

Good morning and Happy New Year. The beginning of the year is always fun. You've got a couple extra pounds to keep you company. You sort of get a clean start. And it's a natural time to do new things. Historically, January has been a month where our church has kicked off different programs and ministry efforts. But this is no ordinary beginning of the year at Fellowship. As many of you have heard over the last few months, and as Gary talked about last Sunday, we have just begun this new journey God is taking us on, a new direction, and one that is all about purpose. We're going to continue that conversation this morning.

Last week Gary gave us the purpose of God and man: 1) That God's purpose is the joy of man. And that, as we have joy because of God, we can't help but praise him. 2) That man's joy is the purpose of God, that each of us will experience joy as we discover and live out our purpose from God. 3) The purpose of God is to repurpose my life, that God has made us alive in Christ and made it possible for us to live out the purpose he has for each of us. And that's why we've started down this path of **calling each other to live out our God-given purpose in Christ every day.**

I don't know about you but, when I hear that mission, I get fired up. It's personal, it's intentional, and it's active. I get excited to be a part of a church where everyone is living on purpose and living with joy. But how do we do that? What is it going to take for us to live out that mission? The answer is right here in this room. It's ok. You can look around. The answer is all of you. You see, the God who gives us the gift of salvation also gave us the gift of each other to be partners in pursuing our purpose.

**How inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who by God's will are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians...Let him who has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together***

Is that the way you feel view the family of God? We do, and we want to help put you in a position to call each other.

That's why, in 2017, we are calling anyone who considers Fellowship Dallas their church home to join a Life Group. A Life Group is a weekly gathering of a small number of people who live on purpose with God and each other. Life Groups will become the hub for discipleship in our church, where we come together to dig into who God is and the purpose he has for our lives.

Up to now, we have had home churches, small groups, and community groups. Many groups have had tremendous success in forging friendships and fostering people's relationship with Jesus. I talked to one long-time member of Fellowship and he calls his group the gift that keeps on giving. But while groups is something we've done, I don't believe groups is something we are. If we are going to live out our mission, groups have to become part of our identity as a

church. Life Groups is not simply a change of name to an already existing program. It's a transformation of how we do ministry and how we do life together.

And if we are making a move of such magnitude, we need to turn to Scripture to determine how to do this right. The New Testament contains nearly 50 passages called the "one anothers." These passages are instructions for how we are supposed to live with our Christian family. They include the commands like love one another, forgive one another, confess to one another, pray with one another, welcome one another, and be devoted to one another. But there's a particular one in Hebrews 10 that I want to focus on this morning.

**[Hebrews 10:24-25] <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**

The only way we fulfill our mission is through devoted participation in the fellowship of believers. While all of the "one anothers" are important and should be evident in our groups, I believe this passage gives us the most clear direction in how we are to live out our mission.

The first thing it shows us is that **calling each other is intensely relational**. It's a two-way street. It's an interdependent arrangement where we all have something to contribute and something to receive. To live out our mission, you will become one who calls AND one who's called. But it's not going to happen if we stay strangers.

In most of our Bibles, V.24 probably says something like "consider how to stir up one another...", but the original order of the words is actually "consider one another." Our mission demands all of us to give concentrated attention to each other, to become students of one another. That's why we have to be in gatherings where we can share our stories and truly get to know others and be known by others. Without that, we'll come up short in our mission. You ever been given "advice" by someone you didn't know very well? How'd you receive it? Calling without relationship is just meddling. I can only call someone I know.

Relationship is also vital because of the spirit of our interaction. The writer of Hebrews uses a fascinating word that, when you understand it, may take you aback a little. In the ESV, it's translated "stir up." NASB-stimulate, NIV-spur, KJV-provoke. It's a word often associated with anger or disagreement though, here, it's meant positively. This passage is not asking us to merely provide suggestions on how others should live. It's calling us to be a catalytic force in someone else's life. Without the undergirding of a relationship, calling each other is an action of intensity that becomes offensive. But within a relationship, it becomes invited and welcomed when given in the spirit of helping that person live out their God-given purpose. These are the kinds of relationships we know we can develop in Life Groups.

But to what end? The text tells us love and good works. You know why we have to spur each other to love and good works? Because they don't happen by accident. It doesn't come naturally. We need help!

