

Title: Life-Fitness for the Church

Text: 1 Cor. 12.7-13

Theme: A case for personal ministry

Series/Occasion: Presenting an apologetic for becoming a church of small groups

Prop Stmt.

Five years ago, the relative security of our nation was shattered by a group of men who attacked us from within. For those of us who did not live in NY or DC the damage and death seemed impossible to comprehend. Then, for a time our nation prayed, families pulled together and of course many people wanted to go to church. The Pentagon has been repaired, the debris at the WTC has been cleared away, the books have been written, the movies made, and though we live with many reminders of it, most people would prefer to live as if things like this could never happen. We want to be left alone to pursue our little pleasures, build our little kingdoms and amass our little fortunes. Life for us in this corner of the world has been rather easy for a while. I believe that some of that is changing. The thawing of the cold war is giving way to the heating up of a very complicated conflict. The resurging relationship between Russia and Iran, the connection of N. Korea and Syria, the surrounding of Israel, the emergence of China as the superpower who will probably surpass us on the world stage in the next 30 years are all pieces of a puzzle that paints a picture of a different world that is passing away. Our lives are changing. This simply illustrates what the Word of God commands us, and the Spirit of God begs us. Do not set your affections and build your hopes and dreams on the values of this world. It is passing away. Only Christ, and Christ alone is worthy of your highest affections and deepest dreams.

We know that. As followers of Christ, we know that. But I do not think that many of us, really know that. Our Christianity is still pretty shallow. Many of you struggle with real basic, almost elementary things for a believer. Daily feeding on the Word, praying, discipling, faithful giving, witnessing, humility, a relational reconciliation are ongoing battles. It is tempting to study the meat of the Word as a cover-up for not following through with the milk of the Word. Changes are coming to the way we live. This can become some of the most exciting and exhilarating times for the gospel that we have ever witnessed, if we are ready. My task is to help you be ready. We are not ready yet. We are not handling some of the basics of life right now, as we should, much less as the heat in the kitchen starts to get turned up. For several months now, I have been calling you to be ready to live with a clearer vision of what matters. Now is the time that we need to start helping each other move in that direction. There are two kinds of pain; the pain of discipline and the pain of regret. The pain of discipline is only for a while, the pain of regret can last a lifetime. Helping each other live genuine lives before God and our world demands relationships that go beyond a shared public experience in our worship services.

I turned 46 this week. So far, it does not feel much different than 45, which I don't recall thinking that it was all that much different than 44. And yet, while I don't feel dramatically different than when I graduated from college, I now have a son who is in college, and other children looking ahead to it. Life moves on - fast. I am also close to completing 17 years of ministry here. I am hopeful for 20 more. Being 46 brings some

benefits. I know longer have to show my business card at funeral homes when they question my claim to being a pastor. Older ladies in the congregation no longer pinch my face as much they used to. But in these years we have grown together. You have learned patience as I have just plain learned.

When I came here as pastor, I committed myself to building into our church community characteristics that I wanted the church to recover and build on:

1. Expository Preaching – the primacy of preaching
2. Clear Doctrinal Teaching – a recovery of the gospel and a theologically literate congregation
3. Godly, Humble, Leadership
4. Integrity at all levels driven by discipleship and personal growth in Christ
5. Genuine concern for lost people, with a true understanding of conversion
6. Biblical church discipline

I have mourned and still mourn the shallowness of preaching that is prevalent in protestant, evangelical Christianity. I grieve over the theological fuzziness and the dysfunctional lives that characterize our churches. I am saddened when churches change their message in order to cater to a post-modern spirit that rejects clear categories of right, wrong, holiness and sin. I knew that I ran the risk of being thought of as old school, past tense, irrelevant, but I knew that the Word, faithfully taught, consistently applied would be used by the Spirit to bring about deep and abiding fruit. We worked on this together, and God has been so good to us.

But through the years, I began to see that while we had developed some strengths; there were weaknesses that needed to be addressed. In fact, the study, the teaching and preaching of the Word and the humble honesty of many of you helped reveal these weaknesses. I began to see that you could not obey the Scriptures' teaching on church discipline without holding to a biblical model of church membership. They go hand in hand. I began to see that counseling, discipleship, and biblical friendship are one in the same. The administration of the church should never function apart from the shepherding of people's lives. An "us vs. them" mentality does not need to exist. We really believe that we are in this together. Leaders should never manipulate and use the flock, and the flock should never manipulate and use the leaders. If we are going to truly honor Christ by reflecting His unity, then we have to have trust in our relationships. Trust is built on speaking the truth, and doing what you say you are going to do. Even when we have had to address problems, we have tried to do in a way that reflects our commitment to what is right. Now, we still have a long way to go, but God has been good to us. I do not tell you enough how blessed I am to be your shepherd. Your desire to hear and follow the Word is the delight of delights. And not all of you get that yet, but I pray and preach and eagerly desire for you to wake up and realize that there is no satisfaction that can compare to having your affections and passions centered on Christ and on the church. You absolutely cannot make a greater investment of your life than to invest into what the Lord of the Universe died for. That is the church.

