

Four Things You Probably Won't Get Directly From God

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John: Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair

John 17:20-21

This month I'm devoting my messages to focusing upon the need for individuals to get connected into deep, meaningful relationships particularly through small groups here at Vineyard. I spoke last week about the growing isolation of Americans and quoted extensively from the book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam. I mentioned that virtually every civic association has seen a decline of membership in the past 30 years from the Boy Scouts to the NAACP, to the League of Women Voters. Club membership across America is down. Participation in professional associations and unions is down. Participation in most churches is down. And informal connections between people, friendship circles, dinner parties, picnics, eating together as families, all of these informal connections are showing declining participation.

One only needs to look at the design of contemporary suburbs to see the growing isolation of Americans. The whole layout of modern suburbs destroys any sense of community.

The neighborhood where I grew up in New York was an older neighborhood in which there was a mix of houses, businesses, and schools sprinkled on any city block. It was a neighborhood designed not to serve the automobile, but people. As a result, people could leave their houses or apartments, walk out on the street, and meet

other neighbors as we shopped, went to restaurants, movie theaters, or schools. All of this was done on the same local street.

But the modern suburb is designed not for people, but for the automobile. You can't, in most suburban neighborhoods, walk to a store unless you are planning a hike of several miles. The store is almost certainly built across several major intersections. If you were to walk to Polaris or Sawmill Road where all the stores are, people would look at you and say, "Why is that man walking on Polaris Parkway? He probably has a mental problem, or he's just been released from prison. Lock your car doors."

Our homes remove us from community. Older homes and older communities have big front porches that are near the street. My grandmother used to sit on her front porch and from her porch she could watch everything going on in the neighborhood, speak to it, and about it to anyone within earshot. She could sit on her chair on her front porch and talk with neighbors who were walking by.

But in the suburbs where I live, I drive up to my house, push a button, which opens my garage door, drive into my garage, and go into my house from the entrance in the garage. There are no front porches. Everyone has a back deck where you sit. The whole design of the modern suburb is anti-community and highly isolating.

But not only is our culture isolating so that many folks are profoundly lonely and cut off, but Americans are also highly individualistic.

One of the men on our staff who helps to oversee our small groups is from Tanzania. His name is Edmond Lyatuu. Edmond was telling me the other day about some of the differences between African and American cultures. He said when he was a child, it wasn't just your parents who would reprimand you if you were getting into trouble. Other adults would intervene, correct you, and rebuke you if you were doing something you weren't supposed to do. And if his parents found out that he was getting into trouble when there were other adults present, they would rebuke the other adults: "Why didn't you do something? You saw my child doing what he wasn't supposed to do. Why haven't you taken responsibility to correct my child?" There is in Africa a strong feeling that they are all part of a community and that the community has the responsibility to raise the children.

In the US it is entirely different. According to a Dutch Corporate Survey I read a few years ago, the US is the most individualistic nation on earth. Most American parents would be highly offended if another adult presumed to correct their children. How dare you intrude on my parental prerogatives?

Is it any wonder that we have so many failures in America – academic, moral, marital, and child raising failures? Why, with all the information that we have, with all the books and tapes, and all the resources that we have, why so much failure? We have a society that essentially communicates to people that you sink or swim based on your own wits and your own abilities.

I believe that the #1 reason why people fail spiritually, the reason why folks make a good start at Christianity, but don't continue on is because our entire way of approaching God is wrong. I believe that individualism, each of us trying to make it alone in our relationship with God, is the #1 reason why so many people receive Christ as Savior, begin to walk, and then drop out along the way, blow out, or collapse.

The greatest problem facing Christians in America regarding our spiritual growth is individualism. Individualism, trying to go it alone with God, is a greater threat to your spiritual well being than is American consumerism, than is American materialism, than is our entertainment culture. We need other Christians to begin the Christian life. And we need other Christians to grow in the Christian life.

The only environment that a Christian can grow in successfully is the environment of deep relationships with other Christians. And if you, or someone you care about, is having problems in almost any area, you need to think about other people as being part of God's solution for that problem. We want God to simply zap us directly from heaven, to simply instantaneously heal our depression or fill our brains with counsel and direction for our current times, or simply remove from our lives powerful addictions. Most likely, however, God is going to employ other people to supply what you need.

