

What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?

Week 2: Chapter 5 ~ 9

Chapter 5 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Our Goal Should Be More Than Attending Church.

The church, as an institution, can be, ironically, very limiting to our communion with God and others. This is the premise of this chapter. Or, to say it another way, the existence of an institution does not automatically mean that the purpose of that institution is being accomplished.

As Skye says, *“There are other resources, relationships, personal practices, and acts of service that draw us into deeper communion with Christ beyond Sunday morning worship or the programs of our local congregation.”* I would go as far as to say that if we properly understand our identity in Christ and our loyalty to Christ, then we will naturally see ourselves as part of something much larger than a local congregation. We’ll see ourselves as part of God’s larger Kingdom and family. While a local congregation is an important manifestation and representation of the Kingdom of God, our identity and commitment go beyond the scope of a local congregation.

- *How has your communion with God and others been developed/enhanced by being part of a local congregation? How has your communion with God and others been developed/enhanced by something beyond your local congregation?*
- *What factors have contributed to the development of your faith, to your maturity in Christ?*
- *Are there any reflections from last week’s Scripture readings that you’d like to share? (This will be a standing debrief question each week to encourage reading and reflection on the suggested passages.)*

Chapter 6 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Following Jesus Isn’t About Me, It’s About Us.

Throughout this book we’re going to read a lot about “we” and “us” and about thinking of ourselves as part of a collective/community, a body and family, and not simply as individuals. The reason for this is because we live in a society and culture that has largely over-emphasized the self, the individual. BUT...I think there’s something important that needs to be said here.

While we’re clearly, and unhealthily, out of balance in one direction, it is entirely possible to become out of balance in the other direction—enmeshed or codependent relationships—which opens up a host of other problems. The healthy goal is what psychologists call “self-differentiation” which is a proper balance between connection and autonomy, maintaining a sense of self within a context of deep meaningful relationships.

Considering the rampant individualism, consumerism and self-centeredness and the way people (Christians and non-Christians) tend to look at the church as a provider of religious goods and services and themselves as spectators and/or customers, we have to very intentionally focus instead on what it means to be part of a group, a community, a family.

It makes complete sense why our culture/society is struggling with anxiety, depression, and loneliness...it's the natural fruit of a preoccupation with the individual/self. It is important to remember that God is a Relationship, a Divine Community—we typically use the term Trinity. Humans are made in the image of God, which means we are designed for relationships. We don't function well outside of being part of a collective/group.

- *How in tune are you with your need for relationships?*
- *How healthy (or unhealthy) are the key relationships in your life? (For that matter, who would you consider the key relationships in your life?)*
- *What would change if you thought of your “spiritual life”, your “faith”, as less about YOU and more about the group you are a part of?*

Chapter 7 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Church Is Where We Wrestle With God Together.

This chapter makes me think of our Big Ask Dinners...or at least what we hope our Big Ask Dinners could be...a time/place where the church family comes together to wrestle with the issues, topics, questions of our day, and the struggles we have with life and faith.

But I've got to be honest with you...the questions we typically receive have me (well, us as the ministerial staff) wondering: Do these folks not have any questions, doubts, struggles? Are they afraid to ask difficult or controversial questions? Have we not created a safe enough environment where real, deep, honest questions, issues, and struggles can be talked about? (Part of the reason the questions are anonymous is to help create a level of safety.) Do people view their faith in Jesus as disconnected from “real life” issues?

Our hope with the Big Ask Dinners is not to create a space where all your questions will be answered, but rather, as Skye says, “...where we can struggle openly rather than privately, and where questions are asked and sometimes answered. But when no answer is found, the church is also where we find comfort, support, and encouragement..” Because, at the end of the day, it's more about relationships than answers anyway.

One of our hopes with this book specifically is that it will be a catalyst for questions, some of which will be discussed in Table Groups, no doubt, and some hopefully raised at Big Ask Dinners. Hopefully, the various Bible passages included at the end of each chapter will provoke questions that people will want to talk about as well.

