

# ***Losing My Religion***

## ***4. Fruit of the Spirit***

February 25-26, 2017

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On Dec 5, 1914, Ernest Shackleton embarked on what he called “the last great polar expedition.” His goal was to cross Antarctica by dogsled—an uncharted journey of 1,500 miles across the most inhospitable terrain on earth. His crew of 27 was handpicked from a field of 5,000 applicants. The ship that would carry them there was named *Endurance*. For six weeks they fought their way through frigid seas and ice floes trying to reach the continent, until finally their ship became frozen into the ice pack. There was nothing to do but hunker down for the winter and wait for the spring thaw to release the ship. After ten months in their wooden icebox, spring finally arrived. But instead of releasing the vessel, the shifting ice floes crushed it to pieces.

At this point, Shackleton gathered his men and announced his new mission: to get every man home safely. With the ice pack breaking up, they set up camp on a giant ice floe, hoping the current would carry them toward Paulet Island, where they had provisions stored. Shackleton devoted every waking moment to preserving his men’s health, morale, and unity. Day after day he walked from tent to tent, checking on each man. When spirits began to sag, he would order the cook to come up with some hot drink, or call for a talent show.

When it became apparent that the floe was carrying them out to sea, Shackleton ordered the men into three lifeboats they had preserved from the *Endurance*. After seven harrowing days and nights fighting powerful currents, freezing rain, and massive icebergs, they made it to an uninhabited slab of rock called Elephant Island. For the first time in 497 days, they set foot on land. But they were far from safe. Elephant Island was far from any shipping route, and no one on earth knew they were there. With morale and provisions running out, Shackleton determined their only course of action was to take one of the boats and head for a whaling station on South Georgia Island for help. That would mean a journey of 800 miles across the most treacherous waters on the planet. As he shoved off with a portion of his crew, Shackleton promised the rest he would come back for them, and the 22 men left behind assured themselves that if anyone could save them, it was Shakleton.

For 14 days the small boat battled gale-force winds and 20 foot seas. They took only four navigational readings during the 800 mile journey. If they were off by even a degree, they would miss South Georgia entirely and be lost at sea. On the 14th day, they spotted land, but the outgoing tide wouldn’t allow them to get to shore, so they had to spend another night in the waterlogged boat. That night a hurricane hit, and for nine hours they fought for their lives. When daylight broke, they were able to land in a rocky cove, only to discover they were on the wrong side of the island. The only way to

get to the station would be to hike across 22 miles of mountainous terrain that had never been charted or crossed before. Shackleton and two others trudged 36 hours straight before stumbling into the whaling camp like walking corpses.

Shackleton allowed himself one night's sleep, before setting about the task of rescuing the rest of his men. He would have to acquire a ship, and re-cross those hazardous waters. His first three attempts failed, as sea ice prevented him from reaching Elephant Island. During those months, Shackleton's hair literally turned from brown to gray with worry over his men. On his fourth try, Shackleton made it through the ice, and as he approached the island, he saw men gathering on the shoreline to greet him. Anxiously he counted one, two, three ...but it wasn't till he reached 22 that he breathed a sigh of relief. "They're all there," he said to his mate, "they're all well." Shackleton kept his word, and delivered every one of his men safely home. That's loyalty. That's commitment. That's faithfulness.

When I first read this story I was really impressed by Shackleton. After thinking for a while about this story, I began to become more impressed with the 26 other guys on the trip. Think about this...a group of 20 some men sticking it out together in the Arctic for close to a year without a mutiny. They didn't divide into camps or factions. They didn't kill one another. No one mysteriously died in an avalanche. A group of men banded together on the island in a worst case scenario. They were not warm or well fed. They were not living in ideal situations or comfort. They really didn't know if they would ever be rescued. They didn't vote anyone off the iceberg. Some of the men would have had bad emotional days. Some of the men had to get on other men's nerves. You can't hide the quirks of your personality in close quarters for a year.

There's only one way that they could have made it together through this trial. They had a shared goal. They had a shared vision. They each knew that they would have to pull together to see their mission completed...to get home. Likewise, the apostle Paul knew that Christianity was not a solo sport. Our faith calls us to be connected together under a common vision, a common goal, to accomplish the purpose of making disciples who make disciples. But, let me ask one question here. How can we be disciples who make other disciples without being in community together? Well, the obvious answer is that it's impossible. To become disciples who make disciples which is our purpose, then we must do it in the context of community.

