

Becoming Spiritually Mature through Small Groups

“A New Creation” – Unit III, Session 4

June 24, 2018

Our primary passage of Scripture this morning is from Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, which is found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7. Our passage this morning is found in chapter 6, verses 25-33:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:25-33 (NIV)

So, if somebody were to ask you “what is your primary purpose for existing, for living here on earth,” what would you say it is? Keep in mind, this is no simple question. Our whole life revolves around our answer to that question. I would contend that the reason that we have so many problems in our world today, especially our problems in the United States – like all the gun violence, our inability to solve problems like immigration, health insurance, the health crisis itself, our trillion dollar budget deficit, drug addiction, and especially an ever increasing suicide rate, is because the good majority of people have not come up with an adequate answer to that question.

I am continually drawn back to the title of one of my favorite country music songs, when I first became enlightened by country music, or some might say unlightened, around 1980. The song sung by Johnny Lee was entitled “Looking for love in all the wrong places.” That is the story of most of our lives – we are looking for love, we are looking for fulfillment, we are looking for the primary purpose of our lives, in all the wrong places. We are looking for it in our jobs, in material things, in sports and other idols, in approval from others, in our sexuality, in our families, and most of all we are looking for it in ourselves. Most of our anxiety and addictions stem from the fact that we have not been able to find our fulfillment, our purpose in any of those things.

This might sound like a rather odd beginning to a message which is supposed to be about “Becoming Spiritually Mature through Small Groups,” but hopefully by the time I get to the end of my message you will be able to see the connection.

This morning we are concluding the third unit of our series, entitled “A New Creation.” This unit has been about “Becoming Spiritually Mature.” Becoming Spiritually Mature through God’s Word, Becoming Spiritually Mature through Prayer, last week – Becoming Spiritually Mature through Generous Giving, and today – Becoming Spiritually Mature through Small Groups.

What does it mean to become spiritually mature? Ephesians 4 tells us that is the goal of all Christians, “to become mature.” In fact Paul tells us that the primary purpose of church leaders is to prepare God’s people to become mature:

to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:12-13(NIV)

God’s ultimate purpose for our lives is to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and to reflect the His Kingdom and His reign in our lives.

We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.
2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,
Romans 8:28-29a (NIV)

Call to Worship this morning:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to you name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.
Psalm 115:1 (NIV)

Dallas Willard was one of the great philosophers, Christian theologians and writers of the last half of the 20th century and early 21st century. Unfortunately he died just a few years ago. In one of his books which I am currently reading , entitled *Hearing God*, he wrote:

“God does not exist to solve our problems, we exist to stand up with God and count for something in this world. We must ultimately move beyond ourselves into a life greater than our own – that of the Kingdom of God.”
Dallas Willard

The sad truth is most people do not move beyond themselves. Most people stay on their own agenda and never move on to God’s agenda. Moving onto God’s agenda, moving onto the Kingdom of God, is God’s primary purpose for our lives. That is the primary purpose of the spiritual disciplines – whether it be through reading the Bible, engaging in prayer, giving generously, or participating in small groups. If they don’t move us out, outside of ourselves and onto God’s agenda, then they haven’t served their primary purpose.

I offer that as both an introduction and a warning this morning as we talk about small groups, because small groups have a tendency to turn us inward if we're not careful. They should have an outward or missional focus.

"Small groups" and "being missional" seem to be two of the biggest "taglines" for the church today. Some would say that they are just another fad in the church, here today and gone tomorrow. But both "small groups" and "being missional" are very biblical! But we need to be careful that they are serving their biblical purpose.

Jesus himself modeled what small groups should look like. At times Jesus ministered to large crowds, sometimes well into the thousands, 5,000 – 10,000 on a few occasions. I don't remember where I read it but I recently read that a historical researcher, after researching the number of people who lived in the area where and when Jesus ministered, and taking into account how people traveled in the day, estimated that Jesus came into contact with approx. 65,000 people in his three years of active ministry. Not very many people when you think about it by today's standards. But Jesus knew that he only had limited impact on the crowds. So he broke it down. He had his 12 disciples which was his primary group of men whom he worked with, who he invested his whole life into during those three years. But that core group was a little larger than that as well. There were several women who considered themselves to be Jesus' disciples and close friends, Mary Magdalene, and the sisters Mary and Martha.

But then Jesus had an even more intimate group, a group of three – Peter, James and John. It was those three whom Jesus took up on the mountain to witness his transfiguration. It was those three who Jesus took to the Garden of Gethsemane to be with him in the hours of his greatest need. It wasn't just a coincidence that they were the same three.

Which brings us to two very important sets of questions:

1. If someone were to ask Jesus which one of those groups he considers you to be a part of today, which would it be?
 - a. Would he consider you to be part of the crowd?
The trouble with the crowd in Jesus' day is that they weren't really invested. They were always on the verge of leaving, especially when things got tough, or Jesus' teaching became challenging.
 - b. Would he consider you to be a close disciple – one of his twelve?
 - c. Might he consider you to be one of his most intimate friends, one who he could rely on when the chips are down, at the time of his greatest need, and vice-a-versa?

You see, unlike Jesus' disciples in the days when he ministered here on earth, I think today, with the power of the Holy Spirit available to us, we have the option of being in any one of those three.

2. Who are your three groups today?
 - a. For most of us the larger group would be the people here at church
 - b. Who is your 12? Which group of 10-20 people are you making yourself available to, to spiritually mature and grow in your faith?

