

Knowing God

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to the book of Matthew 28.

What we're doing today is not our normal practice. As you've heard me say before, the regular diet of our church is what's called expository preaching, or preaching that aims to take a passage of Scripture and explain it and apply it to our lives. That is our practice for several reasons, not least of which it helps us to hear what God would have us to hear and not our own agenda.

However, from time to time, it can be wise and helpful for us to take a different approach and think about the teaching and application of the Bible as it relates to a question we need to address. One of those questions that needs our attention has to do with our mission – what is it that we're trying to do as a church? You hear it from us every week, we exist to help people know God, grow together, and serve others.

So for these next several weeks, we're going to take those elements of our mission and look at them piece by piece. And I hope to accomplish a few things with these messages:

- 1) remind us about what we're aiming for,
 - a. I want us to see how our programming and activities should be working together and pulling in the same direction
- 2) help us evaluate how we're doing in these areas
 - a. We don't do everything perfectly – in fact, everything needs work.
 - b. We also want to hear from you – in your grow groups and in our services we have some questions we'd love to have you help us answer
- 3) give you an opportunity to hear from me specifically about how I understand these subjects as we near the time when you will have the opportunity to vote on me as the lead pastor.

I get that this can be kind of weird – I really not trying to 'campaign' for anything here. That idea is silly to me – that a man would try to earn votes for the calling of shepherding a church. But nonetheless, I hope that it will be helpful for you to hear from me about what we should be doing as Cornerstone Baptist Church in Lafayette, IN.

So in some ways, this may feel a bit like a ‘state of the church’ address. And like the state of the union, you should feel free to stand and applaud if you feel really moved today.

In many ways, I hope what we say today is not new for you. At the same time, I hope that you find some challenges here that God may want you to consider as we move into this new year together as a church.

Read Matthew 28:16-20

Intro

Growing up a Boy Scout, we had to learn to use a compass.

(show picture)

Now, I’m not an expert at using a compass, but one of the lessons that I remember is that you would do the work to line yourself up in the direction you need to go and then start walking in that direction. But you couldn’t just assume that if you started out correctly that you’d end up where you planned.

Why not? Because inevitably it’s easy to drift off course. Or sometimes, there’d be an obstacle or something would cause you to move in something other than a straight line. So you had to regularly look at your compass and adjust course if needed. Otherwise, you may end up being someplace that you don’t want to be.

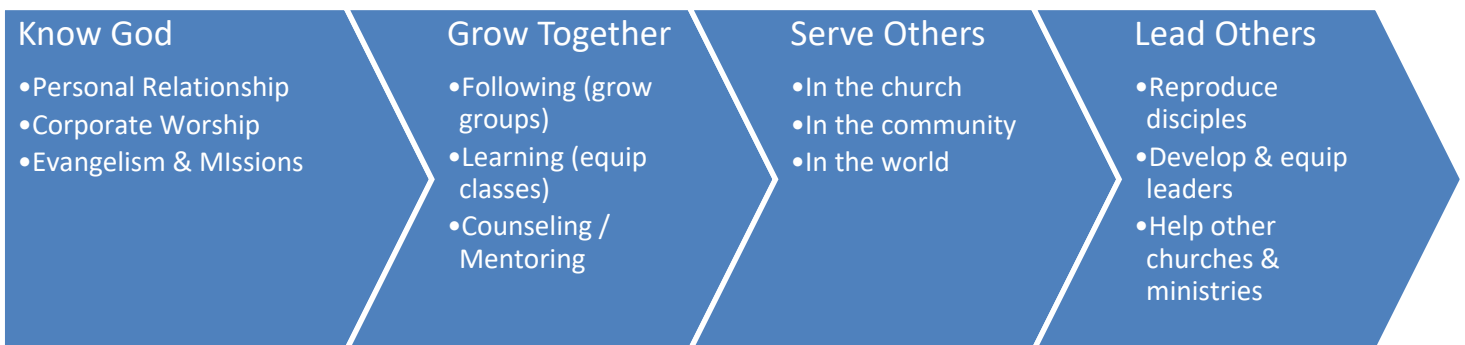


For example, if our mission is to promote holy living in a perverse culture, then we can end up doing a lot of work battling against sin but not sharing the good news of Jesus. Or if we have as our mission promoting justice, it can be tempting to pour all of our energy and resources into helping with education and battling poverty or the criminal justice system and lose focus on the main thing that God has called the church to do. Or if we only every seek to win converts or get people to make decisions for Christ and don’t help them grow in their faith in a local body of believers, then we may end up with a community of folks who are confused about what it really means to follow Jesus. All of these things can be good (indeed are good) for Christians to work toward, but I want to suggest that the church has been given a particular task that we ought not to neglect and should not outsource to some other group.