Paul understood this deeply. That's why his letters were written to groups of disciples for the most part. Paul knew that there were two necessities in order for the people of God to accomplish the purposes of God:

1. Relational Community When I say community, I mean that we must be in regular face to face relationships with each other. Discipleship happens face to face, not shoulder to shoulder as we are now in this worship service.
2. Empowered by the Spirit.

The reality is that you need both of them working hand in hand. Community without God's spirit helping us to treat each other in Christ-like ways leads to an unhealthy community that no one wants to be a part of. So Paul takes some time towards the end of his letter to the Galatians to encourage the community at Galatia to be led by the Spirit in all of their interactions with each other.

**Galatians 5:** <sup>13</sup> *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh<sup>[a]</sup>; rather, serve one another humbly in love. <sup>14</sup> For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>15</sup> If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

Now, what's the first thing that we notice here? Paul is teaching them that above all things they must make a choice to love one another... **serve one another humbly in love**. Remember that he is writing to a broken community. Some believe that they should go back to following the Old Testament ways of the law while some are being faithful to Paul's teachings about being freed in Christ from the law. So Paul is bringing both sides together through a common denominator...Love. Love sums up the law of the OT and is the new commandment given by Jesus: love one another. The bottom line here is that the community will not last or be effective in making disciples who make disciples if the people don't learn to love each other deeply. If they don't get this essential part down, then there is no future for them as a community.

As a youth pastor, I studied and prayed for countless hours trying to figure out why some small groups sustained spiritual health over long periods while some would diminish over a period of time. I would watch some healthy cliques and friend groups thrive, while some other groups would grow toxic and soon diminish. What makes one group healthy, effective and fruitful while another group almost completely disappears after a season? This was baffling.

I naturally thought affinity would be the basis of health. Jocks should hang out with jocks. Band kids should hang out with band kids and so on. Bring people together with common interests and you would expect to see health. Well, that's not always true. And then, I thought...it's all about the leader. And then after a while I discovered that this was not always true either. A great leader's group could be healthy or it could really struggle.

After a few seasons of ministry, two truths emerged that pointed to sustained health.

1. They were united together in their purpose. They knew why they were together and they were committed to each other to fulfill that purpose.
2. The teens genuinely loved each other. They cared about each other. They showed grace and mercy to each other.

The social make-up of a group or who was their leader didn't matter, as long as they were united in purpose and they loved each other. It seems like nothing could stop those groups. Paul understood these truths 2000 years ago and begins to unfold how the Galatians can live this out.

*<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever<sup>[c]</sup> you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

Paul is reminding them, that when they came to Christ, all believers are given God's Holy Spirit. We are no longer led by the written law; we are led by God's Spirit that teaches us to love. Secondly, we are also no longer slaves to our fleshly desires to sin and hurt each other. God's spirit gives us power to overcome these sinful urges so that they could be united and love each other in a God honoring way.

And now, we come to what theologians call a vice/virtue list. A vice/ virtue list is simply a list of examples. It's not a closed list. It's a list of examples. For instance, if Paul was writing to Pittsburgh Christians today he might have a list that is more accurate to our setting. He might not mention witchcraft or some other things because we don't struggle with the exact same issues. He might even add some things to the lists that we struggle with in our region like greed or racism. Either way, Paul is calling us to be led by God's spirit in our interactions with each other.

*<sup>19</sup> The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

As you can probably tell, Paul is a pretty detail oriented guy. I mean he has lists of sins written out. So, I want to encourage us not to get lost in the details here and miss Paul's big point. Paul's big point is that we are called to live in a loving community with each other. And Paul's makes it clear that we have to be led by God's Spirit so that we can be a healthy community that produces disciples who make disciples.

Now, I just want to stop here and point out something. There's another hindrance of Christian community that Paul doesn't spell out for us, but the implications are extremely clear in this text and in other parts of the New Testament. So what is another hindrance of biblical Christian community? It's subtle, but it's prevalent in our society. It's called individualism. And we have to watch out because any church in America can become a collection of individuals instead of a community.