So, we have been studying 1 Corinthians. This study has been good for me and I believe good for all of us. The Spirit of God through the Word of God brings about changes in the people of God. We should expect to be changed and challenged and stretched by God. He is not satisfied until we are completely satisfied in Him. So, as I have been preaching through this book, I have perhaps more than ever in my life attempted to be sensitive to what the Spirit of God is seeking to do in my life and in our church. My prayer has been, "God show me our weaknesses and help me to lead us in becoming a more accurate reflection of You to this world." That desire has driven me more than once to take you back to the very nature and character of God Himself and to remind us that as followers of Christ all of our relationships are to be a reflection of the relationship that God has with Himself. That is one of the most important ways that we show this world that we are believers.

I have also attempted to show you over and over that God raised up the church family as the greenhouse in which to grow His kids. It takes a church to raise a Christian. It takes the church to develop us spiritually. We cannot do this alone. If I am going to be a fully developed, maturing follower of Christ, I need the relationships in this church to help me become that. That demands humility on my part, because you will tell me things about me that I may not want to hear, but I desperately need to. You may not say it perfectly, but God can and does use that to help me. And, you need others to do that for you. And you need to cry out to God and plead with Him to give you the humility to listen and learn from others.

Do you see now, that is what all of these spiritual gifts are for? These gifts are given for the common good. (12.7) These gifts are given that the church may be edified. (14.5) These gifts are given in order to build up the church. (14.12) These gifts are given for the strengthening of the church. (14.26) The gifts are not given for your own personal, private, power trip with God. There is a community that is in view. OK? I think we get that. But, how is that supposed to take place? Hold on to that question. How is the life of the church community supposed to be seen?

In the past I have understood the church as a group of people who basically gather for a shared public experience. The leaders are responsible to put together the right ingredients for that shared experience so that the audience will be able to walk out at the end and say, "Wow! Wasn't that great, moving, inspiring, encouraging, challenging, funny, convicting" – or whatever. In some ways, it is not all that different from a football game. You go to watch, the cheerleaders beg you to cheer whether you feel like it or not, and if something exciting happens, you say, "Wow, wasn't that great, moving, inspiring, encouraging... - or whatever.

But, I am looking at 1 Corinthians and 12-14 in particular and I see that God has designed the church to function like a body, where every part is connected to the rest. Every part is functioning and doing its part to contribute to the health of the rest. What is that supposed to look like? How are we supposed to do that? The church has to gather for preaching and worship, but did God intend for church life and the function of all of the body to take place in an hour or so a week? Of course not! So, how is this supposed to

take place? These are the questions that I have been asking myself, and the elders have been asking. We know that the preaching and teaching of the Word have to have a pre-eminent role in the church, but that preaching and teaching must produce a community of believers who are living out the Word with each other and connecting with each in order to help each other grow into fully devoted followers of Christ.

You can walk out of here week after week and say, “that was a great service.” But, if your life is not being conformed into the image of Christ, if you are not dealing with your heart issues or the issues of your family, then you are deceiving yourself. That is exactly what the book of James says (1.22). If all you do is listen – you are fooling yourself into thinking that you are something when you are not. So, here is what we need. We need to hear the Word. We need to place ourselves under the preaching and teaching of the Word. But, then we need to take this to the next level. We need the help of other brothers and sisters to apply the Word and live it out. And, we need to help other brothers and sisters apply the Word and live it out. The call to Christ brings with it a call to community. And if the leadership of the church is doing its job, we are helping you live out that community. If this thing called Christianity is really all that it claims to be, then our lives should be extraordinarily different than what they are. But here is where we struggle.

Grandparents, when you talk about your children and your grandchildren with each other, what does the conversation sound like? Think about it! Do you speak about their educational goals, vocational accomplishments, financial achievements, athletic aspirations? Ok...is that it? Do you talk with each other about their zeal for Christ, their passion for missions, their love of the gospel, and their ministry in the church? Do you long to see Christ formed in them, or is Christ and the church, just a means to keep them out of trouble so they can stay on the path of the good life? Do you talk to your own kids and grandkids about what it means to love God, and face the challenge to live for Christ in this culture?

Parents, what are you more concerned about? Your kids grades, your kids athletic goals or Christ being formed in them? Now, think with me, if in real practical, life situations, our conversations and our goals for life are not all that different from anyone else, do we have any right to call this Christianity?

We can scream all we want at the influence of Post-modernity and the politics of religious pluralism which claims that all religions are equally valid, and that no one can claim the true way. But the truth is, if in our lives we are living like the rest of the world, then why should they not conclude that we all sort of believe the same thing anyway? How on earth have we given them a reason to believe if all we want is about \$3 worth of God?

Students, kids, don't waste your life. The suburban dream is a joke and a bad one at that. It never satisfies and there is always another sale that you have to go to another store that you must have and another toy screaming to be bought and then insured. It never ends.