I've called today's talk, "Four Things You Probably Won't Get Directly From God." Let's pray.

Galatians 6:1 reads:

SLIDE

Brothers, (and I'll add and sisters) if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted.

The apostle Paul is telling us that being restored when we are trapped in a sin is something that we probably won't get directly from God. God, instead, is going to use other people to set us free. The apostle Paul is saying that our relationships with one another are not a spiritual luxury, for those who can afford it. Deep relationship with other Christians, in the context of a group, is a necessity. You simply will never be able to fulfill God's purpose for your life unless you have deep, continuing, ongoing relationship with other believers.

The Bible, from beginning to end, tells us that we do not do well alone. One of the first things that God said to Adam in the Garden was, "It is not good for man to be alone." Adam didn't respond, "Hey, me and you are sufficient by ourselves." God said we couldn't fulfill his purpose in our lives in isolation. You cannot simply be American individualists and live well.

Ecclesiastes 4:9 reads:

SLIDE

Two are better than one. If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But woe to him who falls and has no one to help him up.

Have you ever been in a situation where you have fallen and have had no one to help you up? Have any of you ever been, or are you now so isolated, so alone, that there was no one around to help you when you were wrapped up and enslaved by a destructive habit?

What is Galatians 6:1 talking about? He says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin,” the issue is that a Christian, a genuine follower of Christ, someone who has received Christ into their lives as their Lord and Savior, who is trapped. Paul is speaking about a Christian who has been taken hostage by some particular habit.

Perhaps you overeat when you are depressed or angry. You regularly commit the sin of gluttony. Or you struggle repeatedly with explosive anger, even though you are a Christian. You scream and punch walls. You’ve broken things. You’ve had a number of meltdowns. Perhaps you’ve gone so far as to physically hurt another person – your spouse, your child – you’ve pushed or hit them. If someone recorded you during one of your rants and played it back to you when you calmed down, would you sound to yourself like a psychotic mental patient?

Maybe you are trapped by an eating disorder. You regularly purge yourself after eating, or you are starving yourself. Maybe your trap is the trap of pornography and you regularly view pornography. Or you continue to practice sex outside of marriage.

If you are a follower of Christ and you are trapped by a sin, I can guarantee you that you are not happy with your sin. You cannot have the Holy Spirit in you and happily sin for long. Here's the way it works. Before you come to Christ, you can be happy and sin. I was a happy pagan. I didn't think twice about sinning. I didn't lose any sleep over my sin. I wasn't particularly bothered by my speech patterns, or my lovelessness, or my partying.

But something happened to me when I came to Christ, and the same thing happened to many of you – the Holy Spirit, in whom there is no sin, entered my life and the Holy Spirit, in whom there is no sin, enters the life of everyone of you who has become a follower of Christ. And God's Spirit in you is at war with your sin. He hates sin and he will continue to combat sin in your life. A Christian can never peacefully and happily sin. The Christian can sin, but not peacefully or happily so.

Let me offer you a graphic.

SLIDE – Addictive Behavior

False Thinking – This will make me happy



Leading to Compulsive Behavior



Leading to Guilt and Shame



Leading to Despair



Leading back to False Thinking: This will make me happy.

Thoughts like “Chocolate will make me happy. Sex will make me happy. Work will make me happy. TV will make me happy. Gambling will make me happy. A relationship with a guy or girl will make me happy.”

We believe those lies and we engage in a certain compulsive behavior. We lose our will power. After we’ve engaged in the behavior or in a relationship, if you are a Christian, you will certainly experience guilt and shame. And because you aren’t living up to the standard that you believe God is setting for your life, you will probably despair. You will beat yourself up, “I can’t believe I did this again. I’m a worthless person. I’m probably not really a Christian.” And this despair and discouragement will lead you right back into the false thinking; I need this thing in order to make myself happy. And the noose will tighten around your neck.

