

Why Small Groups? Hebrews 3:12-19
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I am so excited to be embarking on a new year in the life of our church, and I'm very encouraged by what God is doing among us. I'm excited about the new people who are getting involved in the church. I'm excited about the spiritual hunger that I see here, and the spiritual growth that is happening. I'm excited about our vision for the future, and I'm eager to see what God's going to do in 2008 as we continue to pursue that vision and seek His will for us.

This week and next week I want to spend some time talking about our vision for the coming year. You may remember that a year ago, in January of 2007, I preached 4 sermons on the vision of our church. I basically expounded the points that are summarized in our mission statement, which you can see each week on the front of the worship folder. Our mission at Three Rivers Grace Church is: To delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. That's why we exist. That's our purpose. That's our mission.

In those sermons last January I took each piece of that mission statement, and explained the biblical foundation for this mission. The first week was "Delighting in the Beauty of God's Greatness," and our text was Romans 11:33-36, where Paul concludes a major section of his letter with a doxology. He writes, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." God is glorious. He is the greatest Being in the universe. He deserves all the glory and praise, and He will get all the glory. And, in fact, He does everything He does in order to get glory for Himself. God is God-centered. He loves to put His glory on display, and that's the most loving thing He can do for us, because what we so desperately need and what we so deeply desire (even if we don't realize it) is to see God's glory. And that is the same as saying, What we so desperately need and desire is "to delight in the beauty of God's greatness." God's glory is the beauty of His greatness. He is awesome. He is glorious. He is great. And His greatness is beautiful. It's breathtaking. He is great in countless ways. And there is great delight in beholding the beauty of His greatness.

These truths are at the very center of who we are as a church. We are seeking to be a God-centered church. This church is not about us. It's about God, and about His greatness. We're not seeking a name for ourselves, but longing that God's Name would be lifted up in this city. That's the first point of our mission statement. Delighting in the beauty of God's greatness. We are God-centered.

Secondly, "Proclaiming the Truth of God's Word." The text I used in that sermon was 2 Timothy 3:15-17. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (vv. 16-17). To be a God-centered church we must be Bible-focused. God's inspired, inerrant Word is where we go to learn about God's greatness and to delight in the beauty of who He is. We are God-centered and Bible-focused.

Thirdly, we want "to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The passage for that week was Romans 3:21-26, and we saw the God-centeredness of the

Gospel. We don't deserve God's mercy in any way. We can't earn His favor. We are all sinners who deserve eternal punishment. But the wonder of the Gospel is that God made a way to punish our sin without punishing us. He did this by putting our sin on Jesus Christ, and putting Him to death on the cross. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, for all who put their trust in Him. We can't work for salvation, but anyone can receive this gift by repenting of their sin and trusting in Jesus Christ. I would love to talk to you more about this if you have questions. This is the best news in the world, and the most important message you will ever hear in your life. Don't ignore it! If you are apart from Christ, you will spend forever in hell. But Jesus can save you, and He can show you the real meaning of life, and He can give you an eternal inheritance in heaven. This Good News is what we love to talk about here at Grace Church. The God-centered Gospel of Jesus Christ that is revealed to us in the Bible.

The final phrase in the mission statement describes our mission field, "among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world." Psalm 67 says, "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy . . ." (vv. 3-4). This is our God-centered prayer as we pursue urban ministry and world-wide missions. We want the peoples, the nations, the various ethnic groups, to delight in the beauty of God's greatness with us. We want the various ethnic groups in Pittsburgh, and all the people groups of the world, to praise God and rejoice in the Gospel.

To summarize, we are God-centered, Bible-focused, Gospel-loving, and missions-minded. These are the core features that define Three Rivers Grace Church. I encourage you to look up those sermons on the website and listen to them or read them, and think about your own life and your commitment to this church, and think about how you are advancing this mission.

What I want to do this morning and next week is focus on two specific applications of this mission statement for the year 2008. These two applications are not explicit in the mission statement, but they are commitments that flow out of it. They are means by which we hope to advance this mission. The first is small groups, and the second is urban outreach, urban ministry, having an urban presence. The title of the sermon this morning is "Why Small Groups?" And next week it will be, "Why the City?"

So, Why small groups? Why is this so important to us, and how does it help us fulfill our mission as a church? First let me say a few things about how small groups will help us fulfill our mission, and then we'll come to our text for this morning, which is Hebrews 3, and we'll see why small groups are crucially important to each and every one of us.

