

A Model for Church Health

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 July 2014

Preacher: Don Coleman

[0 : 00] So tonight, I want you to, well you don't really need to open your Bibles, that's terrible! for a pastor to say, especially one who really believes in bringing your Bible to church and! opening it up and reading and following along and even making notes. But I have it right there for you. Now that's in the New King James Version, so we'll all be on the same version.

And this actually is a passage of scripture that, one of many actually, that my students in China last week worked through and they just had the text and we worked together to find out what the passage meant and how it could apply. And of course, the immediate meaning of the passage or direction that it is given is to Israel. And you might remember, I mean we're getting in Deuteronomy 31, we're getting toward the end of the book of Deuteronomy and what comes right after that? Joshua. It seemed like we were just there, Joshua. I spent quite a number of weeks looking at Joshua. And so what you have here is just two verses that have been pulled out of a very lengthy kind of farewell instruction from Moses. In fact, the chapter begins with Moses saying, I'm old now. And he says, I can't go in, can't go out. I suspect that means he needs help getting around. And so he's old and he also reminds them that he will not be going into the promised land. And we know the story behind all of that. And so this is just part of a long, in fact, it takes several chapters. It's kind of a two-part sort of farewell and time of instruction for God's people just before they are to go into the land of promise. And so we took this passage and looked at what it meant when Moses wrote it, which is the first thing you must do is find out what the author intended when he first wrote it. And then made an application or a connection with this passage, these verses, these instructions, made a connection to the church, to us, God's people.

And discovered some things that really cross over into the life of the church. And not just any church, but what we could call a healthy church. And so that's why I've entitled this. In fact, I put the title on it. We didn't work on titles. You know, in China, they don't need titles for their sermons because they never publish them. You know, you don't need a title if nobody's ever going to read it. And, you know, so we preachers, we think we've got to come up with really neat little titles, you know, that are really attractive and allure people and peak interest. But they don't have marquees out in front of their church. They don't have bulletins on Sunday mornings so they can have that nice, neat little title, tantalizing title. Not that they are always tantalizing.

So I added the title, but kind of the points and sub points of it. We work all this out together.

Now, again, this is written or was spoken actually originally and then later written down to Israel.

[4 : 04] Israel. Israel. They had come out of Egypt. They had been through the wilderness wanderings and God had been faithful to them all the way through, delivering them from Egypt, parting the Red Sea, providing the manna and quail and all of their needs and many, many other things that you can go back to the Bible and read about. And so now they're getting close to actually being able to go into the land and here are some instructions. Now, let's connect that to the church and see this as a model for a healthy church or church health. So let's kind of work down through this. Verse 12 begins, Gather the people together, men and women and little ones. So right off, what do you visualize? What do you imagine? You imagine the people coming together. I mean, that's the instruction. Moses has instructed them to come together and all of you, not just your leaders, not just, you know, those who are, you know, your elders, but all the people, all the men, all the women, even the children, gather them together. And I suggest to you that it's a picture of fellowship. That's number one. It's a picture of the fellowship of the church where they come together. You know, fellowship, at least in Baptist circles, is typically associated with potluck dinners, you know, or, you know, we don't always call it potluck.

I've had a number of people over the last, over recent years, especially young people say, why do we call it potluck? That just doesn't sound good at all, you know? Well, they just haven't lived long

enough, you know, to know that potluck is a very good thing. And I have grown up with potluck dinners, as most of you all have, and in the church. And so it's a pretty natural thing then for us to begin to associate fellowship with food, you know, food. I mean, we just can't hardly get together without having food. And that's not a bad thing. I think that's a very good thing, and it's very scriptural.

We can find many examples where Jesus was with his people, and they were eating, with his disciples, and they were eating. In fact, on the, I think, the very last occasion after his resurrection, and in one of his appearances, remember, the disciples are out there, the apostles are out there fishing. They got a little disillusioned, you know, Jesus is dead, he's gone, and alive, but gone. And Jesus, remember, had said, stay here until you've been empowered from on high.