How do you break this cycle of misery? You can’t do it alone. American individualism will absolutely fail you at this point. You cannot pick yourself up by your own hair, or lift yourself up by your own bootstraps. When you are trapped, when you are involved in a compulsive behavior, when you are what therapists call “addicted” you almost certainly will not be able to get free even with God’s help, apart from other people. Hardly anyone ever recovers from an addiction or a compulsive behavior apart from deep connection to a support network.

Psychologist Henry Cloud, in his book *How People Grow*, says this, “Some may stop their addictive or compulsive behaviors apart from other people, but if their relational patterns do not change, they will relapse if they are not involved in a group.”

So what is it that other people can do for you that you can’t do for yourself? Other people can restore you to a place of freedom, if you are trapped. Paul says in Galatians 6:

SLIDE

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

The word for “restore” is used in the secular Greek for setting a fractured, or dislocated bone. A bone is broken and another person restores it. They straighten it out. The word was also used of the apostles when they were mending their nets at the end of a long fishing trip. They dragged in their nets, cleaned them, and where the nets were torn, they mended them, or restored them. This is what the apostle Paul is saying.

The goal that Jesus Christ has for each of us is real freedom, liberation from enslaving habits that fracture us. Jesus wants to remove from our lives things that tear us or shred us. His goal is freedom. That’s why I died, to set you free. But we have a role in each other’s lives in helping to restore the gift of freedom.

Remember back in our study of the gospel of John in John 11, Jesus raised a dead man named Lazarus to life. And this dead man, Lazarus, is called forth from the tomb. He's still bound and gagged with his grave clothes. Jesus says to his family and friends, "Go now and loose him. Untie him."

I think that is the role of other Christians in our lives. We've come to new life through the born again experience. We've been called forth from the tomb, but we need other people to untie us, to loose us, particularly if you find yourself trapped and enslaved by a sin or an addiction. You probably can't be restored by yourself to freedom. You probably can't restore your marriage to health, if the patterns in your marriage are long-standing.

Let me tell you a story about a guy in our congregation named Brad. He was repeatedly sexually molested while attending a Catholic Seminary as a teen. In his 20's he plunged into the gay lifestyle, picking up men in bars and cruising the parks. He lived with another man for four years.

It was against this backdrop that the miracle of restoration began in Brad's life through the church. In 1995 Brad discovered that he was HIV positive. He was faced with his imminent death. It was against this backdrop that a former college roommate and his roommate's new wife asked Brad for help in locating a church. The only church that Brad could think of that fit his roommate's description was the

Vineyard. Brad had attended the Vineyard a couple of times before that and his roommate's wife insisted that Brad accompany them to church.

During that Sunday morning service there was an announcement for Project Compassion, our ministry to those with AIDS and who are HIV positive. Let me read to you Brad's own words:

Although I didn't show it at the time, I was shocked that a church would have a ministry like this, but even more that they weren't afraid to announce it publicly. My previous experience with church was not only a blatant rejection for me, for my gay life, but also for the fact that I would think of accusing church leaders of such horrible acts as sexual abuse.

I was so blown away with the idea that a church was willing to look at the truth regardless of its implications on their reputation that I went home and cried uncontrollably for hours. At the Vineyard that day, I recognized the loving heart of God that I had known as a child.

My friends and I returned the next week. We liked what we were seeing and we decided to give the Vineyard a try. It was only a few weeks later that I decided to give Christ control of my life. My former college roommate accepted Jesus, too. For the first time in my life,

since the sexual abuse occurred, I began to see hope restored to my life through the church.

[Here's the key] I discovered in a men's group at Vineyard four other guys who were willing to face their issues along with me. None of them were struggling with homosexuality. But I realized that every single man has issues that keep him from deep relationship and intimacy with God. From that men's group, I discovered healthy, normal relationships with other men, because we were all going after God. I found in a men's group a safe place where we could all go after God together.

Because of what God did in my life through the Vineyard, I have entirely left the homosexual lifestyle. I still experience occasional temptation, but its totally in check. And I don't any longer experience the consuming, compulsive desire that I used to.

God also provided Brad with complete suppression of HIV through the use of anti-retro drugs.

