

How to Respond When You've Been Dissed

Finding Gospel Opportunities in Disruption, Distraction, and Social Distancing

Hello Grace Community Church and any friends watching online, welcome to the new normal at least for the foreseeable future. Personally I'm still struggling to get my head around the fact that there's not going to be a Sunday morning service cause going to church is so ingrained in me. But it is a vivid reminder to us that the church is not a building, the church is not a meeting, the church is a people – the called out ones – and by the mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we have been called out of sin and death into God's light and life. If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, that's who you are. You are the church. I am the church. We are the church. Even when we can't have a public service.

So grab a cup of coffee or tea, and let's spend a few minutes together in God's word. I've been feeling that God's purpose in this challenging time is to strengthen – not weaken – the church and to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to many who don't know him. So my desire this morning is to encourage and envision us for what God wants to do in these crazy, unpredictable times.

I've titled this message: *How to Respond When You've Been Dissed*. Let me explain that title cause you might be thinking, "What in the world does being dissed have to do with the situation that we're in right now?" I was praying and thinking about what's going on and it struck me that we're dealing with three major disses right now:

- Disruption. Our lives have been disrupted. Our economy has been disrupted. For many, our employment has been disrupted. Our schedules have been disrupted. Schools have been disrupted, which means parent's lives have definitely been disrupted. Sports have been disrupted. Plans have been disrupted. Travel has been disrupted. In so many ways our lives have been disrupted.
- Distraction. When all this was beginning to unfold last week I knew I needed time in the word and prayer and anchor my soul in God and in His word – we all do. But what I found was my mind was so distracted by everything that was going on. There was so much noise in my head it was hard to focus. Wondering about what's going to happen. Finally I was able to take a walk and get some quiet time with the Lord – and I recommend you get some quiet time in prayer and the word. But don't be surprised if you find your mind distracted with a million other things. It's a distracting time.
- The last dis is social distancing. Was that even a thing two weeks ago? Usually when hard times hit, we get through it by pulling together, but now we have to get through it by staying apart. Two weeks ago, GCC was coming into a busy season as we were planning an Easter outreach and service, had a Discovering Grace class, a marriage seminar, a men's breakfast and other ministry events on the calendar. The coronavirus blew up our calendar. Virtually empty now. Because we need to practice social distancing.

We've been dissed: disrupted, distracted, and socially distanced. The question is, how are we as the church to respond to the challenges we face? I thought of the early church and a point in time when they encountered many of the same challenges we're facing today. Let's pray and then pick the story up in Acts 6:7.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:7

So here's what's happening: the church is growing and thriving, God is doing amazing things, people are getting saved. The word of God is spreading. The number of believers isn't just growing, it's growing

rapidly. Even some of the crusty old religious leaders are believing in Jesus. It's good, but all that good is at this point mostly confined to Jerusalem. And God never wanted the gospel to be confined to one zip code.

So something's about to happen that's going to disrupt, distract, and distance the early church and it all begins with this passionately outspoken believer named Stephen who steps on some people's toes, gets them so angry they haul him before the Sanhedrin, and he makes them so angry they decide to stone him. All that takes up the rest of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7. Let's pick things up in Acts 8:1

1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day (that day!) a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

That day persecution *broke out against the church in Jerusalem*. It didn't ramp up over months or weeks – it happened in one day. Our outbreak is coronavirus, their outbreak was persecution. Stoning Stephen was so satisfying they decided to go door to door, killing and imprisoning Christians. It got so bad that they all had to flee Jerusalem to the surrounding regions. Talk about disruption! Their lives were turned upside down as they had to leave everything they knew and flee to unknown land in order to escape the outbreak of persecution. Talk about distraction – they had two of the most stressful things going on at the same time: moving, and someone trying to kill you. So they had a lot of noise in their heads. And all of this carried a most severe type of social distancing as they were separated geographically from their homes, their church, their friends, their neighbors, and in some cases their family.

What we're asking is, how did they respond to all this? Let's look in chapter 8 for the verse that tells us they got so scared they locked the doors and pulled the drapes and never spoke about Jesus again. Actually that verse doesn't exist. Instead, look at verse 4 *Those who had been scattered preached the word **wherever** they went*. They turned the outbreak of persecution into an outbreak of the gospel! They took all the bad and by the grace of God and power of God turned it into something very, very good! An opportunity for the gospel to break out and reach countless new areas, new regions, new people!

I believe God has gospel opportunities for us that will be borne out of this difficult season. Let's consider three of those opportunities this morning:

1. There's gospel opportunity in challenging times

We are in a challenging time and I want to make clear that I'm not trying to put a smiley face on this. For a lot of people there's a lot of hardship and pain in this. Trying to contain the virus is a serious challenge. People are dying from the virus and that's real pain and loss. Businesses forced to close, people being laid off, not knowing if they'll have a job when this is over. Not knowing how they'll provide for their families. All this is real pain and hardship. The persecution the believer's faced in Acts was real pain and loss too. The Bible tells us to weep with those who weep – and we do. We weep with those who've lost a loved one or struggling financially or wrestling with fears about the future. We really do.

