

Growth Track | Connect

Aaron Brockett | Hebrews 10:24-25

Well, I love Nora's story and I'm so appreciative that she was willing to share it. Could we just give her a hand? Appreciate her courage for giving us a peek into her life. Nora is a part of our Downtown campus. I just want you to know, if you're a guest or if you are visiting with us, we are one church that gathers in multiple locations around the city.

I just want to look right into the camera and say hello to our North campus, want to say hi to Downtown. I also want to say hello to our West campus and brag on West for just a minute. Last Sunday West celebrated a one-year anniversary since launching and they had a record attendance last weekend. They had over 840 people last week. They set up and tear down in a school on the west side—so West, you are our heroes every single week. I just thank you so much for the way that you serve so faithfully.

I also know that we have a number of people watching online. So I just want to say hello to anybody viewing online. In fact, last Sunday we had people who were watching the service—get this—Barbados, Dubai, Japan, and Jamaica. Isn't that amazing? So welcome wherever you may be tuning in around the world.

If you are watching maybe down the street or somewhere here in Indianapolis, that's great. We'd love to see you sometime in person. We like to say that technology is incredible but watching online is a great place to start in your spiritual journey but it's not a great place to stay. It is a phenomenal tool if you're kind of uncomfortable to maybe show up to church for the first time or wonder what it's all about. Maybe you're traveling or you've got sick kiddos at home, but don't make it a habit of just watching online because, largely, we want to connect with you.

In fact, I was talking to some people in the hallway last week during all of the baptisms that we had and I talked to several people who said, "Yeah, we've been watching online for about a year and we finally decided to come." And they got baptized last week.

I was talking to a young lady who said, "I was watching from home on Sunday morning, saw the invitation to baptism, saw all of the baptisms and just felt convicted that I needed to do it." So she showed up Sunday night, in person, and we baptized her that night. So incredible—would love to see you sometime if you're watching online.

We are in week two of this series that we started last week called *Growth Track*. The big idea behind this is what we want to do church wide—we want to just help everybody determine what your next step is to connect and to grow spiritually.

So here's *Growth Track* all at once:

Start following Jesus and be baptized.

Week number one, last week, we looked at the fact that we've just got to start somewhere. Jesus said follow me. That was the biggest invitation that he gave. So we want to start following Jesus, explain to you what that means and then for you to be baptized. There were 140 people who got baptized last week at all of our campuses and ... Yeah, we can go ahead and clap for that. We had an additional 150 people fill out the card and leave it with us and they marked the box: I really want to be baptized. But they just weren't ready last week so we're following up with them. We're hoping to see that baptistery get used a whole lot more between now and the end of the series.

Connect with others and join a group.

Today we're talking about connections: why should we connect with others, what does that look like? Why should we join a group? Why are groups such a big deal to us.

Grow in your faith, in a group, and through daily spiritual disciplines.

Next week we're going to look at growth: how you grow in your faith in that group and through daily spiritual disciplines.

Go discover your purpose, join a team, and make a difference.

Then we'll wrap it up on week four with: Go. So go discover your purpose. How did God make you? What's your personality type? What are your spiritual gifts? What do you bring to the table? Join a team and then go and make a difference. I would say that this sentence right here is the definition of fulfillment, which is something that we are all looking for in our lives.

That's what *Growth Track* is all about. Now, after we finish the series, beginning in October we'll just start running *Growth Track* every week. And when new people come to the church and they want to take the next step, we'll just point them to *Growth Track*.

You don't need to start at week one and go through week four. You can start anywhere you want and run through *Growth Track* so that you know what your next step is. If you come for all four weeks of this series, you don't need to go to *Growth Track*. You're in it right now. I want to teach our whole church this content before we start running this every single weekend.

I want you to find that card in your aisle and by the end of the service fill that out, mark the box that is most appropriate to you and drop it off at whatever campus where you may be before you leave. This is really important because I know about half of you filled out a card last week. I wanted more of you. My feelings aren't hurt too badly. I want to just encourage more of you to

participate in this even if you mark the box: I'm not interested. Or even if you create another box that says buzz off, I don't want to be... I get that.