Perhaps as hear about restoration, the Holy Spirit would fill your heart with hope that you could be set free. Again, I tell you that that restoration will likely only occur if you screw up your courage enough to allow another person, folks in a small group, some

folks in a men's group, or women in a women's group, or folks in one of our recovery groups know what is happening in your life.

I read a statement about the difference between recovery groups and most church's small groups that cut me to the heart. This writer said, "When Christians fall, their first instinct is to run away from their small group and hide. When people who are in recovery fall, their first instinct is to run to their group and find help." That made me pray, "Lord, allow every small group in our church to be the kind of place of grace that when people stumble, or are trapped, their inclination would be to run to the group rather than away from it."

Unfortunately, many of us cannot or will not put ourselves in a position of vulnerability. We will not voluntarily share our stuff so that we may be restored to a place of freedom because of shame, because we don't want to be exposed, because we enjoy for a season our particular chosen sin. We will not tell people where we really are at. And so we wear a mask. We pretend to be good Christians while we have a secret life, a double life, and a hidden behavior.

Something happens to a person's inner being when you keep doing what you know to be wrong, especially if you are a Christian. Your conscience becomes unbearable, so you gag it. You learn to turn your conscience on and off. This growing divide happens in your heart and you live a schizophrenic Christian existence. You start lying to yourself and become good at lying and covering up yourself to others. A growing rottenness occurs in your soul and this rottenness grows and grows. If you

continue to violate your conscience, you can end up with what the apostle Paul calls a “seared conscience.” It is a conscience that has been scarred over and calloused.

The more you lie to yourself and the more you lie to others that you are all right when you are not all right, the more imaginary your relationship with God is. Do you know, friend, that it is possible to keep ignoring the voice of the Holy Spirit? You can freely choose to ignore the Spirit’s voice. He will not compel obedience. Has any one of you here ever been challenged or convicted by the Holy Spirit about an area of your life, about a relationship that God wants you to repair or about some action God wants you to take, but you have chosen to ignore the Holy Spirit’s voice? Has anyone ever done that?

I have. You have. And you can get to the point in your relationship with God where you have trained yourself to turn a deaf ear to his voice. At that point, God cannot any longer correct us directly, so he uses other people to bring correction to us, to straighten us out, to clear up our screwy thinking, and to challenge us. There are numerous scriptures that call people to correct us, confront us, and discipline us as a Christian brother or sister.

SLIDES

Luke 17:3 – If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him.

1 Thess. 5:12 – Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord, and who admonish you.

People to challenge and confront us – we need people like that.

SLIDE

2 Timothy 4:1-2 – In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who judged the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his Kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

Hebrews 3:12-13 – See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

And finally, in Revelation 3:19 Jesus Christ speaks to the church and he says these words:

SLIDE

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

Let me share with you a story from a woman I'll call Lisa.

In about the 7th year of our marriage, I began a multi-year affair with a man who was a Christian. For the first time in my life, I felt loved in a romantic, adult way. God and I had many conversations about how all these wonderful feelings were wrong. I could even, fairly easily, justify

that my marriage was the real sin because we had never lived up to the covenant we promised and my affair was much more Godly. Isn't that amazing!? More amazing than how manipulative the devil can be was God's love for me during this time. Through it all, God continued to tug at my heart, convict me, love me, care for me, even as I rebelled, He provided me very clear signs of His love for me. He listened to me yell and cry but never, never, never let go of me.

I finally broke off this affair only to be involved in another one within a very short period of time. A pattern of duplicitousness and deception was set. On the outside, our life looked pretty good. My husband and I were professionally successful, most of our friends and colleagues would have told you we were both great people, I was very involved in my church, but inside our marriage was rotten to the core.

Now to the part you really want to hear. Ohio State's Alumni Affairs Director told me I HAD to go to the Vineyard to hear the messages. He was a committed Christian and he encouraged me every time I bumped into him and, after about a year, I went. For the first six weeks I attended, I cried through the entire worship time, the power of the Holy Spirit was so strong I almost couldn't stand it. The messages cut me to the core.

