

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

REVIEW: We launched this series because it was the natural extension from our series on the book of Ephesians. In Ephesians we watch God establish His church through the work of Christ. He takes the walking dead and makes them alive; He takes groups that have been enemies for centuries and places them on equal footing before God and in the same entity: the church. And because the church was created by God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, there is certain behavior that typifies a follower of Christ, and certain behavior that followers of Christ are to steer clear of.

We have been looking at a variety of things that come of from this fact that God created the church through Christ's work, and brought us who were dead, to life. So it is a serious matter. These things we have talked about are serious matters.

So far we have looked at taking attendance at church seriously. It is vital to our spiritual health in ways that too many people forget. We looked at taking baptism seriously as a public commitment to Christ. It is not just a hoop to jump through in church, it is a definitive and declarative statement to all that you are a follower of Christ. We looked at church membership, and how it is not a club you are joining. Church membership needs to be viewed in a serious light that this is my spiritual family. Just like I would put lots of time, thought, and prayer before I chose to marry someone, I should do the same about committing to a church family. And when I do commit to a church family, it is just like a marriage - I have responsibilities in the relationship. We looked at the elements in a church service - the preaching, the teaching, the worship, and how those fit into making a choice of a church to commit to. We looked again at baptism simply to say, if taking our own baptism seriously, we should also take the baptism of others seriously and celebrate with them. We looked at the Lord's Supper and ways in which we need to take it seriously. Last week we looked at taking giving seriously. That is giving in all of its forms - giving our service to God, giving our material possessions to God, and how we can take that seriously.

TRAN: Today is our final week in the series. Today we look at taking two other areas of the Christian life seriously which fit neatly under the area of what we call life groups in our church. The two areas to look at today and take seriously are fellowship and evangelism. We will be viewing both of these through the lens of Life Groups and I think you will see why as we work our way through.

## I. Fellowship

- A. This may be the one word that gets thrown around in churches the most, and people actually understand the least

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

1. Almost every newcomer to a church learns the word fellowship within weeks of being a part of a church
2. Which is both good and bad
  - a) Good because it is an excellent word to know when it comes to the Christian life
  - b) Bad because most Christians don't understand its full depth and meaning
- B. So let's back up here for a moment - all emotionally healthy people crave community
  1. It is a simple axiom of life
  2. Christian or not, we crave being in community with other people, and we will go to great lengths to achieve it
  3. So, spiritually healthy people that live in full and complete submission to the Word of God seek that community from their church family
    - a) There are always some that think they can be spiritually healthy apart from biblical fellowship
      - (1) Some think they can not go to church at all, miss the fellowship and still be spiritually healthy
      - (2) Others think they can come to church every Sunday, but not dig into their family and seek the meaningful fellowship they need
    - b) Either way, they are cheating themselves out of true spiritual health and vitality
- C. Many of you probably know the Greek word for fellowship (koinonia)
  1. It was borrowed by the biblical writers to describe the relationship we have with one another in the Body of Christ
    - a) In the secular usage it referred to business enterprises, legal relationships, citizenship, marriage, and friendship
  2. As the biblical writers made use of it for the church family, it is because we all are participants in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
    - a) We have eternal life
    - b) We are partners together, working for God's great kingdom and the fulfillment of the Great commission
    - c) On top of all of that, we each have the Holy Spirit indwelling us
  3. So Christian fellowship is unique - no other relationship quite compares
    - a) Not parents and children
    - b) Not husbands and wives
    - c) Not brothers and sisters, or even close friends
      - (1) All of these relationships share intimacies of earthly life - so that even unbelievers can experience them

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

- (2) Only believers can share in this deep intimacy that we have in Christ
- D. Fellowship or koinonia is often defined by what it is not, but what we just went through is what it is
1. It IS a relationship, a connection like no other connection on earth because it is based on heavenly realities
  2. It is not just socializing or eating delectables in the fellowship hall
  3. This is the problem comes in with fellowship - it is so often confused for socialization
  4. Hopefully this helps
    - a) Socializing is the bigger circle and can be enjoyed by anyone, Christian or not
      - (1) It involves sharing about human life
      - (2) Our struggles our needs, etc
    - b) Fellowship takes place within socializing, but it involves the sharing of the spiritual life
      - (1) It goes beyond the regular parts of life
      - (2) It looks at how that life is affected by our common faith in Christ
  5. Perhaps a practical example to help as well
    - a) Imagine a group of people standing and chatting during coffee hour
    - b) It looks like they are having quite a talk, so you quietly invade the group
    - c) As you do so, you notice they are talking about family life, and some struggles that one of the folks is facing
      - (1) As each person responds, they give a word of encouragement from Scripture
      - (2) Or a piece of advice they found helpful from God's Word or from a Christian book when they faced similar circumstances
      - (3) They were discussing life, but discussing it in a decidedly Christian perspective - we are zeroing in on biblical fellowship
  6. So biblical fellowship can be those moments, formal or informal when we are sharing our lives, and how they relate to our common ground in Jesus Christ
    - a) This can be in a group setting
    - b) This can be with just a few, or even one other brother or sister
    - c) But note that it is in the sharing of our lives and how life relates to Jesus Christ
      - (1) That can mean sharing prayer requests, or answers to prayer

