

INTRODUCTION

We're calling 2013 the Year of Discipleship. So our theme verse is found in what Jesus said in Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Over the next few weeks I'm going to be talking about the genetic markers of a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. The study of genetics is fascinating, and is evidence of the creative genius of God. As the Bible says, you are fearfully and wonderfully made. You have millions of cells in your body and each cell contains 23 pairs of chromosomes. In each chromosome there is deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, which is called a gene. Each strand of DNA is like a twisting ladder, called a double helix. If that's too confusing, just remember this. We inherit genetic traits from our parents. So, if one of your parents had brown eyes, chances are you have brown eyes, too. Or if your daddy was a cowboy, chances are you inherited his Wrangler genes!

In this study we're going to examine five of the dominant genes that can be seen in a disciple of Jesus. Today we're going to look at: The GATHERING gene: A disciple SHOWS UP consistently. Next week we'll study the GIFTED gene: A disciple SERVES UP faithfully. We're also going to examine the GROWING gene: A disciple GROWS UP spiritually. Then I'll talk about the GROUP gene: A disciple LINKS UP relationally. And finally we'll study the GENEROSITY gene: A disciple OFFERS UP sacrificially.

The subtitle of this series is: "I'm not a FAN of Jesus. I'm a FOLLOWER." I got the idea from a book title by Kentucky Pastor Kyle Idleman. One of the weaknesses in the church today is there are many people who are fans of Jesus. A fan is an enthusiastic admirer. The word fan is short for fanatic, and we all know people who are fanatical about their favorite team. I grew up in the state of Alabama, home of the craziest football fans in America. When you're in the first grade you have to declare whether you're an Auburn or an Alabama fan. And your choice pretty much determines who your friends are, who you'll marry, and what job you'll probably have—it's that serious. Of course, the Alabama fans yell "Roll Tide!" And they aren't ashamed to dress up in crazy costumes to support their team. Since they've won three of the last four national championships, they have a lot to cheer about. And although Auburn won the national championship two years ago, their fans have fallen on hard times.

It was so bad when I was a pastor in Alabama that I had to fuss at our members to get along with each other and not skip church when their team lost on Saturday. I showed up for church early one Sunday morning on the day after Alabama had beaten Auburn and there was a forty-foot banner hanging in the baptistery that said, "Roll Tide." There's a hymn in the Baptist Hymnal called "Jesus Saves." There's a verse that says, "Waft it on the rolling Tide, Jesus Saves!" Whenever we sang that hymn the volume was always twice as loud on the part that said "Rolling Tide." You can't make this stuff up. I know what fans are like.

And some Christians act like fans when it comes to their relationship with Christ. They admire Jesus and they are even excited about the Lord. They show up for a few hours each week and cheer for Jesus. I would say a fan would never lay down his or her life for their favorite football

team. But remember, I'm from Alabama, so I'll just say *most* fans would never lay down their life for their team!

A follower of Jesus is someone who goes beyond cheering enthusiastically for Jesus; they are willing to lay down their life for Him. And the first genetic marker of a disciple we're going to examine is this: The gathering gene: A disciple shows up consistently.

Hebrews 10:19-25. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 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."

A Christian once asked me, "Why should I go to church?" I thought for a moment and said, "You don't go to church; you ARE the church." Church is not a place; it's what exists when believers gather together. A fully devoted follower of Jesus consistently gathers together with other believers. Let me give you five reasons WHY we should gather with other believers on a regular basis.

1. Disciples gather in obedience to God

One reason we gather together is because God's Word commands us NOT to forsake meeting together. Sadly, there are many Americans who seldom attend church. Many people only appear in church three times during their lives. They may be christened as a child by their parents. They may get married in a church; and they may have their funeral in a church. In other words some people only attend church to get hatched, matched, and dispatched!

James O. Davis wrote: "How important is it for Christians to be faithful to the local assembly? If a person is willingly and consistently forsaking the assembling of himself/herself, then he/she cannot claim to be true to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and the church are not identical, but they are inseparable."