After one service, I talked to a Vineyard Pastor about wanting to get a divorce and going to counseling to help me do that. I didn't know what his response would be. He made me angry because he asked me if my husband had committed adultery and I answered no. I didn't tell him that I had. But he told me the Vineyard wouldn't encourage divorce without Biblical reasons. I wanted to scream, I know all the Biblical reasons, but this is a special situation, God could not possibly expect me to go back to someone who was so hurtful and emotionally dysfunctional. I know many churches would have allowed me to get a divorce, but I wanted a Bible-believing church I respected to sanction this action. So I kept going to the Vineyard, thinking I could change them, while God continued to use the Vineyard to break and soften my very hard heart. Eventually, I scheduled an appt. with Vicky to seek her help in getting a divorce. Vicky asked, "Would I be willing to consider even the possibility of a reconciliation?" By that time, my heart was ready to consider that, so Vicky suggested I ask my husband, Jim, to come to counseling with me to see what God would do. Even then, I was sure that we would end up divorced, but God now had control.

Jim was willing to arrange his patient schedule and drive to Columbus every Wednesday for almost 6 months. During our nearly 5-year separation, he became a Christian and continuously prayed for our reunion. Counseling was very hard and there were many hurts as we began to reveal our pasts to one another and ask each other for

forgiveness. At least twice, I wanted to end counseling, but each time God intervened in ways that can only be described as miraculous. Almost one year after we started counseling, on New Year's Eve 2001, we recommitted to our marriage. [I had the privilege of presiding over their recommitment service.]

Our marriage is not perfect; we've both learned how hard you have to work to have a good marriage. We also know that the only reason ours is successful is because God is at the Center and he used his people to challenge and correct me. There is still work to be done in our relationship, but I now count it a privilege and an honor to be married to Jim. He is my best friend and someone I admire more than anyone in the world. Amazing when you consider how much I despised him not so long ago!

Have any of you ever had Christians in a group, or through a counseling session confront you or discipline you, to do something in your life that needed to be done, but that God used another person to do? Have you turned a deaf ear to God, so much so, that you were no longer willing, or perhaps even able to hear his voice?

We probably won't get correction or discipline directly from God. He's probably going to use other people to do it.

A third thing you may not be able to get directly from God, but that God may use others in your group to do is to fully experience his love. You might say, “But wait a minute. Isn’t love something that we just get directly from God? Why do we need other people? Why do we need a small group or women’s group, men’s group, or recovery group to experience God’s love?”

Let me make this really practical for you. Have any of you ever said, “You know, I know that God loves me with my head, but I don’t feel it in my heart. I know the verses:

SLIDE

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

Jeremiah 31:3 – I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have drawn you with loving-kindness.

You read the verses about God’s love. You know these things are true. And yet, you don’t feel them in your heart. Have any of you ever said, “You know, I know that God loves me. That’s what the Bible teaches. But I don’t feel it.”

Almost all of us have said that at one time or another. In fact, friends, the way we learn things in our hearts is different than the way we learn things in our heads. Our heads learn by gathering information, by reading, through listening to teaching,

through hands-on practice. But our hearts learn things by life experiences. And you can gather lots of information in your head about God's love, or God's grace. But if your life experience is one of lovelessness, if your life experience is one of abandonment, or loss, or rejection, God is probably going to use other people to enable you to fully experience his love.

God wants you to know that he is for you and not against you. And you may have experienced some situations in your life that have deeply wounded your heart. You may even have prayed, "God, heal me." But the love that God is going to communicate to you to heal you often will not come from him directly. The love that's going to heal your heart of loss, or abandonment, or rejection will often come through other people. God is going to use other people to heal you.

Over and over again, the Bible commands us to love each other. Jesus says in John 13:34

SLIDE

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Romans 13:8 – Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law.

1 John 4:11-12 – Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Let me tell you a story of a man in our congregation who was deeply wounded by life.

He says:

My dad was an alcoholic and he physically abused my mother. My parents soon separated and I hardly saw my dad. One time my dad met with my sister. When he came to drop her off, I tried to go out and meet him because I missed him so much. When I got out there, he pushed my sister out of the car and drove off without even looking at me.