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

- (2) It could be sharing struggles with holding on to our faith because of difficult circumstances, or how God “wowed” us again by meeting us in those circumstances
  - (3) It could be sharing our heart for our kids to grow in their relationship with God
  - (4) It could be in sharing our struggle with sin, or a victory over sin
    - (a) And often we think the “big sins” - drinking, sex, pornography
    - (b) But you will be amazed when you have a godly brothers or sisters that you can share your sins with, how freeing that can be
      - i) Even if it is not a “biggie”
      - ii) Even if you are tempted to be mean to your neighbor that is always a jerk - or you have a bad attitude about being involved in justice issues because of your view of poverty - or you just haven’t been the husband or wife you know you should have been at a given moment
    - (c) In sharing those things, the goal is to gain perspective, to hear from another that you are forgiven in Christ, and what God’s Word says to that
- E. So let me give you a few benefits of fellowship that we sometimes don’t think about - and then we will have to move on because I am taking two big ideas and squeezing them down for one sermon
- 1. You can experience the grace of God in ways you cannot otherwise
    - a) God has put together a multifaceted faith for us
    - b) You experience God through
      - (1) Prayer
      - (2) Communion
      - (3) Your good looking preacher going crazy up here for Jesus
    - c) And you experience Him differently through each of those ways
    - d) Which means that there are ways for you to experience God through fellowship that none of those other ways will ever meet
      - (1) And when Christians actively disconnect from biblical fellowship, they are only hurting their own spiritual vitality
  - 2. You can experience the grace and gifts given to others
    - a) We talk about this around here that God gives all of us spiritual gifts
      - (1) Some have more than one
      - (2) But we all have at least one
    - b) None of us have them all - otherwise we would not need the church
      - (1) So in fellowship with others, I get to experience their spiritual gifts

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

- (2) I get to benefit from what they do so well
  - (3) On mission trips I see some of our folks with gifts of mercy that want to linger and spend lots of time with those hurting
    - (a) Being the administrative - lets get stuff done type, it forces me to slow down and grow in mercy
    - (b) If I were not in fellowship with these folks, I would miss that blessing from God
  - 3. Your practice of spiritual disciplines is encouraged when you are in fellowship with others
    - a) Ever get discouraged in your prayer life?
    - b) Isn't it exciting when someone comes and tells you a wonderful answer to prayer and a blessing they experienced from God through prayer?
    - c) Of course - and then, we seem to find that motivation to keep on praying
    - d) Hebrews 3:13 - in order to encourage one another daily, it assumes fellowship is taking place
      - (1) What happens when that is not taking place?
      - (2) We can become hardened to sin
    - e) There can be no doubt that fellowship is vital to a Christian's spiritual life
  - 4. You experience love in ways you couldn't otherwise
    - a) Did you know that it is impossible to fulfill Christ's command to "love one another" if you are not in fellowship
      - (1) You can have fluffy bunny feelings all day long for people
      - (2) But love is an action word - and that action means you have to be in fellowship with others
    - b) It's good to bring up the idea of love here because just like with love, true fellowship carries risk
      - (1) Just like it is risky to love someone because you might get hurt
      - (2) It is risky to enter into genuine fellowship with them because you might get hurt
    - c) But to modify the old adage, "It is better to fellowship and get hurt, than to never fellowship at all."
- II. On to the second half of this message - Evangelism
- A. Often times when we think of evangelism we think of personal evangelism
    - 1. Some think of door to door, or talking to strangers
    - 2. And personal evangelism is important
      - a) Because I will never have the influence in a person's life that you have

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

- b) So you have to open your mouth and share with them about Jesus Christ, and what Christ has done for you
- 3. So please hear me correctly, I am NOT
  - a) Replacing the need for personal evangelism
  - b) NOT telling you that evangelism has changed and here is how we are going to do it
  - c) NOT in any way taking away from personal evangelism
- 4. What I am doing is de-emphasizing it today in favor of pointing out ways in which the church, corporately, can and should be involved in evangelism
- B. One of the ways in which congregational evangelism or small group (or as we call them, Life Group) evangelism has a benefit going for it is because it is a group, it can declare greater praise
  - 1. Not greater in quality - because all praise to God whether from an individual or a whole group is about what God has done!
  - 2. However, what a group brings is twofold
    - a) It brings praise in greater quantity
      - (1) Obviously with more people should come more praise or testimony to God
        - (a) Just like a choir will sound stronger than a single voice alone
      - (2) So when you have a life group that is talking about their life in Christ, be it praise or fellowshiping about their lives in Christ, it brings a greater sense of glory to God
    - b) The other thing a group does is bring praise and glory in greater variety
      - (1) A non-Christian is no longer hearing of just one single story of praise from one type of person
      - (2) Now they are hearing multiple people bringing glory to God in a variety of ways, and in a variety of circumstances
      - (3) That is powerful
- C. The other thing that congregational or small group evangelism has as a benefit is the display of unity to the world
  - 1. John 17:20-21
  - 2. Here Jesus is praying about us - those that believe in Jesus because of the disciples message
  - 3. Jesus asks for unity just like He and the Father are one
  - 4. The reason He asks for unity is at the end of verse 21 “that the world may believe that you have sent me”
    - a) Realize it or not, unity is an essential part of evangelism