So what is our trajectory? Where are we aiming? We're aiming at the task that Jesus called us to – to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that he commanded. As a church, we have used the phrases “Know God, Grow Together, and Serve Others” as a way to capture the core elements of this Great Commission. And there's a fourth one, which we'll talk about in a few weeks, that we've called “Lead others” which is a way to describe how we are to help reproduce this mission in other people, such that we make disciples who make disciples.

So here's one way to picture this:

Make Disciples



So that's the whole thing, and how I see them relating to one another. But the question that we need to answer today, in order to understand this first part of our mission, is a relatively simple one: What does it mean to know God?

I want to talk about the answer to this question under two headings: personally and corporately. What does it mean to know God personally (we'll spend most of our time on this one)? And what does it mean to know Him together as a local church or corporately?

Knowing God Personally

To answer the first part of the question what does it mean to know God personally, there are many places we could go in the Scriptures, but I want to draw our attention to a few places in the gospel of John, and show you why knowing God is step one.

Let's begin in **John 20:24-29**

24 Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

26 Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." **28** Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" **29** Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

In this story, Jesus has resurrected from the dead. Some of the disciples have seen Jesus alive, but others weren't there – like Thomas. And in His mercy, Jesus doesn't chide him for his lack of faith, but offers him assurance, saying "It's ok – you can touch me," and "do not disbelieve, but believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus is talking about us – we who have not seen Him with our eyes, but have yet believed. John includes this story so that we would be strengthened in our belief. That's why he wrote his whole book. Look at what he says next, as he gives the purpose statement for his whole gospel...

John 20:30-31

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; **31** but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John writes so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the King. And that by believing we would have life in His name. His whole book is aimed at that – John wants us to have life by believing in Jesus. So keep that in your mind – the way we have life is through believing in Jesus.

Next look at John 3 with me...

John 3:16-17

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Here Jesus is speaking with a religious teacher, one of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. And is telling him that he must be born again. Nicodemus doesn’t understand, and Jesus gives him these words – God gave the Son out of His great love for the world so that whoever believes in the Son should have eternal life.

Here we learn that belief in Jesus results in eternal life. Remember John writes his gospel so that we might believe. And to believe is to have eternal life. And that invites the question, what is eternal life? What does that mean? Well, there’s one more step that I want to show you, flip over to John 17.

This is known as the High Priestly Prayer. In this chapter, we get a glimpse into the heart of Jesus as He prays to the Father just before He is betrayed and led away to be crucified. In some ways, this is the true Lord’s prayer, the one the Lord Jesus prays Himself.

John 17:1-3

17:1 When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, **2** since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. **3** And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

What is eternal life? It is to know God and Jesus Christ. And what does it mean to know God? We know God through belief in Jesus, even though we have not yet seen him with our physical eyes. And what do we believe about Jesus? That He is the Christ, the one who comes from the Father, who is God Himself, who gives His life as a ransom in the place of sinners, so that we might be born again. Not because we deserve it or because we’ve earned it or because we are somehow worthy in ourselves, but because God so loved the world.

This is the heart of the Christian gospel. You see how these things are connected? To know God is to have eternal life. To believe in Jesus is to have new life in Him.

You've probably heard the phrase, "to know me is to love me?" maybe you use that one yourself... Well, to know God is to believe in Him and have a different kind of life – an eternal one. It's a life 'unto the age' – life that comes from knowing God personally as we will even more one day in heaven.

And that's where it all begins for us as a church. By saying that we want people to know God, we are saying that we want to see people come to life! We want to see people born again! We want to see people know what it is to experience the eternal life of knowing God for themselves. And that starts right now – it's a now thing, not just something that we'll experience in heaven some day off in the future.

And that brings us to the first question we need to ask ourselves – do we know God? Do you know God? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you have eternal life?

Friend, if you're here this morning and you don't know for sure that you have eternal life, I would love to talk with you about that. Don't leave before getting that settled. We want you to know the joy of knowing God for yourself.

We sometimes ask, "Do you know God or do you just know about Him?" What I mean when I ask that is to challenge us to examine whether or not we have a vibrant relationship with God. It's not just a question aimed at making you feel bad because your relationship with God isn't like your relationship with your spouse or your friends.

When I think about how people know God in an ongoing way – it doesn't always look the same. We come to Christ the same way – by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That's the only way that sinners can be justified and made right with God. But our ongoing relationships with God – the way that we know Him and experience God in our lives may look slightly different from person to person.

Let me give you a few examples – there are many more. For some, their relationship with God is experienced mainly through prayer. They pray often and deeply, and they

see and recognize God answering their prayers and changing their own hearts and perspectives as they pray and reflect on how God is involved in their lives.

For others, they see and know God in creation and enjoying and worshipping God as they experience the beauty of the world and other people and the things that people create – they know God in the way they have an ongoing expression of gratitude and wonder about who God is and what He has done.