We just want to know how we are doing. We're not going to bug you. We're not going to show up at your door. We just want to know how we're doing because I'm not interested in just amassing a crowd of spectators on the weekend. I really do want to help mobilize you to know what it is that God has put you on this planet to do and how you can connect and make a difference. So I would encourage you to drop that off before you leave.

Today we're talking about this whole importance of connecting with others. So if you have a Bible or maybe a Bible app would you please turn to Hebrews, chapter 10—Hebrews, chapter 10.

As you are turning there... When I was in junior high school I went to basketball camp one summer. And I was really, really nervous to go because I didn't know if I was going to know anybody. And sure enough, I got roomed up—it was on a college campus so we stayed in the dorms—I got roomed up with a kid who was from a different school in a different town, we didn't know each other. So it was really awkward. We were kind of making introductions and seventh grade boys really aren't all that well known for their social skills. Unfortunately, it doesn't get any better when we grow into men.

We were just kind of like trying to get to know each other in the room and we didn't know each other at all. And all of a sudden, right before bedtime, a bunch of his friends from his school found him and they barged into our room. And immediately he just lit up. I couldn't get two words out of him before but now he's talking to them and he's totally relaxed and you could tell that they were good, good buds. And they said, "Hey, why don't you grab your things and come down the hallway and stay with us. He didn't have to think twice about it. He dropped me like a bad habit. He was out of there.

Now if that were to happen to me today and I had a room to myself, I would be like, "Sweet—got a room to myself. I'm pushing those beds together, queen sized bed for me," right? But as a junior high boy, it made me incredibly insecure. I was just like, "Man, I don't have anybody here."

And what made matters worse is that I could hear everybody down the hallway having a good time. I found out all of my buddies were staying on the floor above me. So I turned off the light. I lay down in bed and as I just laid there I was like, "Man, I don't want to do this. I don't want to be by myself the whole week long."

I'd never been overnight by myself at a camp before so I remember laying there thinking to myself, "You know what? I'm out. I'm going to call my mom and dad and just tell them to come pick me up. I don't want to do this."

Then there was a knock at the door and it was a friend of mine from my class—he grew up in my neighbor hood. He was staying on the floor above me and he goes, “Hey, man. I heard you were down here. Are you in a room by yourself?” I was like, “Yeah, my roommate bailed on me.” He was like, “Oh man. Why don’t you grab your things and come up and stay with us?”

I remember that moment changed everything for me because with those words he was basically saying, “Hey, I want you to know that we see you and that you matter. Why don’t you come join us?” That changed everything for me that week. I didn’t think about calling my mom and dad, I didn’t want to go home, I stayed and I had a great week.

You know, that was nearly 30 years ago and that junior high boy is still in here. And I just bet that maybe you have something similar going on in your life. Here’s what I know about you even if we’ve never met and regardless of where you stand spiritually or where you stand with God—I know that every single person listening to this right now wants to know that they are seen. They want to know, “Do I really matter in this life and can I make a difference? Can I do it with other people? Can I be involved in the lives of others?”

I think this is what the author of Hebrews is really driving down on in chapter 10 because he’s addressing the church, he’s addressing what we call the body of Christ and he says: Hey, listen. You can have full confidence to approach the throne of God because of Jesus and because of what Jesus has done for you can have complete confidence that God wants you to enter in. And then he addresses our relationships with each other.

Here’s what he says in verse 24. He says, “Let us think of ways,” and I love that, the mental image that comes to my mind is we’re always kind of sitting around—let’s just brainstorm. Let’s just come up with a whole bunch of ideas to do what? “...to motivate,” or some translations say this word, I like it better **stir**—how can we stir up, “*one another*,” to what? “...to acts of love and good works. And let us not **neglect**,” or ignore or overlook or underestimate, that’s kind of what that means, “...our meeting,” or gathering, “together, as some people do, but,” what’s the word at all of our campuses? Say it, “**encourage**...”

My favorite definition of the word encourage is let me loan you my courage. I know that maybe you’re discouraged right now, I know that there are some things in life that are coming against you so let me actually loan you some of my courage so that you can get through the day. Let’s encourage, “...*one another*, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”

That means especially now that we live in a world that is so discouraging, especially now that we live in a world that is so divisive. Let’s not give up meeting together. Let’s continue to stir one another up.

