

The Easter Challenge 4 - The Challenge of Community
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We're in a sermon series called The Easter Challenge. We've taken the challenge to examine the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We've taken the challenge to change. We've talked about the ways God changes us – through His word and His Spirit and circumstances. Pastor Deb challenged us to build our lives on the foundation of God's Word.

Today I'm preaching on The Challenge of Community. The reason I'm preaching on this is because one of God's greatest tools for changing us is other people!

That's one of the things this quarantine is showing us how much we need each other! As we've called all of our church members over the last month – one of the main things we hear is how much everyone misses each other, misses worshipping together, misses community.

If we stayed in isolation forever – there are many areas of life that would not improve because we wouldn't be aware of them. There are issues in each of us that only manifest themselves when we are in relationship with other people.

So, we won't really change if we are not in relationships with others. Relationships have a way of bringing things out of us that would not be evident any other way.

This reminds me of my early days of ministry when I thought I could change everybody. I was counseling a couple on the verge of divorce. After many weeks of tedious hard work they came in one session and said that they just had the best week of their marriage. My chest swelled up and I thought "Wow, I'm really helping these people." I asked them why they thought things were going so well. I was expecting them to say my counseling was setting them free. Then my big head got deflated when they said the week was so great because the husband was out of town on business all week.

Beloved, anybody can get along with anybody if they're not around each other. It's when we are in close proximity that sparks fly! Sparks do fly in relationships, but that's okay. Proverbs 27:17 says:

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

It's easy to seem holy and righteous when we keep ourselves at arm's length from others. But relationships can bring things up and out of us that we aren't aware of any other way. So – one of the biggest things we do for each other is not just showing each other how to change – but showing each other we need to change! This is why Satan attacks community and church attendance so hard!

I truly believe that the local church is the only hope for the world. We have the truth that people need to hear and I don't know if there's ever been a time in history when God's Church has been so relevant and so desperately needed.

One of the reasons I have such great hope for the Church is that Jesus established it and promised that it would prevail no matter the times or circumstances it faces.

Virtually everyone agrees that no one impacted history like Jesus Christ. And no group of people has impacted the world like the church. Emperors have tried to silence the church. Governments have tried to destroy the church. But it has never worked and will never work because Jesus said in Matthew 16:18

I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Jesus has changed the history of the world and He continues to do so! He has changed the lives of many people here today. And He can change your life and your history right now! One of the ways He does that is through a community called church.

The church is not just a place to attend – it's a place to belong. The church is a family. Ephesians 3:14-15 says:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

We are a family so we help each other in times of need. Galatians 6:10 says:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

The church is not perfect, but we do our best to meet people's needs. We visit them in the hospital. We help them with financial needs. We provide food for the hungry. We've called every member of our church during this pandemic and we've done our best to pray for every need and meet every need.

But here's something I've observed over the years – it's easier to meet the needs of someone who is plugged in to the community of GFC than someone who just attends services here. For example – during the past few weeks we've had some people who needed meals brought to them due to sickness in their families. We had many people help with that and I noticed that the people who helped were almost always in a small group or ministry with the people they helped. It's much harder to get people to sign up to help someone they don't know versus someone they do know. That's one of the reasons you should take the challenge to get connected to the community here at Grace.

By the way – that's not just coming to church on Sunday. Very little connection happens there.

As a church – we are only doing 3 things right now – Sunday services, Wednesday night Bible Study and Small Groups. The best way for you to get connected and stay connected is to join a small group.

Some people just don't get the importance of small groups. So – let me give you some reasons.

1- Small groups are important because they provide a way to meet the needs of the church community.

Our church is full of all kinds of people from all walks of life. There are people with spiritual issues, emotional issues, family issues, relationship issues, financial issues, work issues and addictions or life controlling problems like anger, fear or lust. There are people who are lonely or grieving or hurting. And there are people who are happy and fulfilled.

It can be overwhelming to minister to all these people when their needs are so different. We can't preach to every need every week. We're not even aware of all the needs. So – how do we minister to all these different needs simultaneously?

This problem is not new. It's been faced by the church since the book of Acts. There were major needs in the first church in Jerusalem – but the church was able to meet those needs. Acts 2:42–47 tells us how they did it:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Wow – the secret of the growth of the New Testament church included not just obvious things like teaching and signs and wonders and worship and prayer – but also fellowship and meeting needs in small groups.

2- Small groups are important because they were important to the early church

As a result of their faith and fellowship, people were filled with awe, peoples' needs were being met and people came to faith by witnessing the church in action. That's because the early church had 20/20 vision. I'm basing that on Acts 20:20 where Paul said:

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house...

It is crystal clear that Christian ministry does not just happen in church services, but also in homes and in small groups. Small groups are a big deal to us today because they were a big deal to the early church.

3- Small groups are important because they were important to Jesus

Jesus had a small group. There were 12 people in His group. They were called the disciples.

Some people think they don't need a small group. But if you are a Christian - you are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ - and Jesus had a small group.

If small groups were the way of making and growing disciples in the New Testament, could it be that the same method could be used today? That's why we are taking this biblical truth and starting groups that will minister to different needs. Small groups were and are a big deal to Jesus!

4- Small groups are important because you need a place to belong.