We have to ask ourselves today...are we a collection of individuals or are we a community of believers? Another way to phrase that is...Are we only shoulder to shoulder with each other on the weekends, or are we face to face with each other? A church consultant tells the story of a large, vibrant church he was asked to study. The pastor of this church sensed that something was wrong, even though the church seemed to be thriving. When the consultant interviewed members of the church, he found they were very enthusiastic. "We love it here," they said. "The music rocks. The sermons are relevant to my needs. My kids love it." But when he asked them what would happen if the pastor left, or the music changed, or the kids' programs declined in quality, one after another, without hesitation, said, "Oh, I would leave, and find another church that meets my needs."

What this consultant discovered is that many churches today are simply a collection of individuals pursuing their own interests, rather than a community of people committed to one another's well-being. The only way to get beyond this consumer-mentality is to connect people to one another in deep, caring, and long-lasting relationships. Ultimately, our loyalty isn't to an institution or a building or a program, but to people—to brothers and sisters who are counting on us. And that's where small groups come in. Small groups are the way that God has called us to do life as a community.

- It's in small groups that we learn to disciple each other.
- It's in small groups that we learn to love others who are not totally on the same page as we are on every issue out there.
- It's in small groups that we have an opportunity to build rich, lifelong friendships.
- It's in small groups that we have an opportunity to grow deeply in our faith walk as we encourage each other to take next steps.
- It's in small groups that we have an opportunity to serve our community and to make an impact.
- It's in small groups where we move from a collection of individuals to a community that is there for each other.
- It's in a small group that we fulfill the purposes that God has called us to.

For our spiritual growth campaign we have asked that each person who attends Crossroads to join a small group for the six week campaign. I realize that jumping into a group with people that you might not know can be a daunting obstacle to many of us. I know that for many of us it's just not as simple as..."Well, the pastor asked me to do it, so I will do it." Many of us have a fear of social situations. Many of us fear that we can't fully commit because of our hectic life. Some of us fear that we might embarrass ourselves. (By the way, I have never let that stop me.)

From hearing people discuss why they haven't jumped into a small group over the last decade, I thought I would address these real concerns. So, I decided to make a top ten list for us today. Kind of like a Letterman top ten list, but a Christian one. So with no further ado, here we go!

***Question 1: Will I feel awkward showing up to group the first time?***

Yes, of course you will.

***Q2: Will it take a while to make friends?***

More than likely, unless you are joining a middle school group in which you can have a new BFF within the first two meetings.

***Q3: Will there be some emotionally unstable people in the group?***

It's probable...it's the world we live in. My groups have always patient with me. As Pastor Tim says, people like me are an acquired taste. This is why Paul had to write our passage today...because people are people.

***Q4: Will I grow in my faith in small group?***

Absolutely, if you give it time.

***Q5: Will there be awkward moments?***

Money back guarantee if there aren't any. If you don't experience an awkward moment we will buy back your Draw the Circle book for a dollar.

***Q6: What if I am too busy to do a group?***

We're all too busy not to be in a life giving group.

***Q7: Will there be people who try to be the first to answer every question, every time?***

Yes, I happen to be one of those personalities...it's exhausting to be around people like me, I know...but thankfully people have loved me through it by living out this Galatians passage.

***Q8: Will I be forced to share or pray out loud?***

Not until you are comfortable.

***Q9: Is there a better way to become a disciple who makes disciples?***

Nope.

***Q10: Is there a better way for us to impact our community?***

Nope, we are better together.

I have some wonderful, lifelong friends that I never would have met if it were not for being in a small group with them. On a personal note, I can't express how deeply my life has been impacted by being in community with the people here at Crossroads. My wife and I have said time and time again that our small group became our family in the last few years.

I want to see you experience God in ways that you have never had the opportunity to before. God has called us to be in community together; in a loving community as Paul described to the Galatians. I am so excited for the 20 new groups that are starting. It's going to be an adventure; a wonderful adventure!

Let's take out our commitment cards. I want to give you time during the next few moments to make a commitment to join a group for the 6 week period. If you are already in a small group, please indicate on the commitment card .