- *What do you question, doubt, struggle with? Have you found the church to be a safe place to wrestle with your questions, doubts, issues...or do you feel pressure to keep up appearances or keep the peace?*
- *If you've participated in a Big Ask Dinner, what has been your experience of it?*

Chapter 8 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Church Is Where We Find—And Pray For—Our Enemies.

High Christology leads to high ecclesiology. (Meg told me to use normal words, so let me say that differently...) A high view of Jesus leads to a high bar for the church. The Gospel...the claim that Jesus is our King, the world's rightful King...is something that should unite us and hold us together. Sadly, we live in a time when people will change congregations over rather petty things—a difference of opinion, an offense, a change in worship style. It doesn't say much about our view of Jesus, does it? (But it says a lot about our view of ourselves.)

“Rather than reflecting the divisions of society, the church is called to reflect the unity of God's Kingdom.” This is what the world needs to see if they are to believe our claim and testimony of Jesus. Jesus said as much Himself and even made it a matter of prayer, *“I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me...May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.”* (see John 17:20-23, emphasis added) There's a lot riding on our unity, friends.

When we see the church struggling for credibility and relevance in the world today, we need look no further than right here. Do we know and believe the Gospel, and is that seen, demonstrated, reflected in our life together? How are we going to love our enemies if we don't even like each other? If we have an issue with somebody, do we pray for them...so that WE might change and grow in love and Christlikeness...or do we use it as an excuse to bail and go “shop” for another congregation?

- *What do you think about that quote from Justin Martyr that opens this chapter? How does that compare to your church experience?*
- *Think of someone within our congregation that you don't have a great impression of, tend to avoid, have less than positive feelings about. What might Jesus be inviting you to do about that? Are you willing to at least pray for them? Or perhaps make it a point to greet them during Passing of the Peace? (Hmm...this has the makings of a Soul Training Exercise 😊)*

Chapter 9 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Is United In Love, Not Anger.

As Skye points out in this chapter, anger is a very accessible emotion. What we need to understand about anger is that it is typically a secondary emotion. Usually what's truly underlying it is fear or sadness. Unfortunately, we're not well trained emotionally to deal with fear and/or sadness in a healthy way, so we go to anger instead. Typical modern-day Americans like you and me are woefully emotionally stunted. Instead of recognizing fear and sadness and allowing them to have a healthy formative effect on us, we reach for anger because it gives us a sense of power and control.

Skye goes on to point out that we tend to socially organize around shared fears and prejudices. I think it's safe to say that our recent election season has proven this point. But as followers of Jesus, we are called to something different, a better/higher way of being that's not dominated by fear but rather by love.

Sadly, a defined and agreed upon enemy has a way of uniting people. I recall seeing this after 9/11. As Christians we are called to define ourselves by Jesus, by who we are for not who we are against.

- *Take a moment to think of a recent time when you were angry. If you're willing, share about that experience and the circumstances surrounding it. Can you look deeper into that situation and perhaps notice sadness or fear?*
- *How, or in what ways, is our culture/society driven by anger (or fear)?*
- *Who does the church tend to fear or villainize today? What about our congregation, specifically? What about you, specifically?*
- *What is your personal practice of recognizing/identifying your emotions and dealing with them in a healthy way?*
- *As you consider your church family, would you say that it is a shared love for Jesus that holds you/us together? (Or something else?) Explain.*

Soul Training Exercises

- Read & Reflect on...
 - II Peter 1:3-9
 - John 4:19-26
 - I Corinthians 3:5-19
 - I Peter 2:4-10
 - Genesis 32:22-28
 - Romans 12:3-8
 - I Peter 3:8-12
 - James 3:13-18
 - Ephesians 2:11-22
 - II Corinthians 5:14-19

- Improving/Strengthening Relationships
 - Identify someone in our congregation who you have less than positive feelings towards. Spend some time praying for them over the course of several days. Consider how you might improve your perspective of them and your relationship with them. Perhaps it will be as simple as a warm smile during Passing of the Peace (as opposed to avoiding them). Maybe it will be having coffee with them so you can get to know each other better. Be open to however the Spirit might change your heart/attitude toward them and allow the Spirit to direct you in relating to them differently.