Now as I look at this passage immediately one of the ways in which you try to determine what a passage means is you have to understand what the author intended to mean. If you say, “Okay, in this original setting, who is he writing this to?” I think that the author is implying that a couple of things are going here.

Number one is that the people were greatly discouraged. There is a lot to be discouraged by. Just a show of hands at all of our campuses how many of you had a least one thing happen to you this week that was discouraging? Show of hands.

For me it was every day. There was something that happened, something that went on. It's amazing the power that other people and external circumstances that are outside of our control have on the quality of our day. You're going, "Man, I was having a pretty good day until she said that." Or, "I was having a wonderful morning until that email came through." Or, "Man, I was having such a productive afternoon until that person came in and just messed up my flow. My flow is all out of sync and now I'm not nearly as productive because that person came in and said that to me."

So he's saying: Listen. There isn't a person that you lock eyes with every single day who doesn't need some encouragement, because we all do. I think that's the first thing that he's implying in this passage.

The second thing is that he's implying here is that there were maybe some grumblings or some habits among these first century believers in which they were starting to not show up to the gatherings, saying, "Well, I don't really need to show up for that, my relationship with God is good."

And he's basically saying: Hey, let's not get in the habit of just kind of staying in isolation. That's even true today. Oftentimes I'll hear people ask this question. They say, "Well, why do we need to go to church." Or, "Can't you be a Christian without going to church?"

And my answer to that question would be, "Hey, listen. By all means your salvation is not tied to your church attendance or involvement. God doesn't love you more if you're here or less if you're not. However, I would say that whenever we make a statement like that we're actually framing up that statement through the lens of, "Well, what am I going to get out of it if I go?"

We say, "If I don't think that I'm going to get much out of it then I don't need to go." Instead of saying, "Well, what am I going to get out of it?" we need to flip it and say, "What am I going to bring to it?" And that's very different because you can sit back and say, "Well, I don't know if I'm going to get anything out of it if I go," but what will be missing if you don't show up and bring what you and only you can uniquely bring to it?

If nothing else that you encourage someone—if nothing else that you stir someone up because you know, maybe just like you, somebody just had a week from hell and they're struggling and they're limping as they come through here. And one person or a small group of people can't encourage everybody. This is why the author of Hebrews says: let's do it to one another, let's encourage one another. Let's stir one another up.

Did you know that there are at least 30 verses in the New Testament that cannot be applied to the life of a believer if we are not connected to another person in a gathering called the church? It's all of those one another statements.

This whole idea of encouraging others is something that oftentimes runs against our nature because I think that for many of us the automatic question—I know this is true for me—is, “Well, when I wake up, when I go about my day, who's going to encourage me? Who's going to notice me? Who's going to help me get through the day?”

That's not necessarily bad, but it's just one-sided. And even those of you in the room who are natural encouragers, and we're so thankful for you, even for any of us that encouragement comes easily to, we still have to be taught how to do it and we still have to be reminded to do it.

So here's the flip of the paradigm. Instead of waking up on Sunday morning or Sunday afternoon and saying, “Man do I really need to make it to church today,” say, “Man, I can't wait to get to church today to see who God's going to put in my path, to see who needs to be stirred up, to see what it is that I can bring to the table—the difference that God might make because of my involvement.”

Here's the amazing thing about encouragement. When you give it, you receive it. Just go try it sometime today. Just genuinely encourage someone and see if you don't walk away actually feeling better yourself.

In fact, did you know that the only place in the Bible where it not only gives us permission but it actually encourages us to be competitive is in this area of encouragement? How many of you are naturally competitive people? Any competitors out there? Yeah—I see a lady right back there. Two hands. She's like, “Yeah, I'm the best. I'm the best here at raising my hands,” alright?

I'm super competitive. It gets under my wife's skin. We pull up at a stop light, I size the car up, the year of the car, all that—the driver. And I'm like, “Alright, I can take him.” Why? Right? Just because I can. I'll be in the line at Meijer and just judge the line of people and how fast I think they might be at the self checkout. That's the line I get in because I've got to get through as fast as I can.