So this isn't about trying to put a happy spin on all this. Not at all.

But the Bible tells us that what God is preparing for those who love and trust Him is so good – so eternally good – that the suffering we go through in this life (though very real) can't be compared with the glorious good He has waiting for us. That's awesome news and awesome hope! And like the early church, we want to spread that good news wherever we go.

In one sense these hardships have revealed that the steady consistency and security we enjoy in this country can be turned upside down overnight. The Bible talks about those who are saying "peace and

safety” and sudden destruction comes upon them. The only true peace and security isn’t found in the stock market or well stocked grocery stores or a steady paycheck. True peace and security is only found in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus died on the cross so that all who believe in him might be forgiven and reconciled to God as friends. Even better, as sons and daughters. Challenging times are hard, but they can also serve to open people’s hearts to spiritual things, and we have the opportunity to open our mouths to tell people about the love and grace of Jesus!

There’s gospel opportunity in challenging times.

2. There’s gospel opportunity in change

I mean, think about all the things that have changed – at least temporarily. I got a call from a friend the other day wondering if we could get together for a cup of coffee. The question is where? Coffee shops and restaurants are all closed now. Across the country pastors are sitting in an empty room talking into a camera and people are worshipping from their homes. Don’t get used to it! Grocery shelves are empty. People are working from home, kids are home from school. California, Illinois, and NY have ordered residents to stay at home unless necessary. It’s like the country has come to a standstill. So many things have changed.

There are people who don’t want change and there are churches that don’t want change. I read about some churches that refuse to stop meeting publicly, including one church of 7000 people. They are saying, we’re not going to change what we’re doing to adapt to the crisis going on. I think they see the call to stop meeting publicly as a threat to their religious freedoms and a call to faith and courage.

I think they’re missing what God is doing and what God is calling us to do. The Christians in Jerusalem could have stayed and welcomed death for the sake of Jesus. They could’ve done that. But they would have missed what God intended to do. God wanted them to embrace the changes so that the gospel could be spread even further.

Some of us resist change – some of us fear change. That’s not normally me, I like change but honestly when I first saw how things were going to change I was afraid that the change would be for the bad. That being confined to our homes and not able to meet would make it easy for us as a church to drift away from God, to grow complacent in our faith, to grow distant from each other. That’s certainly possible, but let’s not let that happen!

I was encouraged and challenged by something a local pastor named Dave Bretch shared. He was talking to a friend and they were talking about all the changes and how they couldn’t wait for things to return to normal, to go back to how they were. I think we all can relate. But later Dave was walking in the woods and praying and he realized he didn’t want things to go back to how they were. He didn’t want to be the same person he was before everything changed. He wanted to be a better husband, a better father, a better pastor, a better person. He wanted to love the Lord more.

Change can be hard, but there’s gospel opportunity in change. The day will come when things will get back to normal, but I hope that we’ll be forever changed. I hope that God will use change to make us a better, stronger, more caring church. Let’s not resist change, let’s pursue what God is doing to spread His glory and the gospel through the change.

3. There’s gospel opportunity to show care to others

If we look more closely at Acts 8:4 *Those who had been scattered preached the word **wherever** they went* we realize that the believers continued to put themselves out there for people. Continued to forge relationships wherever they went. They cared enough to not pull in their sidewalks and say, "I'm not going to risk that ever happening again." Wherever they went, they cared enough to share the love of Jesus.

Social distancing is strongly encouraged and I support it totally because it's for a good reason. I'm thankful we have the social media tools of livestreaming and posting videos and facebook and mailchimp emails. We can connect with each other without leaving our home. But let's not let these become a substitute for the human touch. For caring.

The same tools that can help us pull together, can make it easy to pull apart. Social media can be a great way to connect, but it can also be an easy way to disconnect. Even without the coronavirus scare we can be tempted to get so wrapped up in what we're about and what our lives are about that we distance ourselves from others. I'm talking to myself too cause I can do it. It all becomes about our lives, our careers, our families, our, our, our. See, lack of caring about other people is its own form of social distancing.

Jesus loved to show individuals that he cared about them – think of Zacchaeus – and he calls us to follow his example. Good things happen when we do – not just for those we touch, but for ourselves as well. I think John Maxwell is so right when he says "SUCCESS is when I add value to MYSELF. SIGNIFICANCE is when I add value to OTHERS." We add value to others by valuing them. Our lives grow in significance as we love and care for others.

Jesus left heaven and came to earth out of a ferocious love for people. God so loved the world He gave us His only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. The gospel is God's love put into action. So I've got one more dis word for you: discipleship. That's what discipleship really is: following Jesus into a world of upheaval and disruption and distraction and social distancing, and spreading the gospel of God's love.

I thank God for you, Grace Community Church family. You really do care. You really do love. But we don't want to go back to how we were. Let's respond to these disses – disruption, distraction, and social distancing, by loving and caring better and seizing the gospel opportunities God has put before us. Let's pray.