Oh I know, I've said it before too – "I don't need anybody." But we all need relationships and friendships. Did you know that it is unbiblical to say we don't need anyone else. The fact is -- God created us to need each other! We see this in Genesis when God created everything and called it good. However, in Genesis 2:18, for the first time God said something was not good.

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Adam enjoyed an intimate relationship with God. He walked and talked in perfect fellowship with God. This was all good. Yet! In the midst of all the goodness, God said it was not good for man to be alone. Why? Because God created man with the need for human relationship.

We are Biblically incorrect when we say: "God is all we need." If God is all you need then do you need to eat? Do you need water? Or do you need to sleep? God created us with certain needs: for food, water, sleep, oxygen... and other people. 1 Corinthians 12:20-21 says:

But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

God created the church as a body whose members need each other. Although it is incorrect to say God is all we need; it is correct to say that God is the One who meets our needs. However, He designed it so He meets some needs through other people. That requires us to be in community!

Scripture constantly underscores the importance of relationships. In fact, the greatest commandment is to Love God and love people. This is why I see small

groups as a priority for every Christian and every church. Building relationships isn't practical in a crowd of 200 or 2,000. Only in small groups can we develop relationships.

5- Small groups are important because you need prayer and support

Effective small groups pray together and pray for each other. And who couldn't use 6-7 people praying for them on a weekly basis? By being part of a small group, you're agreeing to be prayed for!

In your life, you will face setbacks, distractions, mistakes, relational drama, and doubt, just to name a few. Maybe you're in the middle of one of those times right now. Whatever you're facing, you need the prayers and support of other people.

The writer of the book of Hebrews knew the importance of finding support in others during tough times. He knew that in order to keep going, stand strong, and persevere, his readers—the early followers of Jesus—needed each other. Hebrews 10:25 says:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

This verse highlights our need for community with other Christians. Why? So you can grow in your relationship with God. So you can grow as a parent, son, daughter, friend, employee or coach. So you can go through tough times with people who care about you. That's why small groups are such a big deal.

6- Small groups are important because you need healing

All of us have areas that need to be worked on. And there is an element of healing you can receive here when we pray at the altar. But there is a whole other level of healing found in James 5:16

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Small groups are one of the best places for this to happen.

7- Small groups are important because they provide opportunities for you to be involved, discover your gifts, and use your talents

God has given spiritual gifts to every Christian – including you. He fully expects us to use them. But it's simply not feasible for everyone to use their gifts on a Sunday morning. We can in a small group, though.

8- Small groups are a big deal because they give you an opportunity to minister to others

It's not all about you. It's tempting to think that, but it's just not the truth. Consider this...you may not think you are in great need of friendships, but maybe someone else is. It's not all about you – and your small group can become your place of ministry.

Faith is a personal matter, but it's not a private matter. You are not meant to keep it to yourself. There are no “lone ranger” Christians. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. We're meant to go through life together.

9- Small groups are important because we all need help in crisis times

Life is hard, and being a Christian doesn't automatically fix every problem in your life. We have pressures at home, work or school. There are times we need others to help us through life's difficulties.

The truth is that all of us are going to go through the ringer at some time, in some way. When the tough times come for you, I want your church family to be there for you. When the tough times come for me, I want you to be there for me.

The good news is that there are people going through the same things as you. You don't have to be alone and you can rely on others to help you. There are times we can't do it alone. We need God and we need His people.

Small groups provide excellent support in times of crisis, change, and stress. Many people in our church could testify that they would not have made it through a difficult time if it hadn't been for the support of the church.

And the Bible is very clear about how God intends for His people to grow and have their needs met in the church through small groups. We will never be able to hire enough professional pastors to meet all the individual needs in our family. God never intended for it to be that way!

Small groups are the biblical model of the Jesus and the early church. And we want to follow their example.

Our small group philosophy is called free market ministry. We don't care what the group is as long as it fulfills some part of our vision - Touching Heaven Changing Earth by Experiencing God's Presence – Equipping God's People – Extending God's Kingdom or Empowering the Next Generation.

Small groups are a big deal because God designed us for community. Without community, life just isn't as much fun or fulfilling. And it's not what God designed for us. God designed us to live in community.

Have you ever been in a stadium where the home team won at the last second? When the buzzer to end the game sounded, what happened? The crowd went wild, right? The energy released in that moment was electric. Now imagine that same game with one person in the stadium. Not quite the same effect, right?

It's the same at church right now during this quarantine. It's not the same without you here singing and shouting and saying Amen! That's because things are better when they're done together. When life is lived in community, it's richer. It's deeper. It *moves* you.

So my hope today is that it will move you today to say "Yes – I see the big deal about small groups and I want to get connected." That's my invitation to you right now: small groups are so important that I'm asking you to sign up for one today! You can do that on our website or our app.

Also – your family is a small group. This is a great time to begin having some family devotional time!

Life is difficult and we need God and each other! So, let's be the church. Let's build relationships. Let's meet needs. Let's reach out. Together we can touch heaven and change earth.

For the sake of the health of this church, for the sake of your own growth, for the sake of those we are called to reach, I want to challenge you to get connected to the community at GFC. Together we can touch heaven and change earth!