Competition can be a good thing; it can be a bad thing. But do you know the one area that the Bible encourages us to be competitive is in encouragement. It says: Encourage each other and actually be competitive at it. Don't believe me? Romans, chapter 12, verse 10. It says this, “Love one another with brotherly affection.” That's gender neutral. This is the whole idea like a sibling. Your brothers and sisters in Christ—we want to love you with that kind of affection. Here it is. Let's say it out loud together at all of our campuses, “**Outdo one another in showing honor.**”

Outdo one another! And honor is another word for encouragement. Now this isn't like you walk up to somebody and go like, "Hey, man. You're so great."

"No, you're great."

"No, you're great."

"No, you're so great."

"No, you're great."

"No, you're great."

"Want to call it quits?"

"No. you're great."

That's not what we are talking about. We're talking about this genuine, others focused kind of a life where you see the difference that somebody is making and you actually verbalize it. I felt convicted of this years ago. All of the time I would admire somebody's giftedness or admire somebody's service or his faithfulness, what he was doing and I'd never tell him. I would think it. I would go, "Man, that person—I just really admire what he did." And then I was really challenged—if you think it vocalize it. Just tell him. You'll make his day. You have no idea the discouragement that he might be facing.

And when we think about honor we oftentimes, at least for me, I always think about honoring up. Like I'm going to honor my elders or I'm going to honor the person in authority over me or honor my employer. And then we think, "Well I don't necessarily need to honor down." But no. We need to honor everybody. Encourage everybody.

This is the thing that we want to drive down into our church culture: We want to honor up, down, and all around. Every single person that you come into contact with, you just show them honor. You encourage them. And you have no idea what your words of encouragement will do to someone's faith and emotions and to the kingdom of God.

Can I just say it took me forever... I'm still learning this. I still need to be reminded. It took me forever to really get this. Some of you who know me well know that I love sarcasm. I'm really fluent in sarcasm. I have a little bit of a dry sense of humor so for the longest time, especially in my teens and twenties, when I'd be interacting with somebody I would always go for the joke. Part of it was just a way to kind of break the ice or maybe some of my own social insecurities, but I could just see the joke and I'd go for it. And I just thought it was in good fun. I just thought that I was kind of ribbing someone.

Here's what I would do. I'd make a joke at someone's expense and then I'd go, "Hey, man. No offense. I only joke around with people I love. You good? Alright." And he wasn't good because he was sitting there going, "Hey, I'm good," but really he's not good. He's walking away bleeding emotionally because I hurt him and I didn't even know it.

I've gotten to the point now where I'm like, "You know what? Hey, I still can see the joke in every situation. I can still the sarcasm but I don't need to say it. I can just filter it." And my filter is filthy at the end of the day. I just clean that bad boy out, right? And instead of going for the joke, I try to look for the encouragement.

In fact, several months ago I wasn't preaching so I visited one of our other campuses and it was in the middle of winter so it was freezing outside, it was like sleeting rain. It was miserable outside. And I'm pulling into one of the campuses and traffic is crazy there was one of our traffic attendants was out there just all bundled up. You could tell he was freezing to death all soaking wet. And he's directing traffic. And he's got this really cheerful look on his face. He was just like directing traffic with enthusiasm.

I was like, "Man, I can't believe that. If I'm standing out there I'm miserable." So I made a mental note, I need to go encourage him. So I parked my truck and I went out of my way, got to that parking lot attendant and I said, "Hey, I just want to thank you for the way you're serving today. I just so appreciate it." And very quickly he was like, "Oh, yeah. No problem. No sweat."

And just something in my spirit said, "Don't let that go." So I just stopped and said, "Look at me for a second. I'm serious. You have no idea the difference that you are making today." And immediately he started to tear up. And I just about missed the moment because I thought, "Oh, I encouraged him. I did my job. He deflected it. We're all good." And I thought, "No, let me stop for just a second and just speak into his life." Now, I don't know who he was. I don't know what he was going through during his week. But I know this. He needed to be encouraged that day and I just about missed the opportunity.

Don't be one of those people who say, "Oh, I don't want to encourage too much. I don't want you to get a big head." You know that person in your life? If you don't have that person in your life, you are that person, alright? We've all got an Eeyore. People who just kind of take it upon themselves to say, "My job is to keep you humble," alright? Listen. It is not your job to keep other people in your life humble. That's God's job. And he's pretty effective at it.