Still others experience God through deep study of the Bible and theology, puzzling over the mysteries of the faith and having conversations about the way God has worked in the past and how we can speak accurately about Him.

Others know God as they serve and engage in ministry that meets needs or seeks to reach people with the love of Christ. And they are drawn close to God as they make sacrifices of time and resources to serve others when the only one who sees may be God in heaven.

Friends, we need all of these elements in our relationship with God. But don't be discouraged because it seems like everyone else 'gets it' and you don't. We're all in process. We all come to know God the same way – by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone. But our relationship with God will look different for each one of us. And that's a good thing and it's part of why we need each other.

Cornerstone Baptist Church is committed to knowing God. We want all people to have eternal life through believing in Jesus that they might know God. That's our commitment. That's job one.

And let me say this too, if you're a Christian here, and you're not committed to a local church or in the process of pursuing membership someplace or seeking God's will in where He would lead you to join, let me ask you, "what's stopping you?"

Church membership is simply the mutual commitment that we make to one another. It's saying, this is where we plant ourselves and seek to help one another make disciples.

The process of membership here is pretty simple – there's a membership application that you can fill out online, or we can print it out for you if you'd prefer that. Once you

do that, you'll meet with a pastor, and we just want to hear how you came to know Christ, and go over our beliefs and how we do things as a church, answer any questions you have. And then it's a simple church vote, usually near the end of one of our worship services, so that we can all affirm our commitment to you as a brother or sister. If you want to talk about that, we'd love to do that with you.

Now, let me give you a few challenges or observations or some remarks about where we are in the days in which we live. I don't have Bible verses for these, and so take them for what they're worth – which may not be much. You may disagree with some of what I will say here, and that's fine – there's room for disagreement. But I want to share with you about how I see some of the challenges and opportunities ahead of us as a church.

You would probably agree with me that our culture has changed and is continuing to change at a rapid pace. What does that mean for us? Three things:

Our evangelism needs to adapt

It means that our efforts at evangelism may need to look different in some ways than they did in the past. For example, there were techniques that were taught and were effective in many ways that may not be as effective in the years to come. Things like the direct questions of evangelism explosion which taught people to ask, "If you died tonight, do you know where you would go?" Knocking on doors and asking those kind of questions is going to be seen as increasingly hostile. Now, I'm so thankful for the way that God worked through those methods. I know some of you came to faith in Jesus through these kinds of ministries, and I praise God for that. But I think we're going to have to adapt our approach in the years to come.

A few years ago, I was on a missions trip in Italy. And the Italian people are well off financially, but culturally they are largely secular. You might think their country is Roman Catholic, but less than 3% attend mass on any given Sunday. Belief in God is seen as backward and as an excuse for bigotry and hatred and prejudice against others – sound familiar? In many ways, our community is downstream from the secularization that has happened in Europe and in large cities. Europe was once the center point of Christianity, but it's that way no longer. And the church in America may be headed in that same direction.

So we were in Italy, and we were talking with this pastor about a meeting space for their church. And he was explaining to us how difficult it was for their church to get zoning approval for a space to meet as a church because they are viewed as a cult – as a fringe group who teach ignorant things and promote ideas that are harmful to society. When we asked about doing community events like a vacation Bible school, he said that community members would never trust the church to watch their kids. So they had to think of other ways to show the love of Christ and earn a hearing for the gospel.

I think those kinds of stories that are happening in Italy and in many parts of our own country, particularly in urban centers, will become more frequent in the years ahead. Many people in our community have beliefs about the church that are tied to abuse or trauma or mistreatment. Many people are suspicious of the church.

As a result, I think the kind of ‘cold conversations’ in which we directly confront people about their need for Christ may happen – and I hope they do! But I think the primary way people will come to Christ is likely going to be through relationships with Christians and seeing the love of Christ in the church. Our culture is decaying in many ways and crushing people with its emphasis on sexuality and self-fulfillment. The church has an opportunity to speak the truth in love to those people and create space for them to see the goodness of the gospel message. And that leads me to a second observation...

Effective evangelism will need to rest on the hard, slow work of loving people

For us to help people know God, we need to work hard at genuinely loving people. We must love people even when they disagree, even when they hate us, and even when it’s costly. We need to build relationships with others in a world in which disconnection and loneliness are more prevalent than ever. We’re going to have to find creative ways to encourage people and be a blessing to them without treating them like they’re just projects or a means to an end for us. We can’t use people and discard them and tell ourselves that we’re loving people. We need to take the time to get to know our neighbors and co-workers and show genuine compassion and love. And then we may have opportunities to speak the truth of the gospel.

