've been amazed and blessed by the dynamic of grace we see at work in this church. It's the kindness of God, but it's also a result of the grace on our lives as a congregation – not one or two people alone, but because so many here love and care and serve. Because so many are committed to grace and resist legalism and self-righteousness. It's because, in my opinion, this is a church body that manifests in many ways the sweetness of Christ. There has been a dynamic of grace in this church that has been a joy to pastor.

But I believe – and I pray – that the Lord wants to expand that grace outward in the coming years. About eight months ago the Lord answered a decade of prayers by giving us this building. It really is a gift. But

we've always said that a building isn't the church and it's not our ultimate goal, it's a tool, and God requires of us to use that tool wisely and well for His glory. My prayer and hope is that in the coming years we will see a fresh momentum of grace that will spill over into every arena God has called us to be involved in! A momentum of grace that will spill over into our depth of fellowship and make us go deeper. A momentum of grace that will expand our impact in this community and that will see people come to a saving knowledge of Christ. A momentum of grace that will not only cause our involvement in missions to grow bigger but also become more focused for maximum effectiveness. A momentum of grace that will enable us to care for the poor and needy through a focused mercy ministry that really helps and doesn't just throw money at a problem. A momentum of grace that will enable us to multiply through more church planting. It was great to have the Slack's with us last week (and Jennifer with us this morning) and to hear how the church plant in Sarasota is doing well and growing, numerically and relationally. May God multiply the gospel by allowing us to plant more churches! And whatever other arenas God calls us to. But none of this can rest on the efforts of one or two of us nor does God intend it to. **God has designed the church such that we can bring God more glory together than we ever could alone!**

Spirit-empowered synergy

There's a word for what I'm talking about: synergy. Synergy is the creation of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It comes from the Greek word *synergos* which means "working together". The Bible describes a Spirit-empowered synergy in the church when it gets a vision for what God can do through us when we work together. When every part does what God designed it to do. It's that kind of spiritual synergy that Paul describes in Ephesians 4:15 - *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly (in other words, when each member is doing the part God designed him or her to do), makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.* Growing up in every way into Christ. That means a momentum of grace that is growing the church not just in one way, but on many fronts at once so that we are becoming like Christ and doing the ministry of Christ *in ever increasing ways*. It's what the first century church experienced after Pentecost, and it's God's plan for the church throughout history. But it takes a vision for a discipleship that binds our lives and hearts together relationally. It takes a vision for being on mission *together*.

I know that its possible to take this "together" stuff and get weird with it. Churches and groups can get out of whack and think they're some special group or become controlling or in-grown and exclusive or start micro-managing each other's lives or take on a kind of group-think that stifles diversity and differences of opinion. I'm not talking about any of that. When I talk about what God wants to do through us together, when I talk about Spirit-empowered synergy, don't think of us all sitting around in a circle with shaved heads holding hands and chanting in Latin. I'm not talking that. Think of your favorite sports team. Or your favorite orchestra. Or dance troupe. Or successful business team. Strong, healthy individuals coming together to focus their skills and energy in a specific direction to accomplish something bigger together than they ever could alone, with each part playing its part. The whole is greater than its parts.

To truly experience this we need to embrace humility. We need to shift our goals from personal glory (which we all crave) to Jesus' glory (which is infinitely better). I happened to watch a snippet of American Ninja Warrior and there was this guy who had been adopted as a child and he and his wife decided to pay it forward by adopting a child of their own and he wanted to get the word out on the importance and beauty of adoption. On his back he had written, *Jesus loves the little children. I know.* But something he said really struck me. He said, *when you're doing something with a purpose for something greater than yourself, that makes all the difference in the world. ... it's not that I'm doing something special, it's that*

I'm being allowed to be a part of something special, and that's just awesome. That is awesome! The question we need to settle is, do we want to be the star of something really small, or a small part of something really big.

We can bring God more glory together than we ever could alone!

Disciples are called to be on mission together and...

4. Disciples are to be radically Jesus-centered together

Discipleship is always, always, centered on Jesus because at its core discipleship is following Jesus. Jesus calls the disciples to follow him in chapter 4, but that didn't change when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. In Matthew 28 Jesus makes this amazing promise: *And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the world.* Now when Jesus says he is with us, does he mean that he's walking beside us as we carry out the mission he gave us? The answer is no, he's with us to lead us. Jesus said in John 10 that he is the Good Shepherd, that his sheep know his voice, and follow him. He is *with* us to *lead* us. Being a disciple at its simplest core meaning still means to follow Jesus.

This is the greatest protection for the church. Being Jesus-centered protects the church from becoming man-centered. There's only one star of this show, and it's Jesus. To be honest, I'm getting increasingly uncomfortable with celebrity ministers and ministries named after people. I'm not saying these things are wrong, but they increasingly make me uncomfortable. The world really doesn't need Allen Snapp Ministries, it needs Jesus Christ Ministries. It needs ministries that are radically Jesus-centered and powered by the Spirit. It needs kingdom ministry. As the church, we should always actively be pointing away from man-centeredness and making it our goal to glorify Jesus. He's the rock star, we're the stage hands. And that's how we should want it.

George Whitefield expressed what should be the cry of all of our hearts: *Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified...Let my name die everywhere, let even my friends forget me, if by that means the cause of the blessed Jesus may be promoted.* Being Jesus-centered together means we want to see Jesus promoted, not man. It protects the church from becoming man-centered.

Being Jesus-centered also protects the church from being distracted by lesser things than the gospel. Distractions on the road can be fatal – and for drivers today there are dangerous distractions in cell phones and texting that weren't a problem 20 years ago. The statistics on texting while driving are pretty sobering:

- 1,600,000 accidents per year are caused by texting while driving (nearly 25% of all accidents).
- 11 teen deaths EVERY DAY from a text related accident.
- Texting while driving is about 6 times more likely to cause an accident than driving while intoxicated. They're calling it "driving while intoxicated".

When the church gets its eyes off of Jesus and distracted by lesser things, it leads to serious spiritual wrecks. When we see the Bible as a collection of moral platitudes and inspirational sayings and practical keys to living, we are getting distracted from the true meaning of the text, which is always Christ. The Sunday School curriculum that we are switching over to put it so well: *Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it is also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters – even a*

love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus.

That is the one story the church needs to be committed to. The story of redemption. The story of Jesus. In the church we can help protect each other from getting distracted by always pointing each other to Christ, both publicly and privately. In the book of Galatians we read how when Peter was swerving away from the gospel and in danger of leading a lot of people in the wrong direction, Paul publicly confronted Peter and it got his eyes back on the gospel and saved the Galatian church from a tragic wreck.

Conclusion

God calls us to grow together as disciples and do the mission together that He has given us to do. That can be scary and challenging, but when Jesus is at the center, and we are guided by God's word, we can experience the Spirit empowered synergy and the joy of being allowed to be a part of something that is greater than we are. **We can bring God more glory together than we ever could alone.**

What do we do with this?

- a. Disciples multiply ministry. Plug in with your gifts. God has gifted you in some way – use your gifts for the kingdom.
- b. Over the next few weeks I want us to look at an idea that is new to us: start small discipleship groups to encourage one another in our discipleship.
- c. Praying together. Our next corporate prayer meeting is Thursday, August 28. Let's join together to pray down God's power and blessing not only on this church, but through this church to our community and beyond.
- d. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Let your heart and mind meditate on the story of redemption that is the Bible, God's love story to this world. Discipleship is following Jesus. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, please consider the claims of Jesus for yourself. I pray that this morning you will hear his invitation to you personally to follow him as your Lord and Savior.

Let's pray.