In this passage of scripture from Hebrews there are five times the writer says, "Let us." We're going to look at all five Let Us's, so I'm calling them "five healthy heads of 'Let us' for Disciples." Here's the first one: "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the HABIT of doing." (Hebrews 10:25)

We all know what habits are. They are behavior patterns we get into, and we do them so often, that we do them without even thinking about it. If you Google "bad habits" you'll find a list of the top ten bad habits: Smoking; Overspending; Gambling; overeating; drinking too much; taking drugs; complaining; being chronically late; eating junk food; and a new one for our generation: Being superconnected (texting, tweeting, Facebooking).

The writer of Hebrews points out that some people, obviously those calling themselves Christians, had developed the bad habit of staying away from the assembly. It was true two thousand years ago, and it is certainly true today.

I want to show you some attendance graphs for Green Acres. Because we average almost 5,000 people in worship most Sundays we think this is a large church. But when you consider that we have almost 15,000 people whose names are on the roll of our church, the reality is that about 10,000 people who have declared themselves to be Christians and followed Christ in baptism have developed the bad habit of staying away. Two-thirds of the believers in our church don't seem to care enough about their faith to even show up on Sunday. I'm not angry with them, and I can't really speak to them because they aren't here—and you are, so good for you for simply showing up today. Think about TISD, or one of the private schools. What would happen if only 1/3 of the students showed up? You might think the school had a problem but actually the problem would be with the parents and the students!

There is great spiritual value in getting in the habit of showing up. The comedian, Woody Allen, said: "Eighty per cent of success is showing up." Of course Woody Allen also said, "My one regret in life is that I am not someone else."

I googled "showing up" and started reading a blog. A few sentences into it I realized that this blog was written by a dog, a Pug to be exact. Of course I suspect the owner helped him a little. But the blog said: I hear my master opening the door of the refrigerator, so I head over to the kitchen and see he's making himself a turkey sandwich. Now, unlike most humans, us dogs have very little dignity so I figure, what have I got to lose? I get into position seated near his feet and look up at him with my adorable pug face. He looks down on me and asks, "Are you here for a piece of turkey, Buddy?" He dangles a piece of sliced turkey just above my head. I give him all the right signals: ears are pointed up, eyes wide, tail wagging. He lowers the slice of turkey to my mouth and says. "OK, here you go." The turkey is as good as I thought it would be. He doesn't notice it, but I'm smiling.

Since then, every time I hear my master rustling in the refrigerator, I head on over there and give him "the look." I don't always get what I'm after but every now and then he tosses me a slice of turkey; or a chunk of last night's grilled chicken, even a doggy treat. I don't always get something but if I just show up, there's a chance I just might. And when I do get something, I forget about all the other times I didn't (us dogs have a pretty poor memory anyway).

Lesson learned? If you lie around on your doggie bed scratching yourself all day, nobody's gonna' bring you a thing. But if you just show up where the action is and give off the right signals...you never know.

Now that's pretty profound stuff considering it came from a dog. Here's my take on that. If you stay in bed on Sunday mornings reading the newspaper or lounge on the couch watching old movies don't be surprised when you feel spiritually empty. But if you'll get in the habit of simply showing up, good things are going to happen spiritually.

2. Disciples gather to worship the Lord

There are plenty of groups that gather together on a regular basis. Civic clubs meet. Mahjong groups meet. Retired guys meet and have coffee or to play dominoes. The thing that makes the church different is that we gather to honor and worship our Creator.

The second healthy head of "Let us," says, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith." (Hebrews 10:22) If you had been a Jew living in the time of Jesus, you could approach the Temple in Jerusalem, but you couldn't get very near. If you were a woman, you could only proceed to the fence that separated the court of the women from the court of the Israelites. If you were a man, but not a priest, there was another fence that stopped you. You couldn't get near to the presence of God. If you were of the tribe of Levi and a priest you could work around the outer areas of the larger Temple building. But even a priest couldn't enter into the place where the Shekinah glory of God dwelt. That area was separated from everyone by a huge, thick curtain. Only the high priest could lift that curtain and enter into the Holy of Holies—and that was for a few hours one day a year!