God says: No. You stir one another up. Well what if they are arrogant? That's not your problem. God will actually deal with that. In fact, I would even say that people who come across as arrogant, they're still insecure and need encouragement because the reason why they are arrogant is because they are compensating for it, therefore they are self-promoting. That's what arrogance is. And actually, your encouragement could humble them.

So don't be one of those people who withhold encouragement thinking, "Well, I just don't want anybody to get a big head." The author of Hebrews says we've got to stir one another up. Our

weekend gatherings should be the most encouraging environment that you find yourself in during the week. And I'm not asking for you to be fake, I'm not asking that to be hype, I'm saying genuinely you come in here with the Spirit of Christ, looking to encourage other people.

I read a couple of weeks ago that about 70 percent of people who were polled said they hate their jobs—70 percent. Now if that is anywhere near being true, then that means that people at all of our campuses are walking in here every single week greatly discouraged. So, we just can't encourage enough. Even if someone loves their job, you just know maybe somebody right now whose marriage is in a valley, it's discouraging. Maybe someone is really lonely right now or maybe at odds with a close friend and it really hurts.

Maybe there are some financial issues, or some health problems, or there is an addiction or multiple addictions that some are medicating throughout the week and they want to be free from them but they can't get free from them and they hate the cycle they are in. Maybe you are just walking in here week after week with a whole bunch of shame and it's discouraging and the last thing that you need is to be kicked when you are down.

And I believe that the reason why church is declining in America today isn't just because people don't believe in God anymore. It's because they are like, "I got discouraged there once. Why would I go back?"

Philip Yancey is an author who years ago, I'll never forget this, he wrote about talking with a young lady who was really, really struggling. She was a single mom. She was addicted to drugs and she had started selling her body in prostitution to put food on the table and she felt horrible about it but she didn't know what else to do. So he was trying to encourage her and he said to her, "Well, have you ever thought about going to a church to get help?" And she looked at him with this look of shock and disgust and she said, "Church—why would I go there? I already feel bad enough about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

See, I think that we need to reframe our expectations about church and what it is that we get here. Paul writes in Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 15 through 16, he says, "He," referring to God, "makes the whole body," not talking about our physical one, he's talking about the spiritual body of Christ, "fit together perfectly." Meaning that there is nobody here who shouldn't be here, like this is a mistake, you are perfectly fit as part of the family of God. Listen to this, "**As each part does its own special work,**" the work that God designed you to do, "**it helps the other parts grow,**" so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love."

That means that if you are a follower of Jesus you can't opt out on being on mission with Jesus. Jesus calls you into his mission in the world to find more and more of his lost kids and to encourage the body of Christ so that it continues to grow up.

What that practically means is that every time we gather together on the weekends, you come ready—I'm talking to believers here—you're locked in, you're ready to be joyful, you're ready to serve, you're ready to say, "It's not just about me. It's not just about what I get out of it but

it's what I bring to it. And God, place somebody in my path who really needs to be stirred up." You come ready to sing, you come ready to worship, you come ready to learn, you come ready to engage, you come ready to clap when one person gets it started! That's just what you do.

In fact, speaking of that, since I've come back off of break I think every single time I've been up here teaching I've tried to like beckon you to respond back to me. Or I'll say, "Hey, is anybody out there?" Whatever. And by the way, I never have that in my notes. It's always spontaneous. And I just kind of throw it out there.

And I've had a number of you reach out to me and say, "Aaron, it's okay. We're with you, alright? It's fine. Do you need a hug?" And I want to be really, really clear that when I do that, I'm not fishing for compliments and it's not because I'm insecure—well I might be a little bit insecure, but aside from that it has nothing to do with that. It's because I want to stir us up. I want to stir us up.

Even more than that, I believe this. I believe that God doesn't just speak through one voice on a platform to a crowd, but God speaks and moves through the collective response of his people. Alright? And oftentimes the collective response of his people is better than the sermon. And oftentimes it makes the sermon better. Like I would say that if you don't think that I'm preaching very good, just start shouting me down, alright? And I'll preach better because I'm like, "Wow, you're really with me."

And what it does to the people around you who are kind of coming in here and all of this is new, they go, "Wow, these people are expecting to hear something significant." And God is on the move. And it's that you're not just spectators in a crowd. You are participants in the mission of God. And you have a ministry that I will never have.