Last week we heard that God's people ARE God's program. If God's people are God's program, we need a godly attitude towards them. That's love. That's the character of Christ manifesting in us. And as we have the attitude of love, it becomes the foundation from which we do good works, works all Christians should do and works specific to my purpose.

I'll never forget the time I asked one of my groups for some help on dealing with a difficult situation. It was going to include a unpleasant conversation and some changes for the person I needed to engage. I had it planned out and just wanted to run it by them in case there was something I missed. I finished presenting my plan and said, "So, what do you guys think?" All I got back were blank stares, each waiting for the other person to speak first. And finally, they did, telling me my approach was not all that loving, not all that good, and they set me straight. I was so thankful for their stirring up of me! But not of that happens unless we have a relationship with each other.

If we are going to build and live in these interdependent relationships, we're going to have to consistently show up. **Calling each other is devotion.** Presence precedes mission. We're going to have to be together to call each other, and the writer of Hebrews knows this. At the beginning of v.25, we're cautioned against "**neglect(ing) to meet, as is the habit of some.**" Lack of participation has always been a threat to purpose. It's a threat because it presumes two things.

First, it presumes that you are ok without us. It's the belief that you can know God fully and become all that he has for you without the people of God. We see throughout the Bible, though, that some of the most difficult times come when someone is alone and isolated. A silent Adam leaves Eve to fend for herself against the serpent, ultimately leading to sin entering the world. David, while alone and running from Saul and certainly not looking like he's going to be God's anointed King of Israel, says in Psalm 142 "There is none who takes notice of me...no one cares for my soul." A dejected and despondent Elijah is at his lowest when he's alone in a cave, believing he's failed in his mission, begging God to take his life. Last fall we studied 2 Timothy, where an imprisoned and abandoned Paul is trying to finish well, but you can't help but hear the loneliness in his words. Even Jesus, who was on his way to fulfill his purpose at the Cross, lamented that his brothers had fallen asleep, essentially leaving him all alone.

Second, a lack of participation presumes we are ok without you. It's the belief that you have no role to play in the Church or that your impact would be minimal. It doesn't matter whether or not you show up. But God's Word doesn't see it in that way and, in fact, paints a pretty stark picture for those who don't participate. "Neglect" is more literally "abandon."

This past Monday, NBA star Derek Rose, without communicating to anyone, left New York and missed that night's game. He just didn't show up. And this group of men called a basketball team, whose mission is to win basketball games, had to fend without him, and he was skewered in the media. They lost, by the way.

Listen, Jesus is going to build his church with or without us. But he's established it in such a way that everyone is necessary. I don't think the writer of Hebrews uses "neglect" or "abandon" to bring us to shame, but instead to communicate the magnitude and importance each and every one

of you play in the body of Christ, in this church, and ultimately in your Life Group. Your participation in a Life Group is vital.

Life Groups are not a slick program created for the mega-church age. It's the way the body of Christ has always gathered. In the Acts 2, Luke gives a summary report of what these new followers of Jesus, who make up the Church, are doing.

**[ACTS 2:42, 46] <sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.**

From the beginning of the church, God's people have spent their time hearing God's Word preached (apostles' teaching) AND investing in relationships with other Jesus-followers (the fellowship), who are their brothers and sisters in Christ. Their days included attending corporate gatherings at the temple and smaller, more intimate gatherings in their homes.

If we take that to heart and see it as our model, we're going to have to acknowledge that Sunday mornings are not enough. What happens in this room isn't going to get you there by itself. Don't get me wrong. Sunday worship is a beautiful thing. The corporate gathering of God's people for the praise and worship of God, and the public proclamation of his Word for the instruction of its hearers, has been and always will be a vital aspect of someone's spiritual life and a foundational practice of Jesus's Church. But it's not relational. It's one-way communication. And a sermon can only call you so far. Our devotion must go beyond the hearing of God's Word and extend to the living out of God's Word with each other. We have to live life together.