Here is the challenge that I have. How can I as your pastor, and how can we, the elders lead you into becoming a community of believers who are used by God to transform each others' lives? How can we be grandparents, parents, friends, students, brothers and sisters who are ministering to each other at a heart level? How can we develop true NT fellowship so that we become a community of believers to this community? How can we become people who instead of feeling guilty when asked about our study of the Word and prayer, our witnessing, our financial giving and stewardship, our relationship with our family, our thought life, and testimony at work, we are instead growing and seeing improvements in these areas?

Here is the big difference. If church in our definition is only a shared public experience. Then, our message to our world is limited to, "come, see our service." "Come, hear our preacher, hear our music, watch our concerts, attend our Vacation Bible School, send your kids to our kids programs, be impressed, be awed or entertained and hopefully, you will want to come back. The shared public experience of worship through preaching, teaching, singing and the ordinances of baptism and communion are very, very, very important and must not be neglected. But they are not the only means of grace that God has provided in the community of believers. If we only meet together in order to learn, then I fear that we are setting ourselves up for the warning that Paul gave in 1 Cor. 8.1 – "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." You see, in addition to the public gathering of the church God has also designed true fellowship, genuine relationships to help us develop as a true community of love and help. These relationships put our theology on display. This world for the most part does not care what we believe. Most of your neighbors do not give a rip what goes on in here. But, they will stand up and take notice when they see sacrificial love in action. They will stand up and take notice when you live with a personal, settled confidence in Christ.

I believe that the reasons we don't talk about personal matters very well, is 2-fold. 1) No one has ever done that with us so, we do not know how to talk with others very well. And/or 2) We are more attendees at a church than we are true followers of Christ.

Many of you know, this is not a new concern on my part. I have been expressing this over and over. It has been very encouraging to hear so many of you voicing the same thing. In fact, last spring we conducted a rather in-depth questionnaire and so much of this was confirmed in your thoughtful responses. We love our preaching and teaching, but we recognize a need to be more of a family, more of a true community of believers. Relationships like that cannot develop like they should, only through shared public experiences. As we have looked at the one-another's that are given to the NT church: love one another, serve one-another, pray for one another, be hospitable with each other, encourage, counsel, help, and share with one another, we have seen that these are natural, everyday, personal-level activities that ought to be going on with people who are connected with each other. But, when do we have time to connect? How can we have these kinds of relationships in such a busy, busy world?

The Elders are convinced that we must become a church of small groups, so that every member of the church has the opportunity to develop this level of community. In

addition to our public gathering for worship and preaching, there has to be smaller gatherings for encouraging accountability and just plain, deep, loving, biblical friendships. Some of you have been working on this and I am excited about that. We want to take this church-wide. How?

Beginning next Sunday night, Pastor Jerry is going to be laying out a more detailed reasoning for why we need to do this, and then how we are going to accomplish this.

1. Do I realize how critical it is to be a viable part of a community of believers?
2. Am I willing to look at my schedule and examine my investments of time from a more eternal perspective?

At the same time, the leaders of the church have to take a look at the schedule of the church. I think that we unnecessarily complicate things at times. We cannot add more to the schedule without taking something away. We are willing to do that, and are actively working on that. The activities and demands of some of the church things that we do can at times actually distract us from doing some of the things that we have to do.

Becoming a church of small groups does not guarantee that our lives will change. If we only gather for instruction, then we will by default create an atmosphere of knowledge but lacking in love and true fellowship. If we only talk about it, and to that level pretend in our worship, then we will just be one more hype in a world of promises; promising something that we cannot deliver. But ministry to each other on a more personal level helps all of move toward becoming what we desire and need, and yet remain afraid of.

Companies and other organizations are often strangled in meetings. “We are going talk about it” is a line that is repeated over and over, often as a convenience that replaces doing something. Counseling is fine as long as you only talk. Your actions are what reveal that which you truly believe. Cornerstone, God has been very gracious to us. Many of you long for genuine relationships that help you grow in truth, love and humility. You were made for God, and God made us with needs that are met by each other. As this community of believers, lives out true community in Christ, the result will be a healthier, stronger, and truer church.

Perhaps like me you know the song, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so; Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but He is strong.” It was probably the first song I ever learned. In 1949, when Mao Tse Tung declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the country was closed to missionaries, and all Western Christians were forced to leave the mainland. The church has had a very difficult time since. For years little was known about how it was doing. What news did leak out had to be discreet. One message did get out in 1972. It was brief, and to the Chinese authorities, innocuous. It said, “The *This I Know People* are well.”¹

¹Patterson, Ben ; Goetz, David L.: *Deepening Your Conversation With God*. Minneapolis, Minn. : Bethany House Publishers, 1999 (The Pastor's Soul Series; Library of Leadership Development 7), S. 118

I think a similar future is in store for the true church in America. Our message, our ministries will probably have to go underground. The hype, the buildings, the publishing companies and music will belong to the past. This world is no friend to grace. Training the next generation to thrive in those days demands that we help them see what matters and what doesn't – now.