God has gifted you in ways that I will never be gifted in. And you have a set of friends, and you have influence that I will never have. So there is no such thing as the peanut gallery within the church. I'm just here. My sole job is to just encourage you and stir you up and teach you and convict you so that you'll join me in following after Jesus.

Years ago at my very first ministry there was a good friend of mine named Kevin. He was in my small group. Kevin is a great guy. He's an engineer, loves the Lord, and has a great family. But one of the things that I noticed about Kevin was during the worship services he would stand there and his body language was just a real bummer.

I don't know if any of you know what I'm talking about but I would like watch him during the worship time and everybody is like—worship team is killing it and Kevin would literally standing there stiff as a board. And you were like, "Man, what's up with Kevin?"

It was like week after week after week after week after week. And then during the teaching time I'd be up here preaching my guts out and Kevin would just be sitting there like, "Hmm, Hmm," just like he was analyzing everything and I was like, "Man."

So finally one day Kevin and I go to lunch and Kevin and I knew each other well enough so I said, "Hey, Kevin. Could I ask you something?" And he's like, "Yeah, sure." And I said, "What's up with the body language during the worship services?" He's like, "What are you talking about?" I'm like, "Do I need to demonstrate?"

I was like, "When we're worshipping you act like you are mad to be there. And when I'm teaching I can't tell if this is connecting or if you disagree or what." And he was totally shocked. He was like, "Aaron, oh man." He's like, "I didn't mean for it to come across that way." He's like, "I can't sing so what I'm doing is during the worship times I'm standing there and I'm reading the lyrics and I'm internally agreeing with them and I'm giving them to God. And then when you're teaching, I'm an engineer so I'm really trying to listen, I'm trying to kind of analyze it, kind of get in here."

And I was like, "Okay, that's great. I'm glad I asked. Now I feel like I know you better. Now, do I have permission to speak into your life?" He was like, "Yeah, sure. Absolutely, you know that you do."

"You're bumming the rest of us out, man!" I was like, "It totally makes sense. I totally get it, but man, it's not just about you, Kevin. It's not just about you and God. There are others around you and part of your responsibility as a Christ follower is stirring one another up."

And can I just say the same thing to our church? It's like I saw Kevin at his girl's birthday parties and he was not standing there going, "Hmm. Happy Birthday to you." I would go to a baseball game or a basketball game with Kevin and he's losing his mind over that but he can't be expressive in church. And I said, "Kevin, man, what Jesus has done for us should actually bring you to this place of celebration."

I think what all of us need is just an occasional reframing of what it is that we can expect from the church. We are not here, and I don't want you to misunderstand me, we are not just here to serve you or to do a ministry for you or to provide a program so that you can grow. I hope all of those things happen. But what God has called us to, what God has called me to as one of your pastors and leaders of this church is something more than that.

And we find it in Ephesians, chapter 4, beginning in verse 11. It says, "Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church:" and then he talks about the pastors and leaders, he says the gifts that he has given are, "the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers." Now, their responsibility isn't just to do the ministry, "Their responsibility is **to**," what? What is it? Say it out loud, to "**equip**," that's our primary responsibility, "...to equip God's people," that's all of you, "to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ."

Our primary responsibility is to equip you to do the ministry that God has called you to do. To not just sit back and feed but to jump in and to be engaged because there's a ministry that God has specifically for you. And we are laser focused on that.

We cannot possibly accommodate everybody's request and everybody's desire for a program. I wish that we could but we'd be running in a million different directions. But we know this. We want to help equip you to do the ministry of stirring others up.

You know what we see in the New Testament is that this largely happened in big group settings and in small group settings in the first century church. And the principle remains true today. In fact, in Acts, chapter 2, verses 42 to 47 describing the very first church it says, "They worshiped together at the **Temple**," most similar to what we are doing now. It's a bigger setting and, "...each day, met in **homes** for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people." Now here was the result, "And each day the Lord **added to their fellowship** those who were being saved."

Why do you think that is? It's because it was the most encouraging environment in their city. God was doing something special among those people and they said: We want to stir one another up.

What we see here is the principle that God laid out from the very beginning of the first century church is that we gather together in a big group setting—why? Because there's an energy and an electricity that might happen in a room like the one that you are sitting in that just cannot possibly happen in your living room or in a coffee house.