And after a while, Peter said, I'm going fishing. And so they are fishing, not catching anything, and they look on the shore, and who do they see? You know, they see Jesus there. And so they, of course, Peter beats them all there, jumps on out, does a little skinny dipping, gets on over to the shore, the rest of them finally come. And Jesus has built a fire, and there's fish there cooking, and fresh bread. I've often wondered, where did he get the bread? You know, remember the, one of the temptations of Satan said, you know, turn these stones into bread? And Jesus, of course, refuted that or, or, uh, uh, responded to that with scripture. He wasn't about to obey Satan's, uh, request and sin there. And so now he says, I didn't do it then, but now I will. I'll just take the rocks and turn them into bread. Uh, but here they are, they're having kind of this last little meal together, fish and bread, uh, with Jesus. And so it's very scriptural then. I would suggest to you that when

God's people assemble together, there is that fellowship around a meal or some foods, whether it's, and here's another term a lot of people don't like, finger foods, you know, or maybe not potluck, but let's have finger foods. And that's probably worse than this whole notion of a potluck. Finger food?

[8 : 40] Anyway, um, so very scriptural, I think, and certainly, uh, is an occasion, uh, a, a, a, a very, very enjoyable occasion for fellowship. Um, but fellowship is something we do every time we gather together. It's the fellowship of God's people, the fellowship of the believers. We fellowship around our common bond with one another, uh, that we belong to him. He is our mutual Lord and Savior. And, uh, so we have a fellowship around that common relationship. We have a God. We also have a fellowship around theology. We really do. Although, you know, on some of the peripheral things, there may be some differences, but when it comes to those things that matter, those core, uh, doctrines of the faith, we, we have a fellowship around those things when we gather together and we fellowship when we worship because, uh, uh, uh, we, we are all together responding, uh, to, to God's grace,

God's word, his, the revelation of himself. Uh, we have a common love for him. You know, so every time we gather together, this whole, really the whole, uh, notion behind the word gather is fellowship. It's fellowship.

Now that's a healthy church. I would, uh, uh, uh, remind you though, and maybe the next time we have our birthday fellowship, you'll be, uh, cognizant of this. Have you ever noticed sometimes when we're up here and, uh, uh, and we are all seated together that, uh, sometimes there are people just kind of sitting off by themselves and, uh, and typically they, they are maybe some people who are newer to the fellowship. Uh, maybe they have not been a part of our maybe smaller circle. We can't help it. We're, we're, we're kind of driven and, uh, um, imprisoned by our humanness. And, uh, we all enjoy kind of, uh, smaller circles, uh, of friendship and fellowship, but we need to open up those circles and, uh, and make people welcome. I, I, you know, I would, uh, encourage you and myself as well, uh, that next time we have a birthday fellowship or any kind of fellowship that you kind of seek out other people to sit with and just strike up a conversation, have a fellowship. We need to be together. Really, maybe we ought to have just one big round table. And so, you know, we're all together rather than often, you know, our own little sections on those tables. So gather the people together, men and women, little ones. This is, this is the whole family. And so the first mark then, uh, or, or, or part of the model is fellowship. Second, it's, he adds there, and the stranger who is within your gate.

Now, when this was first written and, you know, the reference here, what Moses is saying, he talked about those who have come out with the people from Egypt, uh, specifically, and maybe others who, who have kind of joined this huge body of people, uh, you know, since they left Egypt, but they're not, they're not Jews. They're strangers. And, uh, and so how could we, uh, make a connection there, an application to the church? Well, I think this then would be evangelism. You

