



September 11, 2016

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

It was a wonderful Sunday for Back to Church with baptisms and a Sunday School high energy rally! Let's bring that energy into our homegroup year.

Paul provides an important perspective on our fellowship together as believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ when he addresses the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. Paul's main teaching to the elders for the church is one of warning, *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock*. His concern is revealed when he warns that the threat will come from both outside and inside the flock, *from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them*. The threat that he is warning against is not direct opposition to the faith, but being drawn away from the faith.

Paul's understanding is that spiritual growth and health do not inevitably follow once people believe the gospel and are baptized. Just as the spread of the gospel is opposed, the spiritual growth of those who have become the people of God though the gospel will be opposed as well. The strategy of the enemy will be to draw people away from the power of the gospel in their lives so that they do not grow into people who reflect God and his character. We do not have the power in ourselves to become like Christ. That power resides in Christ and the good news is that we can have that power operating in our lives. That is why Paul says in v 32 *I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified*. It is only the grace of God that is able to build us up into Christlikeness. And it is not something we earn, it is an inheritance, something that has been earned for us. But we do have a role to play in how connected we are to that power source.

Jesus teaches to this in the well know passage in John 15, *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*. Paul's concern is for the Ephesian church to abide in Christ and not be drawn away from the vine, which is the source of fruitfulness. Jesus also teaches about spiritual growth in the parable of the sower and the soils (Luke 8). Jesus explains that the seed, that which is the source of the crop, is the word of God. And while the seed is the same in every case, the outcome is different depending on the soil. The different soils are the different people and how they respond to the word of the kingdom. And two of these types of people do initially respond to the word, one even with joy, but ultimately fail to be fruitful in their faith because they either fall away under adversity or are distracted by the cares of the world and deceitfulness of riches and pleasures.

The image of a plant being choked by thorns speaks powerfully to our busy lives. The plant is choked because the necessary nutrients and sun light that the plant needs for growth is being used up by the thorns. As we look at our busy lives, we are challenged by asking, is time and energy going to thorns that is needed to nurture the plant of our faith? Navigating this is

challenging and it is also personal. We all have different circumstances and so there is no one size fits all teaching or application. Homegroup is a place where we can work this out together, sharing our circumstances and praying for one another so that we remain alert to those things that drain our time and energy. We need a place of safety and trust where we are able to *"to stir up one another to love and good works."* (Heb 10:24). The only other place this word *to stir up* appears is in Acts in reference to the conflict between Paul and Barnabas on whether to take Mark on their second journey. It is translated there as a "sharp disagreement". So it has the idea of being strongly provoked, the kind of provocation that leads to action. We need that from each other.

We also need encouragement, love and support from each other. This is a featured aspect of Christian community in Scripture. Only the emphasis is on giving love and support, not receiving it. Paul directs the Ephesian elders to a saying of Jesus, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* when he presents himself as a model of working hard to *"help the weak"*. The weak are best understood as those who are weakened by afflictions. So the afflictions that people in homegroup have or encounter during your time together are opportunities to practice this important element of fellowship. We naturally are protective of our needs and reluctant to take on other's burdens. But there is something very important to this idea of serving one another, and bearing one another's burdens. In John 15, Jesus links abiding in Him with keeping commandments and then says, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends."* In Galatians 6, Paul writes about the Spirit and the flesh, *Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* Look at what he then focuses on as an application of this teaching. *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.* Doing good to one another is sowing to the Spirit.

The relationships that we have with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ are precious to our Lord and Heavenly Father. We have the opportunity to deepen these relationships in homegroups to the extent that we are able to invest in them with our time and energy. Among other things, we can encourage one another to abide in the grace of Christ and bear one another's burdens. Let us be alert to the ways that the enemy will attempt to draw us away from this source of grace in our lives.

Pastorally Yours,
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