As I think about our mission statement, and especially our mission field here in Pittsburgh, I see our small group ministry as the main way we're going to expand our influence here. We want to "ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh," and I see that happening primarily through small groups. Small groups can meet in all different places throughout this area, so they have great potential for reaching the various peoples of Pittsburgh, and the various neighborhoods, and college campuses, and the suburbs and towns around us.

It was so exciting to see the things that happened in the small groups this fall. There was great involvement, and there were several people who came to small groups who don't come to our church. Maybe someday those individuals will get more

involved, but whether or not that ever happens, we had the opportunity to study God's Word with them and share the Good News of Jesus Christ. That's one of the great things about small groups, that there are people who may come into your house for an informal Bible study, who would never darken the door of a church building. So small groups are a powerful way to take our influence beyond the corner of Methyl and Hampshire, and go to the peoples of Pittsburgh.

We're going to put a great emphasis on small groups because this seems to be the best way to expand our influence here. We will have groups meeting in various parts of the city, and we encourage you to commit to a group and also be thinking about neighbors and friends and co-workers you could invite to come with you to that group. And Lord-willing these groups will grow and multiply. My prayer is that in the near future we'll need to start more groups. And as these groups grow and multiply and spread throughout more and more parts of the city, we will see this vision being fulfilled, this vision of igniting a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh. That's how our small group ministry relates to our overall vision.

In the remainder of our time, I want us to study Hebrews 3:12-19 (pg. 1002 in pew Bibles). In this passage we're going to learn why each and every one of us needs the care and nurture and encouragement that small groups can provide. It's not enough to listen to a sermon each Sunday. It's not even enough to come to Sunday school and the church service. We need more than that. We need to be involved in each other's lives. We need to be able to speak the truth in love to one another and receive rebukes from one another. We need to pray for each other and hold one another accountable. We cannot live the Christian life alone. We need the support of trusted friends who are going to help us along in the battle.

Read Hebrews 3:12-19

The clear application for small groups is in verse 13, in the "one another" command. We are to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today.'" Then the purpose clause, "that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." We need to be encouraging each other and exhorting one another on a regular basis, because sin will deceive us and overpower us if we're alone. There aren't any lone-ranger Christians. We live the Christian life in community with other believers who help us along the way. I'll come back to this verse, but let's talk about the context of this passage, and the theological foundation for this command.

Notice that there are two imperatives in verses 12-13. In verse 12, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." It's a command to be vigilant in fighting sin. Then the command of verse 13 is to exhort one another. Then notice the word "for" at the beginning of verse 14 and at the beginning of verse 16. These verses provide the foundation for the commands. Fight sin, and exhort one another! Why? That's the question that verses 14-19 answers. And it's a weighty answer. It's a shocking answer. The foundation for these commands involves a very severe warning for those who do not heed them.

In verses 16-19 the author of Hebrews uses Israel as a negative illustration. It's the story of the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and then could not enter the Promised Land because of unbelief. This is an example that teaches us an important lesson about faith and perseverance. The Israelites had experienced God's

power in many remarkable ways, and they were happy to benefit from God's mighty acts. But they did not truly trust God. They loved His gifts, but they did not love Him.

These events that Hebrews 3 refers to are recorded in Exodus 15-17. In Exodus 15 the Israelites are singing and dancing for joy because of the great things God has done for them. God had delivered them from Egypt by sending the 10 plagues, and parting the Red Sea, and then drowning Pharaoh's men. And the people were grateful. But it was only three days later that they were complaining because they hadn't found any water. But then God provided water for them in a miraculous way, and yet shortly later they were complaining again. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3).

The people of Israel liked the miracles that God performed on their behalf. But when the tough times came, it became evident that they didn't really love God or trust in Him. And because of their unbelief, because of their disobedience and rebellion, because they sinned, because they were hard-hearted, God did not let them enter the Promised Land. Hebrews 3:19, "So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief." That generation of Israelites died in the wilderness and were not allowed to enter the Promised Land, because they were unbelievers. They did not trust God in the hard times. They grumbled and complained, and that grumbling and complaining was evidence of their unbelief.

The example of the Israelites is used to support the statement in verse 14. Let's take a close look at what verse 14 says, and then we'll see how it relates to Israel in the wilderness. Verse 14 says, "For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." That's the ESV translation. Here's how the NASB translates the verse, "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end."

This is essentially what the verse is saying, "We have become Christians, if we trust in Christ until the end." The first phrase in the verse is clearly referring to Christians: "we share in Christ," "we have become partakers of Christ." This is what it means to be a Christian. We are united to Christ. We have a relationship with Him.

