

Putting It Together

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Introduction.

- A. This morning is going to be the eighth and final sermon for the year in our series on service groups. It's hard to believe that we've been examining this topic since early October, but it's true. In that time, we've looked at why we need to expand the work we do for God outside of the assembly, and we've seen six options that the elders have offered us to help us carry out God's will. Because this is a time of year where we tend to be out a lot, both because of travel and illness, I thought it would be useful to summarize what I've said.
- B. Before that summary begins, though, it's good to repeat some things we've already said about these groups. First, all of this is going to begin with the new year, once we've all returned and recovered from the holidays. Second, many of these groups are not part of the work of the church. The work group, for instance, is just about the group leader encouraging individual Christians to do good as individuals. There isn't going to be any church money spent in unscriptural ways. Third, as John has emphasized repeatedly, these groups are totally voluntary. Nobody is going to assign you to a group and make you do something you don't want to do. We do believe that these are things that will please God, but your participation is totally up to you.
- C. Because this is voluntary, we need to look at what we're volunteering for: at why we're doing what we're doing, about what each group's job is, and at what results we can expect to see. If we carry out God's will in this, I know we will transform this congregation. Let's look, then, at putting it together.

I. The Purpose.

- A. As we begin a review of everything we've discussed, it's best to start by examining the purpose of this entire effort. For me, the Scripture that sums up what we want to do is Romans 12:1-2. We want to be living sacrifices to God. Back in the time of the Old Testament, of course, they had literal, dead sacrifices. Once you took your bull or your goat up to the priest, you didn't have any part in that animal anymore. What happened to it from then on out was entirely up to God. Paul is telling us, then, that we need to offer up our lives and ourselves to God, because that's the only thing that is acceptable to Him. If we've got it, God wants it. This includes not just the time we spend in church services, or the talents we use in the assembly, but the time that we have all week long, and any gift that we might turn to His service. All of this is meant to help us do that.
- B. Paul describes the process we need to go through to get there in the next verse. Notice that it begins with the renewing of our minds. That mind renewal is what we've been after for the past two months. Then, our new understanding will transform us, with the result that we are able to put our knowledge into practice. We are able to prove what the will of God is. In this process, we're at the halfway point. I think it's fair to say that everyone here has at least some idea of what to do. Now we need to start doing it.

II. The Groups.

- A. As we work on putting this into practice, there are six main areas where we are going to focus our efforts: our six service groups. Many of you have already signed up for one or more of these groups; many of you haven't. I get the vibe that one of the main reasons you haven't is that you were waiting to see what your options were before signing up for one task. To help you in that decision, we're going to look at our groups side by side.
- B. The first group is called the **ENCOURAGEMENT** group. Its mission is to do what the name says: to encourage members of this congregation who aren't here on a given Sunday by getting in touch with them and exhorting them to remain faithful to the Lord. This doesn't have to be any huge production; just sending a card to someone will suffice. This seems like a very small gesture, but it can have tremendous importance. Consider the words of the Hebrews writer in Hebrews 3:12-13. In the church, we need each other, and we need each other because otherwise, we will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Every church in existence struggles with this problem. There are always people at the margins who drift away from Christ without much notice. In fact, there are people like that here at Joliet right now. We need to do everything we can to keep them from drifting, to show them that their brethren really do care about their souls. This group can make the difference between those people being saved and being lost, and there's no bigger difference than that.
- C. The second group we've spotlighted is the **WELCOME** group. Its mission is to greet visitors to our assembly and afterward let them know that we appreciated their visit. In practice, this one ends up being fairly similar to the encouragement group. It also involves a lot of card-writing. The main difference is that you have to talk to the visitors you're writing first, and you have to contact all of them each week, not just one of them. We learn why this is important from Colossians 4:5. Whenever an outsider comes through our doors, we have an opportunity. We have a chance to win that soul for Christ. We are commanded to make the most of that opportunity, and one of the most important things we can do is make sure that our visitors know that their presence matters to us. Just a brief thank-you can bring them back and ultimately bring them to the Lord.