It doesn't make those other places bad, It doesn't mean that God doesn't show up there, it just means that a collective group of people get together and we expect God to show up in a significant way. And then it says that in the New Testament that that's when they listened to the apostles' teaching. But they also got together in groups during the week to share the Lord's Supper and to share a meal together and to encourage one another. And we can learn these two principles right here that I really want to drive down into our church. Take a picture with your camera.

It's that: we learn in rows:

You're sitting in a row right now at all of our campuses looking at the back of somebody's head. That's what you are doing. And I'm dispensing some information for you to process and to consider. We learn this way.

But then: We grow in circles:

That's when we huddle up with a group of people who we are doing life with during the week. And the result of this is that God added to their number, which we know that God wants the church to grow because people matter. God's lost kids who need hope in this world—they need Jesus. But God also wants the church to grow smaller at the exact same time because you matter.

And God says it's not just about the crowd, it's about your personal growth. We see these two things simultaneously happening in the New Testament and it's what we want to reproduce today. So when we say small groups, what we mean is eight to 12 people who gather weekly or bi-weekly in any kind of venue—it could be a living room, it could be a coffee house, a conference center, a park—it doesn't matter.

We have men's groups. We have women's groups. Couples and singles and mixed groups that come together. We have student groups. And when you come together you do two things. You do the daily Bible reading together and then you take the sermon study that our team writes and puts on the app and then you process it.

Now the reason why we ask you to do the sermon study isn't because we think that it's the greatest small group material on the planet. It's not. It's based upon my sermons, mostly. So it's not, alright? But the reason why—there's other great Bible studies out there but the reason why is because in a venue like this, it's just like Nora said. Nora had some questions and she couldn't raise her hand and stop me and ask me. She could, but it would be awkward for the rest of us.

So I know that you've got questions and I know that you are wrestling with some stuff. So you process that with your group. And even more than that, you do this. Here's what your group does. Your group isn't just a social setting. Your group isn't just when you get together with good, good friends. I hope those things happen. But a group is when you say, "Hey, what's God saying to you from that passage? What am I going to apply to my life? And when am I going to do it?" And a group holds you accountable for that. And we all need that in our lives.

So let me just give you four things that a group does in our lives.

The first thing is that: Groups help you to feel connected.

Groups help you feel connected to a big church. Sometimes a lot of people say, "I came to Traders Point but it's just too big." Size doesn't determine whether or not a church is too big. A church feels too big when you don't know anyone. And I've been in a church of 100 where it felt too big because I didn't know anyone. Practically speaking, you're not going to be able to know, intimately, more than 75 to 100 people anyway. You don't need to know everyone; you just need to know someone and groups provide that opportunity.

Here's the second thing: Groups help facilitate your growth.

We're not just getting together to have social hour, but groups are where you actually dig in. We learn in rows, we grow in circles.

Number three: Groups help give you protection.

Protection? Protection from what? Well, largely maybe from your own wisdom. If you're just listening to your own wisdom, it's not wisdom. Proverbs 13 talks about that. We need others who will speak into our lives, others we trust and who we love and we say, "Hey, man. I don't know if you should continue to go down that path."

And then here's the fourth thing: Groups help encourage you to stay in the fight.

We are all discouraged about something. I've had a number of people say, "Man, I just don't know. I don't know if I want to be in a group." Or, "I've had a bad experience with a group. I prefer Sunday school class." I get all of that. Listen. What we see happening in the New Testament was that groups were the model. In fact, Jesus developed a group to be around him. It was the disciples.

And if you think that your group is bad, look at his group. They all bailed on him and he had the whole Judas thing. It was just a mess. In fact, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him and then he still invited him into his group. And if Jesus needed a group, what makes me think that I don't need one? So, can I just ask you today who's in your circle? You all need one.

I want to bring out some of the men who are in my circle today. These aren't all of the men who are in my circle but it's a fair representation. Some of the guys in my group are out of town. They couldn't be here today but I've asked these men to come up and join me on stage.