I started smoking at 11, drinking at age 12, and dealing drugs by 13. My mother felt that she couldn't handle me anymore and so she sent me to live with my father. He got a job in the apartment complex we lived in. On that job, I was nearly molested. I told my father about it, but he called me a liar and he beat me. I went out to the creek behind our complex and thought about jumping in and killing myself at age 14.

I moved back in with my mother and became addicted to speed. Not long after that I met a woman I thought was the one. She was the first

to show me love in a long time. I got her pregnant. She was a pastor's kid, so I tried to get religious.

The baby was born prematurely. When he came out, his little hand grasped my finger. But he died that day of a brain aneurysm and I never saw him again. My girlfriend stayed with me, but six months later I found her in bed with another man.

Then God sent me a woman to tell me what his love was really like. She became my best friend. She got me off drugs and booze, but I still didn't feel complete. I was a high school drop out, and I had a hard time making ends meet, but it never mattered to her. She would tell me, "As long as we're together, it will be OK."

After 23½ years of marriage, my beloved wife was diagnosed with cancer. When she died in May 2001, I felt like my life was over. She was the reason I was alive. She was the reason I was living. For six months all I could do was go to a grief group and go home and cry. I rode my bike out to her grave and held the dirt like I was holding her hand. For six months that's all I could do.

Then one day I drank a box of wine and got into the drugs she used for pain during her bout with cancer. I destroyed my basement and I

ended up in a padded room in the basement of OSU Hospital. I kept going to grief groups when I got out.

When I was there a woman I had not seen before came in and said, “Hi, my name is (Blank). I just lost my husband to cancer. I have five kids and I don’t know why I’m here.” But I knew why she was there. She was there to bring me to the Vineyard. She talked about going to Vineyard and she reminded me of my wife. Through my encounters with her, I felt drawn to God again.

Then I met Guy at Vineyard who opened up his home and his life to me. He was a West Point grad and I was a hippie, but God put us together. On the first anniversary of my wife’s death, I was in church. My friend saw me and asked how I was doing. He prayed for me and I completely broke down. I never felt so loved. He invited me to his son’s birthday party.

Through my friend, I started to meet people at church. I began helping out at church. Then I got involved in one of Vineyard’s home fellowship group. Everyone was so warm, welcoming, and willing to listen. More than that, people would do things with you. Every time someone was doing something, they invited me along.

For the first time in my life, I not only loved life, but I learned to love myself. The last nine months God has put seven different people in my life who are grieving. They are people I feel God is using me to help them heal.

And God has used other people to help this man heal and feel God's love for him.

Last thing – God will use other people to enable you to feel encouraged and supported. We need other people to encourage us to keep going when we are tempted to quit. To say to us, “You can do it. Don't give up. Keep going.”

I've lifted weights for years. It is an amazing difference when I have a spotter who encourages me when I feel like I can't get the weight off my chest. A friend who says, “You can do it. It's just a little bit more. Push. You got it. You got it.”

During the Columbus Marathon a few weeks ago there were literally tens of thousands of people lining the 26-mile racecourse cheering the runners along. That's what a small group is meant to do – to cheer you along, to tell you that you can do it, that you can keep going.

That is what our recovery groups do. When you fall, they say to you, “You can get up. Keep going. Don't quit. Don't give up on yourself. God hasn't given up on you.”

That's what marriage mentors do in this church. If you are struggling in your marriage, we can pair you with a marriage mentor couple, who will encourage you and tell you to keep going. Don't throw in the towel on your marriage.

That's what a men's group or women's group can do for you – to cheer you on, to encourage you in the Christian life. Don't give up on God. Don't give up on your faith. Become the kind of man or woman that Christ intends you to be.

How do you keep going when you are tempted to quit? You know, I think it is really important, friends, that we share with others what I call "the hanging on verses." Do you know the hanging on verses? Have you ever had the Holy Spirit use a Bible verse to speak to your heart when everything else was collapsing around you? To speak to you, "This is true. This is my word." My favorite hanging on verses are 2 Cor. 4:7-9.

SLIDE

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

It is okay to be perplexed. We don't have to have it all figured out. There are times when the load gets so great that you cannot bear it by yourself. And when you are in deep relationship with other people, God will use those people to help you lift the burden, so that you aren't crushed.