have fellowship, the gathering of God's people, that is the, the redeemed, the church, the bride of Christ, uh, who, who are born again, and, uh, uh, believers and followers of Jesus Christ. So there is the need for that. But every time, oftentimes when we gather together, there are also some who are unbelievers. We ought to be, be, we ought to recognize that and, and understand that. Uh, uh, uh, I need to understand that because when you preach, when I preach, I am, uh, preaching primarily to the body, to, to, to, to believers. And yet I need to know and understand that there are unbelievers here with us. Almost every time we gather together, there are. And, and so always there needs to be some, some connection with the gospel, uh, if not in the sermon itself, in the invitation itself. And, uh, and so, you know, we, we, we, we need to be, be cognizant of that, that there are unbelievers that come into this fellowship of ours. They, they may be interested, they may have been invited, they, they, they may, uh, uh, even think they are Christians and yet are not. Uh, they have a false assurance, uh, and all kinds of other combinations. Uh, but there are, there is the stranger, but the idea here, I think is because Moses is actually commanding a certain activity, a certain action to be taken. I mean, it's a, it's a, it's an, it's an action, an activity to gather together. It is also an activity, a thing you do to gather with you also the stranger. So the idea is that we ought to be bringing in the stranger. Uh, now, how do we do that in a hundred or more different ways? Uh, everyone in this room, uh, probably no exceptions, but, uh, um, preachers usually have the fewer connections to lost people than anybody else.

[14 : 51] But every one of you are connected to people out here, connected by work, connected by family, connected by neighborhood, uh, connected in many, many other ways. And if you begin to, to analyze your life and the connections you have, you, you, you, you will notice right off that there are bridges for the gospel in all kinds of different directions. Now it's important that we cross those bridges with a witness, with a testimony of our faith in Christ. And we do that in a hundred different ways. Uh, but also we, we have an obligation to invite, to bring the stranger in.

Now we don't want to call them strangers, you know, you know, it's interesting to me. And, uh, this has been true in Ukraine and also in China that, uh, when there's an unbeliever present, uh, in, in a group of people, uh, uh, there's, there's no mystery about it. And, uh, the, the believers are not shy about saying this one's an unbeliever, you know? Now, you know, if we did that here, uh, why we would just offend that person all to pieces. I'm not saying that, uh, that, that's, that's a right thing or a good thing, but it is a reality in our culture. Uh, so you don't want to, you know, approach a person, you know, you're a stranger and once you, or you're an unbeliever, uh, but you know, uh, if, who they are. And, uh, and so we need to gather the stranger, uh, in so that they can hear the teaching and preaching of God's word and God's word has power. Uh, even the portion of God's word that may be specifically directed to the believer, it's still, uh, the Holy Spirit still uses that teaching, uh, to work his work in the heart of the unbeliever. Uh, and so there's fellowship, there is evangelism, albeit somewhat just suggested here, and, uh, maybe we're taking some, um, I'm taking some liberty here. Uh, it's obvious we have two, two groups of people, types of people here that Moses is saying gather together. You have God's people gather them together, men, women, boys, girls, children, and we have the stranger. And, uh, I think the implication is, uh, they're men and women and boys and girls as well and gather them in. And, uh, for what reason? That leads us to the third thing. And, uh, uh, let me just read the text and then we'll fill in the blanks that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the Lord, your God, and carefully observe all the words of this law. All that falls under, uh, point number three or the third, uh, element in this model for church health. And it would be Bible study. Bible study. And that's just kind of a, you know,

I've thought about just naming it the ministry of the word because, uh, that's a much broader term. The ministry of the word, uh, encompasses, uh, all of the various ways that a church teaches God's word from the pulpit. Uh, I mean, all preaching is teaching. Not all teaching is preaching. Uh, but all preaching is teaching from the pulpit, uh, to the classrooms, to other events, uh, or other ministries like men's ministries, women's ministries, children's ministries, uh, like on, on Wednesday night with Awana and youth. And, uh, the ministry of the word is taking place. And so this is a mark of a, of a healthy church where God's word is being taught, uh, taught to the people. So that's what this part is all about is Bible study or the ministry of the word. And, uh, it's divided into four parts or four elements. The first one would be to listen to God's word, uh, the hearing of it.

[19 : 11] And that's what, uh, the scripture says that they may hear, that they may hear, hear what? Well, the implication is, in fact, it's not even implied. It's very explicit as you get on down to

the end of that verse. It's God's word that people need to hear. Now, if it's not being taught, they'll not hear it. And you say, well, of course, I mean, that goes without saying, right? Well, the problem is there are many churches in our day and in our country that are not teaching God's word. They're not teaching it. Well, I'm not just talking about churches that may be teaching a false doctrine.