You might even have more than one – it might be your Sunday school class, it might be a small group which you are a part of, it might be a group of Christians outside the church?

- c. Who are your 2 or 3 go to people – those which almost without exception should be of the same gender? That is where the discipleship groups are so important.

I will go out on a limb this morning and make two pretty bold statements. One is, if you are only going to rely on the crowd, or just the church, your ability to become spiritually mature is almost impossible. Which is why many people who have attended church every Sunday for almost all of their lives, some for 70-80 years, show very little evidence of any spiritual transformation having occurred in their lives. And my second bold statement is, “without that smaller group, of two or three, your transformation to Christian spiritual maturity will be limited.”

My experience is that many pastors don't even realize it. Several pastors I know don't have a group of 12. It's not the number that is important, it's do they meet with a group on a regular basis for support, fellowship, challenge and accountability? Alex and I are blessed, we have our Pastor Peer group which meets once a month throughout most of the year, we have a couple of different ministerial groups we can belong to, we have our Elder Team, and we can be part of an adult Sunday school class, or small group. Even fewer pastors I know have the two or three that they can go to in a pinch or in their hour of greatest need, to challenge them and to hold them accountable. Hence pastors continue to fall in great numbers, affecting both their own spiritual health and the spiritual health of the churches they serve. Jesus knew something very important when he gave us the example of how best to interact with people for spiritual maturity. But the concept doesn't just apply to pastors, it applies to all Christians.

Small groups are not just important in making us accountable, for fellowship, and for social interaction with others, they are the primary training ground for living out our faith as Christians.

When Jesus was questioned by the Pharisee's, “Of all the commandment, which is the most important”? Jesus answered, The first is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.” Why is loving our neighbor the second commandment? Because loving our neighbors in the way that God desires us to love our neighbors can flow only in a life that grounded on the love of God, both God's love towards us and our love for Him in return, and us trying to live out the Kingdom of God in our lives.

“Love your neighbor!” So who exactly is my neighbor? I would first like to challenge our initial thought of who are neighbor really is and especially who Jesus was referring to. Chances are Jesus was not referring specifically to the people who live right next door to us. They might fall into the category of people Jesus was referring to, but not automatically just because they live next door. After all it says in the Bible that once Jesus started his ministry he had no place to lay his head. During Jesus' ministry he had no permanent home. So who were his neighbors?

Well the English word “neighbor” comes out of an old English phrase which says, “the boor that is nigh thee.” The word “boor” does not mean someone who is boring. It actually is someone

who is much worse than that. The word “boor” means either a peasant or a rude or insensitive person. Any of you live next door to a rude or insensitive person?

Any of you live with a rude or insensitive person? The truth is we can all be a boor, over and over again. Of course the word “nigh” in the phrase “the boor that is neigh thee” just means near. When Jesus used the word “neighbor” as in “love your neighbor as yourself,” he was mostly meaning those who we are intimately engaged with in life.

What Jesus is telling us is that if we want to love the way God intends for us to love, because he first loved us, then it has to move from the inside out. Our most important neighbors often get overlooked. It starts in our own family. They are the ones that we are most intimately engaged in life with. The ones that I am most intimately engaged in life with are the ones who first and foremost I am called to love as myself.

Then I am called to love my church family as myself.

You see, it is much easier to say I love the world, or I love my enemies (at least my perceived enemies), - those that are out there, than it is to love my neighbor – those that are closest to us. The truth is, as fallible, limited human beings, we cannot love the entire world. God can, but we cannot even begin to achieve such a monumental task. I would content that even by thinking we can, or trying to do so, prevents us from loving the people God intends for us to love in the way God intends for us to love.

So how does God intend for us to love those who are closest to us? 1 Corinthians 13 would probably be a good place to look.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
1 Cor. 13:5-7 (NIV)

The love that God calls us to love our neighbors with is a love which always forgives, never gives us, never quits.

You see, it is pretty absurd to think that we can love those that are out there, those that are the furthest from us, those that are the most different from us, those that we claim to be our enemies, when we can't even love those that are closest to us.

Our enemies are most often those we make our enemies, and often they are the ones who are closest to us. Loving our neighbors and loving our enemies starts right here. Why are small groups important? Because the bigger the group, the bigger the church, love becomes pseudo love. It was pretty easy to love all the people I went to church with in my big Catholic church growing up. I only interacted with them for one hour, one day a week, in about as sterile environment as you can get.

But small groups can become “pseudo” small groups when it comes to loving one another as God calls us to love one another, “to love my neighbor as myself.” So, I would really challenge the adult Sunday school classes this morning. How good are you doing with loving one another? How good are you doing with those who are the most different than you? How good do you do when one of the others becomes a boor – rude and insensitive? Can you recognize the times when you become the boor?

Dallas Willard says that “love can only be specific, it cannot exceed our resources or our reach.” Dallas Willard suggests an experiment, a little exercise.

Start by creating a list of the few people that you are most intimately engaged with in life. It should be pretty small, unless you live in a large family. Your spouse, your children, your grandchildren, your siblings, your parents. Then make a list of those in the next circle of degree of engagement. These are close, intimate friends. Willard says this list should probably not contain more than 10-12 names. It might be your Sunday school class, it might be your co-workers, or it might be your neighbor who does live next door to you. Or it might be a combination of those.

The whole idea of the list is to recognize that beginning to love your “neighbor” as yourself requires us to start thinking small, not big, and those who are closest to us, not far out.

Once we can love them the way God intends for us to love, then we can start moving out.