I mentioned to you last weekend that there is a dear man in our church, Scott Bell, the husband of Christi Bell, who heads up our Mourning Touch Ministry to help poor families obtain burial help for deceased children. She works closely with Children's Hospital. Scott works with The Make A Wish Foundation here in town and helps children who have cancer. Scott and Christi have three children.

A few weeks ago, Scott was riding his dirt bike with his son and had an accident. As a result, he broke his neck. He fractured the C1 vertebrae. His injuries were life threatening and it has been touch and go for the last few weeks. He's had problems with his lungs, with his heart rate, various infections. There have been a number of times in the last few weeks where Scott's life felt like it was literally hanging by a thread.

But in the midst of this tragedy, God's people have stepped in to support and encourage Scott and Christi, and their children. And because they were so deeply knit into the Christian community – our church, the church we planted a few years ago, the Sunbury church plant, as well as the folks at Tree of Life Christian School – people have gotten involved. There's been a constant stream of prayers offered for Scott, Christi, and the kids. Our congregation collectively prayed for Scott at our All-Church Intercessory Prayer Meeting just this past Wednesday. On several occasions when it seemed that Scott wouldn't survive, he suddenly and almost miraculously rebounded. And he's been making steady progress.

The Christian community has gathered around the Bell Family. They've provided meals and gift certificates, the lawn is getting mowed, there is transportation being arranged, the kids are being taken care of, their house is being cleaned. Christian friends even stepped in to coordinate communication with the church community. A website was established where new information is being posted regularly regarding Scott's condition.

As of Friday morning, the website has been visited 13,156 times. Christi, Scott and the family have not been alone during this crisis.

And the positive impact doesn't stop there. Other people have taken notice of how the Bell Family has handled this crisis and the love they've been receiving. One of the results of this incredible outpouring of love is that it's captured the hearts of people who knew the Bells' but had no relationship with Christ. Other families of patients in the surgical intensive care unit at OSU have noticed Christi's faith. The nurse, who was on the life flight, remarked that she had never seen such an outpouring of love in all the time she's been with MediVac, the life flight.

Christi has had opportunities to pray for others in the surgical intensive care unit. She's had opportunities to share her faith. Just last weekend, Christi picked up some Bibles and Worship CDs to give out to others in the surgical intensive care unit. She even gave away her personal Bible.

Now, the situation with the Bells' is far from over. They have some very, very difficult days ahead of them. They are not through this crisis. But God has not chosen to work directly in their lives apart from other people.

Here's what I would like to ask you to do. I'd like you to take the bulletin out that you were given when you came in. If you are not part of a small group here at Vineyard, I'd like you to do one of two things: 1) In the tear-off portion of the bulletin, there is a place for you to fill in your name and phone number. There is a line underneath for you to check for our New Community Series that is starting this Wednesday, November 5th at 7:30. It will be running for five weeks, including Thanksgiving week. If you are not in a small group, I'd like you to consider signing up for that.

Or alternatively, we have a bulletin insert. And if you are ready to get involved in one of our small groups, then I would like you to fill out the bulletin insert. Put your name and address, phone number and email address on it. Circle the kind of group you are interested in. Fill out the rest of it. Anyone who is not in a small group, after today's service, go out to the lobby and meet some small group leaders. They will be wearing nametags. All of our pastors and staff who oversee small groups will be out there.

Listen, you need other people and so do I. We are not designed to do life alone. We are not designed to even do life just with God. God uses other people to cause us to grow.

Let's pray.

Four Things You Probably Won't Get Directly From God

Rich Nathan

November 1-2, 2003

John: Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair

John 17:20-21

I. You Probably Won't Be Restored Without People.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Galatians 6:1

If one falls down, his friend can help him up. Pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Ecclesiastes 4:10

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. James 5:16

II. You Probably Won't Be Corrected or Disciplined Without People.

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Luke 17:3

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Hebrews 3:13

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Revelation 3:19

III. You Probably Won't Fully Experience God's Love Without People.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 1 John 4:11-12

IV. You Probably Won't Feel Supported or Encouraged Without People.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2