We have Zach. Zach is in my group and Zach is a bad man, alright? And then we've got James Payne. James is one of our elders, a good, good friend of mine. And Doug Felton is the chairman of our elders. I've known Doug for 11 years. He was an elder when I first came here. Earl Thompson is another one of our elders and his favorite thing is to stand up here on the stage in front of all of you, by the way. I'm getting a lot of joy out of this. And then this is Josh and Josh is in my small group. His family just came to our church like seven or eight months ago. Not very long ago. And this is Greg Anderson. Many of you know Greg. Greg is our executive pastor. He's one of my best friends.

Now, look at this group of men. Guys, I need a group in my life because I don't trust myself. I don't trust my own wisdom. I don't trust my own knowledge. I don't trust that I'm seeing my life objectively. I need a group around me.

There are three postures that your circle can have in your life. The first posture is just simply this one right here. Everybody needs a circle in their life where they just come around you [in a protective stance facing out arms locked] and surround you. In fact, can I just say this? This feels really, really good right now. I just wish that I could have preached the whole message this way. I feel much bolder because I've got these guys around me. They are just coming around me and saying, "Hey, look man. We've got you. We love you and we know that life is hard and we'll take some arrows for you because we're your crew. We're around you." Everybody needs that.

But this is another posture that your circle takes. And it's just simply this one [circle facing inward arms locked]. And can I just say that this is far more uncomfortable, alright? There are some interesting smells, and they are a little too close right now, but we all need people who are this close into our lives.

Listen. You are as sick as your secrets. Don't have any. The best way that you can do that is to have people come around you who have access into your life. Now, you don't let just anybody have this. You don't just like say, "Hey, just come and be a part of my circle." They've got to earn your trust and you need to know that they trust Jesus themselves. But we all need this in our lives. Just somebody up close just asking the question with no judgment, but they will hold you accountable to say, "Hey, man. How are you doing?"

"I'm not doing so well in this area."

"Alright, man. We're with you. We're praying for you. Can we ask you next time we get together how you are doing? Because if you don't do anything about it, you're not going to grow."

But then here's the third posture that a group takes and we all need this in our lives because life can be so discouraging and so difficult. It's just this one right here [straight line linked arm and arm]. You just need people around you as you face life. I mean, if you're not in a storm right now, it's coming. The waves of life hit us and we all think, "Well, I'm good. I'm self-sufficient. I'm not going to fall. I'm not going to make a bad decision." Nobody who ever ruined their life set out to. They never thought that they would end up in a ditch. So when the waves of life begin to hit you've got to have that stability around you.

Man, if I was standing up here all by myself and I challenged somebody to come up here and knock me down, there are a whole bunch of you who would probably like to and you'd come up here and you'd be able to do it. You'd be able to get enough force that you'd be able to knock me over. But if I said, "Hey, come knock me down now," [standing together in a group arms locked together in a strong chain] it's going to be a lot more difficult and even if you could, these guys would come find you, especially Zach, alright?

So today can I just ask you, who is in your circle? Maybe this is your first weekend at Traders Point. You can get into a circle. Maybe you're saying, "I don't know that I'm a Christian. I don't know that I believe what you believe about God." That's okay. Get into a circle and begin to process this.

I just want to encourage you to pull out that card and fill it out and mark whatever box is true for you. And I know that a number of you don't want to play. Only half of you filled out the card last week. I want you to encourage you just to do it, even if you say, "Get lost. I don't want to be in a group." We've got good information now. Thank you very much. Just take that. Drop it off in the box. We're not going to bug you. We just want to know how we are doing. Because,

listen. I don't want to be a pastor of a crowd of spectators. I really do want to help you to take your next step of growth.

Now, a number of you right now say, "Aaron, I tried to get into a group and nobody ever followed up with me. It didn't ever go anywhere." And can I just say, I'm so genuinely sorry. It's all on me. You give this another shot because our team is committed to getting you connected this week into a circle. Who's in your circle? We all need one.

As we take communion together, let's process this and let's fill out the card and drop it off.

Father, we come to you right now and we thank you for what you modeled to us in the New Testament. And, God, I pray that our perspective would change from—when it comes to church that it would change from, "What am I going to get out of it?" to "What can I bring to it?" So, Father, meet us in this place. Do a work within us. I pray that if there are some here who feel like they are isolated that they could walk out of here today knowing that they've made the next step toward getting into a circle. We ask this in Jesus' name. And everybody says: Amen.

Thank you so much.