But when Jesus died on the cross the Bible says the curtain of the Temple was ripped in two, from top to bottom. Two men could stand and the bottom and possibly rip it from bottom to top. But it was God himself who ripped the curtain. And now through the sacrifice of Jesus, our High Priest, we can enter into the very presence of God.

One of the first Bible verses I memorized as a child was Psalm 122:1 which says, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" We're still teaching our preschoolers at Green Acres that verse.

When I was a kid I had a drug problem. My parents drug me to church every time the doors were open. I wanted to go as a child, but when I became a teenager, I didn't want to go, but they still drug me to church. I'm glad they did. Parents, don't ask your kids on Sunday morning if they want to go to church. Tell them on Saturday night that you are all going to church on Sunday morning.

Do you really LOVE to worship? Is it something that you look forward to during the week? For some of you it is. But if others of you were honest you'd say, "Oh, I could take it or leave it." Listen to the thrill of the Psalmist, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." (Psalm 100)

3. Disciples gather to encourage one another

We not only come to worship the Lord, we're here to encourage each other. If you're not here I can't encourage you and you can't encourage me. Your very presence encourages me and your absence discourages me.

For some, going to church just isn't a priority. They attend if there's nothing better to do. Bob was five minutes late for his tee time with his golf foursome on Sunday morning. They said, "What took you so long?" Bob said, "My wife wanted me to go to church. I told her I'd flip a coin. Heads I'd go to church and tails I'd play golf. And I had to flip that coin twenty times before tails came up!"

Let's look at our next healthy head of "Let us." The Bible says, "Let us encourage one another." (Hebrews 10:25) Now some people only go to church by way of their television. I'm thankful for television ministries and God has used our broadcast to encourage people who aren't physically able to attend church. If you are homebound, or have a physical problem that keeps you from actually attending a church, may this broadcast be a blessing to you.

But if you can physically attend a congregation you should. Why? Because there's no way you can encourage other Christians when you are sitting at home watching television. That requires your physical presence.

Last fall over a thousand of our members participated in an online Spiritual Life Survey. We've gotten the results of the survey and I'm pleased to report that there are two words to describe the condition of our church: Happy and Healthy. Generally speaking, our members are satisfied with the direction and leadership of our church—you're fairly happy. And compared to the 4,000 other churches that participated in the same survey, Green Acres ranked in the top 7% of all churches in terms of spiritual maturity.

So the good news is that we seem to be fairly happy and healthy. But the bad news is we are stagnant. The survey revealed we are very weak at the kind of evangelism that produces disciples who produce other disciples. A disciple is someone who is actively winning people to Jesus and then training them to become a mature believer who wins others to Christ.

When we make discipleship a priority, then there will be a revival of encouragement happening. Gathering to worship and encourage each other on a consistent basis isn't the most important thing we do as Christians, but it is probably the most basic thing we do. It all starts with showing up.

There was an old deaf man in a small village who faithfully walked over a mile to his church every Sunday morning. His church was small and there was no one to use sign language. He never heard the songs or the music. He would greet the people and read his Bible. He never missed a Sunday. One day someone asked him, "Why do you go to church? You could read your Bible at home, so why do you show up?" He replied, "I go because I want my neighbors to know which side I'm on!"

Which side are you on? Turn to someone and say, "Your presence here is an encouragement to me!"

4. Disciples gather to motivate ministry

If the most spiritual thing you ever do is simply attend worship, then you have some room to grow as Christian. The reason we gather is to worship and encourage each other to be involved in a ministry to people who are hurting.

The next "Let us" says this: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24) Now in Texas, we know what spurs are for. And it's our job to spur each other on to perform loving acts of service.

I'm convinced some people consider the church to be like a cruise ship. To them, discipleship is a cruise ship. A cruise ship is where you have most of the people lounging and relaxing while you have an overworked staff working hard to serve them. Many people come to church with a consumer mindset. They think, "Well, if this church meets my needs, then I might attend." It's all about what the church can do for them. If they don't think they're being served enough, they stop coming. Or if they don't like the music of the band and singer, they go looking somewhere else. Or if they don't like the jokes of the entertainer/pastor, they're going to shop around for another cruise line...I mean church.