Growing up, my dad would sometimes play motivational tapes by Zig Zigler, “People won’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

We in the church have sometimes gained the reputation of being judgmental know-it-alls, and sometimes we deserve it. We need to remember, our goal is not to 'win' arguments but to persuade people that Jesus is who He says He is. We're not trying to trick people with bait-and-switch tactics. We want to be able to say what Paul says in

2 Corinthians 4:2

But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

We want to love people with joy and sincerity, and we want to openly and boldly proclaim the gospel message because faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ. Effective evangelism will rest on the hard, slow work of loving people. #3...

The home is a critical setting for helping the next generation know God

It is hard to raise a family today, isn't it? It is difficult to try to shepherd our kids and raise grandkids amidst all the pressures of living in our modern culture.

And if you look at the statistics from the last several decades, the number of young people who are walking away from the church is alarming. Speaking as part of the larger church in the U.S., we have not been effective at passing on the faith to the next generation. There are encouraging stories out there for sure, and there is a lot of reason to be hopeful that the generations following us will be strong in many of the ways that we are weak. But there are also great temptations to give in to the pressures of the world and the self-focused philosophies being promoted everywhere you look.

So what can we do? We need to remain committed to keep the main things the main things. That means prioritizing our families. Fathers – your children need to spend time with you. They need to hear from you. They need to play and work with you. Mothers – your children need your wisdom and care. They need time with you. Moms and dads – you need to spend time investing in your marriage. What your children see will have far greater impact than what you tell them you believe. If you don't have kids at home, you too have a role to play in helping invest in the next generation. Whether it's nieces and nephews, grandkids, or the children of the church – you have something valuable to contribute so that the generations to follow us will know God.

The world out there needs the influence of Christians, and we should be watchful and discerning about what's happening in our day. But we dare not neglect the opportunities and responsibility that we have in our homes to help the next generations know God.

So those are three statements from my heart about how we can help others know God personally in 2023 and the years to come.

Knowing God Together

Lastly, let me speak for a few moments on the question, "What does it mean to know God corporately or together as a church?"

I believe the primary way that we know God together is as we experience Him in worship together, particularly on Sunday mornings. So how do we know God in worship? We know God in worship because we center all that we do around the way God has spoken to us. I believe that God wants us to know Him, and so He has revealed Himself to us. How has He done that? How do we know what we know about God?

It's through the Word of God. God speaks His Word, and His Word then helps us know Him. So in our worship services we seek to do five things:

Read the Word – we want to hear from God and let His Word form us and shape us

Sing the Word – we want our songs to reflect the truths of Scripture and give expression to our praise, adoration, thankfulness, and even lament before God

Pray the Word – we want to talk to God together as a church family in worship of God and asking for God to meet our needs in His will

Preach the Word – we want our sermons to be in line with the teachings of Scripture. Whoever is speaking, we want the Bible to be front and center.

See the Word – we celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper as visual and physical reminders of the gospel message. They are symbols that we participate in together in obedience to the Word of God.

Our plan, Lord willing, is to spend some time later this year in a sermon series on worship, thinking about what we do when we come together to worship God and why we do it.

So we want to help people know God together as a church when we worship Him.

But ultimately, it needs to be said that we know God because He knows us...

The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians a warning about turning back to the practices that they used to follow before they knew God.

He writes,

Galatians 4:8-9

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. **9** But now that you have come to know God, *or rather to be known by God*, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

Paul says, don't go back to the idols of the past! You have come to know the true and living God! Or rather, you are known by God. It's not that you've figured out salvation; it's that God has freed you from your former slavery to sin.

Brothers and sisters, the church isn't just a club that rallies around a common purpose – we are a people who have been saved by the grace of God. We have been formed by the Word of God; we are a redeemed people who seek to bring glory to God and enjoy Him forever. We are now fellow pilgrims, traveling through this hard life alongside one another. Cornerstone seeks to be a community of grace because God has known us and loved us and given us hope.

Yes, we have a mission – we want to spend our days helping people know God, grow together, and serve others. But we do that ultimately because God has known us, and grown us through His Spirit, and served us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's all about Him, from the first to the last, so that God gets all the glory.

Let's pray...

Survey

You can fill it out via the online code or use a paper copy

It can be anonymous, if you'd like us to know your name you can do that

Grow Group Questions

1. Do you have a story about how you came to know God personally?
2. Do you feel confident in your ability to share the gospel message with a friend, co-worker, neighbor, etc.? What keeps you from sharing the gospel more frequently?
3. Does our church share the gospel effectively? How could our church help one another in sharing the message of Jesus with others?
4. Pastor Nathan made three statements about helping others know God – do you agree or disagree with any of them? What other observations would you make about evangelism today?

Our evangelism needs to adapt.

Effective evangelism will rest on the foundation of loving people.

The home is a critical setting for helping the next generation know God.

5. What are some of Cornerstone's strengths in our worship services? Are there things that we could do better?
6. How could Cornerstone become better at helping people know God?