The second half of the verse is very similar to verse 6 in the same chapter. It says, "but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope." Both of these verses are talking about perseverance. Continuing in the faith. Trusting in Christ all the way to the end, whether that be death or Christ's return. So verse 14 is saying, "We have become Christians, if we persevere in faith all the way to the end."

Can you see the crucial point that this verse is making? Perseverance is absolutely essential. Those who do not persevere in faith are not true believers. There may be individuals who make a profession of faith, get baptized, and attend church regularly. They may even seem to be very fruitful in ministry. But if they turn away from the faith, or fall into unrepentant sin, and if they persist in that, they are showing that they were never truly saved. I read this verse in the NASB because I wanted to stress that the verb is in the perfect tense, and the NASB makes that more clear. "For we *have become* partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." The perfect tense communicates a past action that has continuing effects in the

present. Therefore the verse is saying, “We have become Christians (in the past), if we continue trusting in the future (to the end).”

What is the implication of this verse for those who do not persevere to the end? Some say that those individuals will lose their salvation. Some think it’s possible for a true believer to lose his or her salvation. But if we look at the wording of this verse carefully, we can’t come to that conclusion. The verse says, “We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” Therefore, if we DO NOT hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, the implication is we HAVE NOT become partakers of Christ. If we do not persevere in faith, then we have not become Christians. True believers will never lose their salvation. But for those who seem to make a start in the Christian life and then fall away from the fellowship and continue in unrepentant sin, their lives serve as evidence that they never were truly saved.

Now this is how verse 14 relates to the example of the Israelites. The Israelites had some awesome experiences with God. They could tell some amazing stories about His greatness and power. But verse 19 says they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Similarly, many of us have had awesome experiences with God. We’ve prayed to receive Christ as our Lord and Savior, we’ve been baptized, we’ve attended church regularly, we’ve read our Bibles, God has provided for our needs and answered our prayers in various ways. And like the Israelites who had the Promised Land before them, we have heaven before us. It is the “rest” we hope to enter. It is our Promised Land.

The Israelites by their hard-heartedness showed that they had never truly trusted God. And the same will be true of us, if we make shipwreck of our faith and turn to the pleasures of this world. If we fall away from Christ and follow the path of sin, we will prove that we never were Christians. We will prove that our profession of faith was empty and meaningless and fake.

The foundational truth of verse 14 and the illustration of verses 16-19 serve as the basis for the two important commands in verses 12-13. Verse 12 exhorts us to be vigilant in fighting sin, and verse 13 tells us to exhort one another, and the basis for those commands is, Perseverance is absolutely essential!

This is why I chose this passage for this morning, because it shows us the immense importance of Christian fellowship, the kind of fellowship that we hope to foster through small groups. Heaven and hell are in the balance here. We must persevere in faith, and none of us are able to do that on our own. God has ordained that we live the Christian life in community with other believers, and He uses our brothers and sisters in Christ as means of grace to us.

We need to be vigilant in fighting sin in our personal lives, as verse 12 commands us to do. And then we also need to be involved in the community of believers in a way that enables us to live out verse 13. We need to be exhorting one another every day so that none of us will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Take note of that last phrase, “the deceitfulness of sin.” Sin is deceitful. Sin lies to us. It presents us with some pleasure and says, This is better than Christ. And that is a lie, because nothing is more exciting or joyful or satisfying than living a life for the glory of God. Sin says, It will feel better to hold a grudge against that person than forgive them. Sin says, The world’s plan for sex and romance is better than God’s plan for sex and romance. Sin says, It will

be easier to cheat than to do what's right. Sin is deceitful, and it's so seductive. It promises pleasure and happiness, but it can't deliver on its promises.

That's why we so desperately need each other for encouragement. When we're facing temptations we need fellow believers who are going to encourage us and point us to Christ. When we're going through a tough time and we are tempted to wallow in self-pity and worry, we need brothers and sisters in Christ who will come alongside us and tell us about the goodness of God and the sovereignty of God over all things. We need to hold one another accountable in our fight against sin, and we need to pray for one another and encourage each other. And when we see a brother or sister heading down the wrong path in life and beginning to make some bad decisions, we need to exhort that person in love and help them see the seriousness of their sin. We need to plead with our brothers and sisters in those situations and say, Don't have an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. Don't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

My plea to all of us this morning is two-fold. First, commit to being part of a small group. And secondly, feel the weight of what these groups are about. It's not just fun social time, although I do hope you enjoy your time together. I hope you laugh a lot together. But it cannot be just that. The fellowship in these groups must go deep. The support must be strong. Because sin is deceitful, and the battle against sin is fierce. And we must be exhorting one another and encouraging one another and helping each other along, if we're going to persevere to the end.