Now, all this talk of spurring and provoking and doing so persistently and devotedly may make us conclude that we are God's chosen battering ram or cattle prod to get our brethren in line and on the move. In fact, when we were crafting our mission statement and wrestling with the words, we had some pushback on the word "calling". And I think I figured out why. I've heard many people abbreviate our mission statement by saying that we're "calling each other out." We're not calling each other out. We're "calling each other to live out..." Here's the difference. Calling each other out sounds like, "HEY, GET YOUR BUTT TO CHURCH!" Calling each other to live out sounds like, "Hey, get your butt to church." Hear the difference? That's an important distinction. We want it to be much more like the second version because **calling each other is a ministry of encouragement and urgency.**

The last part of v.25 tells gives us the spirit in which we are to call each other. "But encouraging one another, and all the more, as you see the Day drawing near." Encouragement is giving someone confidence to do something. Some of you in this room are great encouragers, and some of you have had the blessing of having a great encourager in your life (I'm married to one). I had a college football coach who was prolific at "calling" (and maybe occasionally ventured into calling out.) But if he ever wore you out in practice, he'd always come up to you after and say, "Listen, I'm tough on you because I believe in you. I see this in you. I know how good you can be." God wants to put you in the midst of others so that you can do the same for them, hopefully

with less colorful language than my coach, and to say “I see this in you. You can do it. Go for it!”

Our encouragement should also include a call to get moving. God has a next step for all of our lives, and time is short. The author makes reference to Christ’s return to let us know there’s an end date to all this. It would be spiritual malpractice if I saw something in you, or you knew what your next step was, and I told you to sit on it. Whether it’s the second coming or the day you stop breathing, every passing day gets you closer. We are to encourage with a growing sense of urgency.

What an incredible privilege each of us has to speak life into someone else, to help them identify their God-given purpose, and to encourage them to get after it and live it out.

So here’s my calling to you: that you would consider how to stir up one another to love and good works and encourage one another by joining a Life Group that meets weekly. And if you are married, we want you to be in a group with your spouse, because our calling as husbands and wives is central to our purpose. I’m thrilled to announce that, in two weeks from tonight, we will be holding an event called GroupConnect from 5:00-7:00. We have over 100 leaders who packed into Fellowship Hall last Sunday to get ready for this event and getting ready to receive you that night. Each of our open groups will have leaders and representatives stationed throughout the church for you to meet, learn about their group, and help you decide where you might land. And we’re starting something new in 2017. We will be launching seven midsize groups that meet at the church, mostly on Sunday morning. While you might have 10-12 in a home group, we hope to have 40+ people, spending some time together at the beginning, and then breaking up to have discussion at their tables. We had two pilot groups start last fall; a multigenerational group led by Mitzi, the Websters, and the Stones, and a Family Group led by the Widells and Martha and me. Starting next Sunday, we’ll have sign up tables in the concourse. It’s going a blast. It’s going to be alive. And it will be the catalyst to our church living out this mission God has given us.

And I want to take a minute and talk to the guys in the room. Everything you read on groups is that men are much more likely to resist joining one. If that’s you, I want you to know I get it. You see, over a decade ago, I sat in a chair on a Sunday morning at Fellowship Dallas (I believe we were still at Meadow), and was told they wanted everyone to participate in this new thing called *The Purpose Driven Life*. And I remember immediately turning to Martha and saying, “There is no way in heck (I didn’t say heck) that I’m doing that.” There wasn’t any way I was going to sit in room with a handful of people and share my feelings, and pour my heart out, and get vulnerable. Yuck. No thank you. And so we didn’t. But a couple years later, Martha said she met some ladies, they invited us to join their group, and that she really wanted to. My answer? Pure enthusiasm. “Fine, I’ll go, because you want to, and probably because it’s the right thing to do, but let it be known that I don’t want to and I’m not looking forward to it.” And thank God I did.

You see, if I hadn’t, I would have missed out on a few things. I wouldn’t have friends who are some of the most important people in my life. I wouldn’t have had the comfort and counsel of God’s people through times of great difficulty in my life. I would have missed the privilege and joy of being used by God in helping a couple rebuild their failing marriage. I never would have

heard the encouragement of others who told me they could see me being a pastor of a church, nor would I have had the opportunity to encourage some other guys by telling what I saw in them. I wouldn't know God as well as I do because I would have been learning about him alone, deprived of others' perspective on God's Word and testimony about God's work.

That's what calling each other is all about. It's being with God's people, God's gift of grace, and pursuing together who God is and the purpose he has for all of us. You might be resistant. You might have already told your wife there's no way in heck that you're doing this. But I want to challenge you to give it a chance because it's through others in this room that God wants to find your purpose and change the trajectory of your life. And I promise you that, if you devote yourself to biblical community, you'll join the rest of us in saying what the psalmist says: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers live in unity."