There is that. But I mean churches, evangelical churches, quote, unquote, uh, Bible churches, quote, unquote, that, uh, when there's the opportunity to preach or teach, they're not preaching God's word. They're preaching principles, preaching opinions, uh, pre-preaching, uh, uh, you know, warm, kind of fuzzy, uplifting, motivational, uh, uh, uh, subjects and so forth, but not taking God's word and systematically, uh, preaching and teaching through it as it was written, as it was originally written. That's what we're talking about here. We talk about hearing. It's God's word must be preached, must be spoken. It must be taught for the people to hear it.

And that's just the, uh, the first step. Uh, uh, they, they must hear God's word, hear it. Uh, and then we go to the second step and that they may learn it or understand God's word.

Learning doesn't take place until there's understanding. Actually, we might even add one that's going to come a little bit later until there is life change. Uh, there's no real learning, but that's the second element, understanding God's word. That's why it's important that when you, if you're a Sunday school teacher and you're preparing to teach, uh, Sunday school, whether it's to little ones or older ones and everybody in between, why it's so important that you prepare to teach it. Uh, so that first of all, you know what God has said in his word. Uh, I mean, you have a, possibly a, a quarterly or maybe a commentary or some other helps that you're using.

Which are fine. Uh, and use as many tools as, uh, you, you have available to you. Get your hands on. Uh, but what you're wanting to, to do is find out what God has said in his word. Uh, what he has said and what it means and what it means for us, for me. And so that when I teach, uh, that group of, uh, people on Sunday morning, if you're a Sunday school teacher, then you're prepared to tell them exactly what God has said so that they can learn it. They can learn or understand what God has said.

[22 : 15] It's, there are two different things. It's two different things to say, this is what God said. That's different from saying, this is what God means. And so Bible study not only means discovering what words mean and what a phrase might mean or, uh, uh, or what the author might have meant in his or his historical context or cultural context. Uh, it's not just discovering what it says.

It's discovering what God means, what he means, what it means to you and, uh, and, and what difference that makes or should make in your life. So there must be learning. So here's, here, here's Bible study, the ministry of the word, or we might even say our objectives in Bible study. We want to speak it so people hear it. So the people need to hear God's word. They need to learn.

What it means or understand what it means. And then they need to fear. They need to fear the Lord, your God. And in the context of God's word here, and that, and that's the context.

The idea is that they have a respect for God's word, have a respect for it. Uh, did you know that preachers and teachers wield a great power to help people respect God's word? Uh, and we do that by the way we handle God's word. Uh, if we handle it correctly and it's obvious, uh, not only in the way we teach, but in, even in what we say about God's word, it's obvious to those who are hearing that we have a great reverence and respect for God's word. And you convey that, you teach that, uh, uh, in, in, uh, in your teaching, in your part in the ministry of the word. And by the way, we all to some extent have that responsibility. Uh, we have a responsibility even in the class setting. You may not be the teacher, but, uh, if you're in one of those classes where there is two-way communication, not all are like that, kind of like this one, uh, uh, then, uh, uh, you have an opportunity to also convey your respect for God's word. And, and, and in the context of the family, even in the context of just relationships and friendships, uh, when you get on the subject of God's word and you have an opportunity, uh, to teach a friend, uh, what God has said to you in his word, there, there's a great importance, tremendous importance in respecting and reverencing God's word. And so here's what Moses said the people should do. They gather together. There must be a fellowship of God's word and also a bringing in of those who are outside of the body. There's evangelism and for purposes of Bible study, for Bible study, uh, so that they can listen to God's word, understand God's word, respect God's word. And then there's a fourth one there and it's the obvious one. Carefully observe all the words of this law or obey God's word. Obey God's word. What is the point really, uh, of preaching, teaching, sharing God's word? Uh, what's the point of it?