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

- b) To have unity, implies having a group - or at least a group that is associated with the individual that is doing evangelism
- 5. For those that can remember back to the difficult years of this church, that was one of the greatest problems that underlaid all other issues
  - a) Unity broke down
  - b) Largely because American individualism reared its ugly head
  - c) Once that occurred, it was hard for a time for our church to be taken seriously by outsiders because there was no visible unity
- 6. Unity is a key to being able to reach out to the world with the gospel
- D. When you are part of a group effort that brings someone to faith in Christ, it is a real joy for all involved
  - 1. When Savannah Robinson came to faith in Christ, there were several people that were so excited by that because so many people had been a part of that over many years
    - a) Sue Carson was one of the first people over to Savannah's home years ago when her mom died - reaching out with comfort
    - b) Mandy Schapman and the whole Schapman family reached out to them as well - which began lifelong relationships
    - c) Several of the kids in the YG reached out to Savannah, inviting her to YG, telling her about mission trips
    - d) I coached her, and led her in YG - and it was funny because you could watch her absorbing
  - 2. When she finally accepted Christ as her Savior (or as she put it, stopped being a fan and became a follower) there were many tears of joy shed
  - 3. Savannah herself has been mature enough to recognize the number of players involved in her salvation
    - a) She even realizes that it was not those people that saved her
    - b) She said to me once, "I prefer to think of it as God saved me, and He used you to help bring me along"
    - c) That is a wise young lady that is understanding things that many Christians don't seem to get for years
  - 4. Being a part of a team effort is amazing
- E. Being a part of group evangelism also allows you to do one other thing in a stronger way than by doing it alone
  - 1. You can share and display the love of Christ in ways that doing so alone can't
  - 2. Don't get me wrong - the strength of how the love of Christ is shown is really found in the level of sacrifice
  - 3. What I mean is best found in John 13:35 "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

- a) Francis Schaffer, one of the 20th century's premier Christian thinkers said, "we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives us is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians."
    - (1) In other words, one of the greatest defenses of Christianity for being true is when we love on another - truly, deeply, from the heart
  - 4. The other part to this is that unbelievers can excuse one person loving in a manner like Christ as the exception to the rule (the rule they created about what Christians are like)
    - a) But, when that same unbeliever sees multiple people loving him and loving each other - it becomes harder to dismiss
- III. Which this brings us full circle in what we have to say about Life Groups
- A. Life Groups were designed for fellowship but also as means for evangelism
    - 1. Think about the possibilities
    - 2. You invite someone you know that does not know Christ into your Life Group
      - a) They begin to see how you love one another
        - (1) You pray together
        - (2) You genuinely care for one another
        - (3) You share your lives together around the lessons from Scripture
        - (4) You praise God together
      - b) They see that, and that is powerful witness as to the reality of the Christian faith
  - B. Now think even broader
    - 1. What if Life Groups did what the church has done for Community Sundays?
      - a) What if Life Groups found a family they knew and took them on as a means of outreach and sharing the love of Christ?
        - (1) Inviting those folks to Life Group
        - (2) Caring for those folks in meeting needs that they couldn't
          - (a) Be it household chores or repairs
          - (b) Driving to doctors or groceries - etc.
      - b) What happens then?
        - (1) We begin to expand our influence in the community in ways we have not dreamt of yet
    - 2. A little creativity and some work at building some relationships within a neighborhood or with particular families and we could see God at work bringing people to Himself in significant ways
  - C. The series is called taking it seriously
    - 1. Today we focus on Life Groups

# Taking It Seriously - Life Groups

2. Because Life Groups can be places for both fellowship and evangelism
  3. There can be all kinds of reasons for people not to join a life group or start a Life Group
  4. The reality is, if we are taking the parts of our faith seriously
    - a) We want to experience God in all the ways He has designed, including biblical fellowship
    - b) We want to be a part of a group that is making a difference in the community we live in
    - c) Than Life Groups is one way to do both of those things
    - d) That is why we push those
      - (1) If you feel like you have hit a wall or stagnated in your walk with Christ, and you are not in a Life Group, now may be the time
      - (2) If there is not one that meets on a night that works well for you, perhaps consider starting one with another couple and invite some others from church - or your neighbors
- D. Point is - Life Groups are the way this church has chosen to seek to meet those parts of our faith of fellowship and evangelism as a group
1. But those parts need to be taken seriously
  2. And it is our hope and prayer that you will - and that you will seriously consider being in a Life Group