- D. Next in line, we come to the **COMPASSION** group. Its mission is to visit the sick and shut-ins. This is a familiar task, but it's a crucial one. Once again, friends, the goal of this group is to express love to people we often overlook or who particularly need it. I'm here to tell you, friends, that it's the highlight of our shut-ins' day when another Christian comes to see them. There are times when I go to see Dorothy Lee that I can tell that she's exhausted from talking to me, but she still doesn't want me to go because she's enjoying my company so much. It's just as important when we visit brethren in the hospital. During Lauren's recent hospital stay after her C-section, it made an immense difference in our lives when all of you came to see us. Furthermore, the Scripture tells us that such displays of love matter equally to God. Look with me at James 1:27. We can be sure, friends, that when we go see the members of our Christian family who are wrestling with affliction, that we're pleasing our Father in heaven. If this is something that you're already doing, I would encourage you to sign up for this group anyway. Once you're on the list, Joe can keep you updated on who needs a visit and who doesn't, so that we can carry out this work of love as well as possible.
- E. Our fourth group is the **YOUNG PEOPLE** group. Its mission is to teach our young people and influence them for good. We all know that the world is a dangerous place for the new child of God. We all know that we lose far, far too many of our young people. This group is an effort to halt that trend, by giving our kids more instruction in God's word and by giving them the opportunity to associate with other young folks who want to do what's right. As long as live, I will always be indebted to the godly friends and the Bible teaching I got outside of the assembly. They made a huge impression on me when I was younger and led me to stay true to Christ. We need to remember what Psalm 119:9 says. There is no other way to keep the young from being corrupted besides introducing them to God through His word. If this matters to you, sign up for the group.
- F. Fifth, we come to the **PRAYER** group. Its mission is to pray for the church, its members, and its work. The members of this group have made a commitment to pray more generally, but specifically, to pray for whomever asks for it. This is not the sort of work that we ordinarily see congregations in the brotherhood taking on, but I am convinced that we need to. Every Christian is supposed to pray without ceasing, of course, but this group can be a prayer spearhead, the shock troops we send into spiritual battle whenever we're fighting against a problem we can't solve on our own. Unless the Bible is a pack of lies, prayer like that can make a huge difference. Look at James' comments in James 5:16. Our prayers can transform the spiritual battlefield, but only if we use them. If you want to awaken that kind of power, this group's for you.
- G. Finally, our last group is the **WORK** group. Its mission is to help our older members with their home-maintenance needs. I think this is a case where we need to make a distinction between God's plan for the church and God's plan for individuals. We know that it's not the work of the church to provide painting and landscaping services for its members. However, as individuals, it's only right for us to help our older brethren when we see them wrestling with tasks beyond their ability. I proposed that this should involve two work days per year; in practice, it may turn out to be something quite different. However, this is a task that we need to work on as Christians because of John 3:18. It's really easy for us to say that we love one another, but unless we put in the time and the effort to help one another out, we aren't showing that we do love one another. Christ didn't just talk a good game when He was on earth. Instead, He acted by giving His life for us. If we are truly disciples of His, we will give our lives for the brethren. This group is a part of that.

III. The Results.

- A. In closing, though, we need to consider the consequences of our actions, the results if each one of us commits ourselves to working for God. Let's take a moment to think about the kind of church we can be if we follow through on this group program. We can be a church where every member feels loved and appreciated, where there isn't anybody who is left out or left behind, where we are standing shoulder to shoulder to protect our weak members from Satan. We can be a church where every visitor feels welcomed, where everyone who comes into our assembly is met with a handshake, a greeting, and a smile, not just from the preacher, but from many ordinary members. We can be a church where every sick Christian shares in the love of the congregation, whether their illness has landed them in the hospital for a few days or has confined them to their bed at home. We can be a church where every young person gets the support he needs to be godly, where the constant efforts of our parents are supplemented and strengthened by the entire church, so that our young people see that Christianity is a part, not just of their parents' lives, but of their lives. We can be a church where every saint is strengthened by the prayers of his brethren, where we consistently put the awesome power of God to work in our church and in our lives. We can be a church where every older member is taken care of, so that even in something as humble as home maintenance, God is glorified.
- B. Brethren, we can be that church. Starting next year, all of those wonderful things can be things we do and are known for. But we can only be that church if we work to be that church. All of us, not just the preacher, not just the elders, but all of us, working together to be the church God wants us to be. Young folks, this work is for you. Older folks, this work is for you. Middle-aged folks, this work is for you. Without all of us working together, we will inevitably fail. But with our commitment and God's help, we will surely succeed.

Conclusion. If you want to share in the work we do for Christ, you have to become His disciple first.