If there is not first a decision that I'm going to obey whatever God has said, there must be obedience. Uh, preaching is pointless without, uh, without a response of obedience to God's word. Your personal reading of God's word every day. I hope, uh, your own personal study of God's word is meaningless, pointless. In fact, it is, uh, uh, almost sacrilegious, uh, if not sacrilegious to approach God's word with no really intention of obeying, uh, to read, uh, a passage that, that has a command, a precept, uh, for, for your life, uh, application to your life, uh, a portion of God's word that conveys God's will, God's desire, uh, a portion of God's word that identifies, uh, sin in your life that needs to be confessed and repented of, uh, and, and on and on the scenarios could go. Um, it's, it's pointless to approach that passage and read it and even study it and even discover what it says and what it means. It's pointless if you don't, don't obey. Uh, and, uh, we'll be held accountable, by the way, uh, for God's word that we have read and understood but did not obey. God holds us accountable for that. And, uh, and it's sin.

It's sin not to obey God's word. Uh, so we can't plead ignorance. All right, so those are the four elements under the ministry of the word. Um, and that is the mark of a healthy church, the ministry of the word, where God's people have the opportunity to hear his word, understand his word, respect his word, reverence his word, and obey his word. And there's one more.

[27 : 52] So, and, uh, verse 13, and that their children who have not known it, that is have not known his word, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess. And, uh, I say this is an allusion to discipleship. Discipleship. Now, it doesn't just involve children. Discipleship is not just for children. Uh, but this, uh, this is, um, um, you know, one aspect of one age grouping that is mentioned here, but it's referring, implying the need for discipleship. Because, why? Because God's people don't know all they need to know. Uh, not any of us in this room know all there is to know about God, about his word, about his will, his desires. Uh, we're, we're on that journey. And we're on that together. And just because I've been, uh, uh, called and given the, the, uh, the great task to teach God's word doesn't mean that I know it all yet. I mean, every time I'm in my study throughout the week and I spend hours preparing to preach, I'm learning things all the time that I've never seen before. And, uh, and so we're all in that, in that process, uh, of discipleship.

And that word discipleship is a huge, broad term. And, uh, and it includes not just simply learning God's word, but really includes, uh, um, um, all those other, the other things that we just looked at these four things, it, it, it includes all those things becoming a reality into your life and becoming a part of the discipline of your life. That you let, hear God's word, learn it, fear, respect it, obey it. And so that's why it's almost a repetition that their children who have not known it may hear and learn to fear the Lord, your God. That's, that's, uh, uh, really the, uh, uh, the end game for, for the church, for the body. Uh, evangelism is a part of that. But what, what is it that it, uh, is the purpose of evangelism? It's to make disciples. Uh, in fact, that's the imperative of the great, great commission. The imperative, the command of the great commission is not go. That's implied that we should go. We must go. The, the, the imperative, the only command in the whole great commission is make disciples, make disciples. Now that includes evangelism, but it also includes what we're talking about right here, not just to win them to Christ and bring them into the church, but then to teach them as the great commission says, teach them all things, uh, that, that, uh, I have taught you, uh, that's discipleship so that they might hear and learn and fear the Lord, their God. That's the mark of a, uh, of a, uh, healthy church. Uh, and this is a good model for it. Uh, so what are the four? There's fellowship. Now this is not all inclusive. Okay.

We might, we might say, well, what about prayer? Well, prayer, uh, is, uh, uh, threaded, uh, uh, is a part of all of this, but there's fellowship and evangelism and Bible study, the ministry of the word, uh, which of course, uh, produces disciples. Um, there's discipleship. I think in two verses, pretty, pretty, pretty good. And it was amazing to me, uh, even though, um, obviously I helped them out a little bit, my Chinese pastors, amazing how they could pick this out. All, all that we had to first come to was how might this apply to today. And, and, and so when you started, started looking at it, it all falls right in line, uh, with great instruction, uh, for the church. Uh, we're God's people in this land and God is working his purposes through us, the church in this age, uh, until Jesus comes. And these are the things we need to be about. And, uh, not just because, uh, we're commanded to, but because it will produce a healthy church, one that is most honoring to God.