Well there is a ship in discipleship, but it's not a cruise ship, it's a BATTLESHIP. And when the alarm for "Battle stations!" is sounded everyone knows what their job is and where they are supposed to be.

Let me ask you, have you found your place of service at Green Acres? If I yelled, "Battle stations!" would you know exactly where to go? (And I don't mean out the back door!) Or are you someone who is here to enjoy the cruise and be served? We gather to motivate others to minister.

5. Disciples gather to anticipate the Lord's return

When the early church gathered and parted, they always said, "Maranatha." That's an Aramaic phrase meaning, "The Lord is coming." They were constantly reminding each other that the time was short, Jesus is going to return. The next time they gather might be in heaven, not on earth. So they parted by saying, "Maranatha!"

Our final head of "Let us" reminds us of the importance of this. It says, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess...and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:23, 25) Notice the word day has a capital D. It's talking about the Day of the Lord's return. That day is getting closer and closer. I don't know when Jesus is going to return, but I'm smart enough to know that we're a week closer today than we were a week ago. This means as time goes by we should more and more faithfully gather together and to encourage one another. Do you find your level of faithfulness to attend church growing, or shrinking?

There was a small church in New England with a particular member named Sam, who had been very faithful to attend church every Sunday. But Sam's attendance became more and more sporadic, until finally he stopped coming at all.

The pastor went to visit Sam one cold evening and as they sat down in front of a fire in the fireplace the pastor said, "Sam, we've been missing you at church, we want you to come back." Sam said, "Well, pastor, I've been thinking that I don't really need to go to church to stay close to God. Why do I need to attend worship?"

Instead of answering the question, the pastor simply leaned over and took the tongs beside the fireplace. He removed one of the burning embers from the fire and placed it by itself on the hearth. After a few minutes, the lone ember's flame diminished until it grew cold and dark. Meanwhile the other embers in the middle of the fireplace continued to glow and send out heat. Still without speaking a word, the pastor took the tongs and moved the dead, dark ember back into the middle of the glowing embers; soon it was glowing hot again. The pastor got up to leave and Sam said, "Pastor, thank you for your visit and especially for that fiery sermon—I got the message. I'll be back again next Sunday."

We've been praying for a Spiritual Awakening for years. How will we know when it happens? For sure, there will be prayer groups springing up in homes and businesses and schools around America. But another mark will be that we will see church attendance in America surge to unprecedented levels. So many people will be coming to Christ and showing up to follow Him that we won't even have time to count them!

CONCLUSION

This past week I asked my Facebook friends to tell me what reasons and excuses people give for not attending church. I got some great answers. Some people mentioned that they work on Sunday. Others were honest and said that sometimes they feel like "church people" were condemning them because they smoked or didn't have nice clothes. Others admitted that Sunday was the only day they had off and they needed to sleep.

My favorite answer came from Anna Suprin. We met Anna in the mid-1990s when we did mission work in the Crimea. She grew up in Yalta and during the days of the former Soviet Union, it was illegal to attend a Baptist Church. Anna is now married with two children living in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. She is still a deeply committed Christian. Her English is good, but not perfect, so here's what she wrote: "One day I tried to find good excuse and it seemed I found it. I asked Jesus: "Would you mind if I stay at home today? I will search the internet for good message from good speaker. I will pray." And God answered. He reminded me about the time, when a service at church started at 5 a.m., because it was easier to avoid police. My parents knew, that for them every service in church could be the last one and they could end up in prison. Then I heard a question: "What could happen if all members of your church decided to pray at home instead of going to church?" ...That day it took me twice less time to get ready for church."

Don't ever take for granted the freedom we have to gather to worship in America. One day, it could be gone. Do you have the gathering gene? A disciple shows up consistently.

OUTLINE

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Hebrews 10:23, 25

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes