Recently, I was reading about a series of instructional videos that you can get on almost any subject in the world. It’s called “Lessons from the Master.” The idea is that you can get coaching from the world’s leading authority on whatever it is that you want to learn more about or improve at. For instance, you can get golf tips from the world’s greatest golfer of the last twenty years—Tiger Woods; you can get relational tips from the world’s greatest psychologist of the last twenty years—Dr. Phil; you can get motivational tips from the world’s greatest football coach of the last twenty years—Mike Ditka of the Bears, who are undefeated this year…

This weekend, we begin a series called “No One Stands Alone.” We’ll look at the way God made us for community—about how we are transformed by and in community. I was thinking about whom you would go to if you were to ask,

Who was history’s leading expert on Small Groups? Who has mastered the complexities of human nature and all of the subtle nuances of group dynamics? How is it that transformation happens?

Whom would you go to for coaching on how to create a life-changing, life-shaping, life-giving, life-forming community? In my opinion, hands down the answer would be, “Jesus.”

When Jesus was thinking about how to extend His movement and His dream beyond His own physical life on earth, He did one thing. He didn’t start a country; He didn’t form an army; He didn’t create a university, or an institution, or a corporation; He didn’t endow a foundation. He started a small group. He started a small group with a real small curriculum.

Jesus went up into the hills and invited those he wanted with him, and they came to him. (Mark 3:13)

He settled on twelve and designated them apostles. The plan was that they would “Be With” Him, and that He might send them out. Now, why of all things did He do that? He understood that’s where lives are changed. That’s where characters get shaped. So, from the very beginning, the “Jesus Movement” was a small group movement, and the main curriculum was the “Be With Plan.” They would learn together, study together, pray together, argue together, forgive together, and Jesus would “Be With” them.

When they tried to serve God, Jesus would “Be With” them. When they failed, He’d “Be With” them. When they were sick…”Be With” them. When they were discouraged, when they were confused…”Be With” them to help. “Be With” them to celebrate when they had got something right, and “Be With” them to clean up the mess when they got things wrong. They would walk through life together. The plan was “Be With”…”Be With Jesus.”
Then, He was teaching them how to “Be With” each other. What happens in the Book of Acts is that members of Jesus’ original “small group” said, “Now we see the point.” It was first being with Jesus—doing life together with Jesus—and then being sent out and taking what Jesus taught them. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we’ll start new groups, and we’ll have them do the “Be With” plan: “Be With” Jesus and “Be With” each other. We’ll see how that works.”

We’re told in the Book of Acts they devoted themselves to fellowship. (Acts 2:42) That word, fellowship, has been cheapened in our day. It’s a fabulous word that describes a true small group: having some people with whom you “do life” together. You laugh and weep and celebrate, and you share with them, serve them, give to them and receive from them. They devoted themselves to that.

Every day, they continued to meet together…They broke bread in their homes and ate with glad and sincere hearts. (Acts 2:46)

This tells us that there is something about the nature of the “Be With” plan as it played out in the early church. If you go through Acts, you see that what is talked about is little communities—clusters of believers—who met together in homes. In Acts, it talks about the house of a man named Jason, the house of a man named Titius Justus, Philip’s house, Lydia’s house, the house of a Philippian jailer, the house of Mary the Mother of John. That’s where people met. When the New Testament letter writers sent greeting to believers, they greeted believers “at the house of” Priscilla and Aquila, or believers “at the house of” Aristobulus,” believers “at the house of” Narcissus (that was for a group of recovering ego-maniacs), believers “at the house of” Nympha and Onesiforus and Archippus.

In the New Testament, the idea was not that you had home groups that you could be part of as an option. Home groups were the church. That was it. They didn’t have buildings of any kind for at least 300 years. Sometimes, in Jerusalem, they met at the Temple courts. In other cities, they didn’t even have that. Their basic plan was the “Be With” plan, and the plan hasn’t changed.

The Holy Spirit did not say at some time in church history,

OK. Now we’re going to switch things and start another way of thinking about church,

so that when you talk about church, what you think of is one big building that you go to once a week for service, and where everything else is optional. Maybe nobody will ever get to know you. Maybe nobody will ever get to know your heart, or you’ll never discover your spiritual gifts and get to serve people and grow together. There was never any shift. It was always the “Be With” plan. “Be With” Jesus, and then “Be With” the little community.

As we launch this new series, what we’re going to do in this message is look at Jesus’ plan—the “Be With” plan—and take some lessons from the Master. When a small group or home group forms, what makes that little community great? Many of you are part of one. If you’re a follower of Jesus, and you’re not a part of one, you need to be. That’s His plan.

Lesson Number 1 from the Master:

In a great small group, people are devoted to each other, and they will pay a significant price to “do life” together.
“They devoted themselves to the fellowship,” the text says. They got this idea from Jesus. When the
twelve were in that little group with Jesus, He never made them feel that they were an obligation or that
He had to be there. There is no record of any other rabbi who recruited students—*talmudin*. They always
waited. It was beneath their dignity to recruit, and prospective *talmudin* would come to them and ask,

> May I be in your school?

Not with Jesus. Jesus came along and said,

> I want you. I want you. I want you.

No other rabbi did that. It was considered beneath their dignity. Jesus did that. Can you imagine what that
felt like? To feel like somebody wants you? It’s such a powerful dynamic. Jesus said,

> I want you to be my friend. I want to do life together with you.

Now why did He choose these twelve? Was it because they were really smart, or rich or resourceful, or
powerful, or influential? No. Peter was impulsive. Thomas was a doubter. Judas was greedy. James and
John were ladder-climbers. There was a man named Simon who was a Zealot, which meant he hated tax
collectors. There was another guy named Matthew who was a tax collector, which meant that he hated
Zealots.

I will guarantee you that one of their biggest questions for Jesus was:

> Jesus, why in the world did You choose him?

Part of what was going on was Jesus was teaching them. His little community is not the place where you
get to be around people who are all beautiful and healthy and normal. Look around. It is where you learn
from Jesus how to love people who are as junked up and sinful and messed up and struggling as I am and
you are.

Experts in small group life say the number one killer of small groups is not busy schedules or doctrinal
disagreements. It is what are sometimes called “Extra Grace Required” people: someone who talks too
much; someone who doesn’t get it; someone who isn’t smooth; someone who belongs to the wrong
political party; someone who reminds you of a relative that you do not want to be reminded of. Every
group has one. If you were around for the “Forty Days of Purpose” a couple years ago, you may
remember Rick Warren saying,

> If you look around your group, and you can’t identify the “Extra Grace Required” person, it’s
you!

There’s this little group with “EGR’s” in it, and Jesus believes in them. He prays for them, and He serves
them, and He washes their feet. It was like He wanted to “Be With” them. It was like it made Him glad
when they were together. Nobody had ever loved them like that. After three years of that, they were
shaped by that love, because love shapes lives. They found out that there’s nothing better. We talk a lot
about what Jesus taught about love.
Love God. Love other people.

But in the little group, they learned that’s not just nice talk. It’s really true.

After His death for their forgiveness and after His Resurrection, and after the Spirit came, they said,

If His Spirit is helping us now, what would happen if we gave that kind of love—that kind of devotion to other people? What if we created little groups that gathered together in households? We never got together on this kind of footing before: rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile.

They devoted themselves to this. There had never been anything like this before. That’s the “Be With” plan.

When you devote yourself to a little community—and if you haven’t yet, I hope you’ll take a step that way—When you meet with them, share with them, pray with them, believe in them, grow glad to see them, walk with them, celebrate with them…When you “do life” together, then you’re doing the Jesus “Be With” plan, and anybody can do the “Be With” plan…anybody.

**Lesson Number 2 from the Master:**

A great group is a safe place to get real with people.

Acts 2 says that they *ate together with glad and sincere hearts*. The word *sincere* is kind of interesting. There’s an old story about its origin. I’m not sure if the word was actually derived this way, but it gives a picture of its meaning. The word sincere is made up of two Latin words: *sin*, which means “without” and *cere*, which means “wax.”

The Romans prized ancient Greek statues. Oftentimes, those centuries-old statues would have been cracked or chipped. Sometimes sellers would pour wax into the cracked areas to cover up the flaws and make the statue look better than it really was. If you found you had bought one of those “covered up” statues, you would be disappointed. But if the statue were authentic, and if there were no attempt to hide the flaws, then it would be labeled *sincere*—“without wax.”

Here was a new community where people got together, and they ate with sincere hearts. No hiding. Where did they get this idea? They followed a leader, Jesus, Who was so unusual. Whatever was going on in Him, they found out about it. When He was sad, they saw Him cry. When He was tired, they saw Him sleep. When He was troubled, they heard Him say, “Now my soul is troubled, by sorrow overwhelmed.

They heard Him say,

*I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.* (John 15:15)
Jesus was the most transparent human being they had ever been around. He talked a lot about how people—especially religious people—often try to look good on the outside, but their inner life is really different, with a lot of hiding going on. Jesus said,

We won’t do that. We’re going to “Be With” each other in reality.

No posturing with us. They must have loved being part of a little community like that.

I’ll tell you one of the things that most drew me to my wife, Nancy. One of the defining moments in any dating relationship is the first time you see the other person without makeup, because makeup is really “facial deception.” When you think about it, makeup is designed to deceive other people: to make your eyes look bigger, your lips look fuller, your nose look “nosier,” to hide blemishes and flaws and such.

We had been dating for a few months, I can still remember this, I went over to Nancy’s apartment unannounced. She and her roommate were putting up wallpaper. She was wearing blue jeans and a ratty old sweatshirt. She didn’t have her contacts in and was wearing old glasses. Her hair was everywhere. She didn’t have on a speck of makeup: no lipstick, no blush, no foundation, no mascara, no nothing. Whew! Actually, one of the ways I knew I was stuck on this girl was I looked at her in that moment and thought,

I like this look. I like the way she looks right now. No makeup, glasses—Right now.

One of the things that drew me to her, I know, and one of the things I admire most about her is this kind of transparency of spirit. She’s a very human person, and our marriage is full of imperfections, but I found a kind of freedom in her—a capacity for authenticity and a lack of pretentiousness—and there was a down-to-earth quality in her, a readiness to let other people know who she was and what was in her heart. She wasn’t worried much about, “What do they think?” or “What will the consequences be?”

Part of why I was drawn so much to this quality is that there’s a part of me that struggles to be free like that. I can often find myself much more calculating than I would like to be. I can find myself working hard to manage what somebody thinks of me, or to tell a story that makes me sound brighter, smarter, stronger than I really am. Or just goofy stuff like if I think somebody is really important, I’ll try to make it sound like I agree with them more than I really do. I wear too much makeup—too much wax—and I’m drawn to this sincere kind of person, this kind of community. There had never been something like this before.

There is a fascinating passage in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth where he gives them a picture from the Old Testament. Moses had been with God on Mount Sinai, and when Moses came down from the mountain, the text says, *his face glowed.* Now even in our day, when people are really excited, their faces will beam or shine. People always use one adjective to describe a bride. They say, “She looks radiant.” They never say that about a groom. Nobody cares what the groom looks like, but they always say that about a bride. Moses’ face was radiant. This impressed the people. They said.

Wow! He’s a spiritual guy. He’s been with God.
The word spread. They said, “Moses has a shiny face.” When they looked at him, everyone said, “Wow!” Moses liked hearing that… “Wow!”

Then one morning, he wakes up and looks in the mirror and notices that his face is not as shiny as before. It’s starting to fade. He knows that if people were to see this, they would be less impressed with him, and he wouldn’t be so special anymore. They wouldn’t say “Wow” so much anymore. So, the text says,

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\text{Moses put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. (2 Corinthians 3:13)}
\]

He wanted them to think that he was more spiritually radiant than he really was. So he walked around with a veil—a little makeup.

We don’t know how long he wore it. We don’t know when he finally decided to take it off. My guess is that it was when his wife said to him, “Moses, take off that stupid veil. You are not fooling anybody, and personally I’m glad your face is not glowing anymore. I could not sleep at night. It was like going to bed with a firefly. Take off the veil, Moses.” Whatever prompted it, he eventually did take it off. And what a relief that must have been—just to be plain old Moses.

Paul goes on to say

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\text{Since we have the promise of God’s love and acceptance through what Jesus has done for us, we can live with unveiled faces. (2 Corinthians 3:12-16)}
\]

No hiding. No more wax. No more makeup. Just “This is who I am—with the good stuff and the bad stuff and the fallen stuff—no veil.” We’re very bold. With unveiled faces, we reflect God’s glory. The only way you can reflect God’s glory is with an unveiled face.

A great group is where it is safe to be the real you. To get into a group like that—to help grow a group like that—that’s a group where people honor confidentiality with each other, where you know you can trust other people with your secrets, where you know they will not be careless with your words. There will be a lot of laughter—a lot of joy—People will not use humor to hide behind, or to get in a little jab so that all of a sudden someone is hurt, and they’ll hardly even know how it happened. Such things don’t happen in this kind of group. And the people who lead these groups, instead of trying to be the guys with the answers, will simply be transparent and, when it’s appropriate, share their own weaknesses and struggles. This is the “Be With Plan.” There’s nothing like Jesus’ “Be With Plan” for His followers.

\text{Lesson Number 3 from the Master:}

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\text{A great group is a place where people speak truth to one another.}
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Paul says,

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\text{Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head that is Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)}
\]
We’re going to look like that one day, and we’re going to help each other get there by speaking the truth to each other. Reality is always our friend, but we avoid it. We run from it. Our capacity for self-deception is staggering, isn’t it? A small group of people can help us to see the truth about ourselves, sometimes even in small things.

Nancy and I host a group every year, and last year we had a young couple in our group who were going through grad school here in the area. This is part of how the mind works: I will often think of us as if we are still in that season of life—that “young couple” season. This particular couple is going to relocate down to southern California, so I had mentioned a church that they could try out when they went down to visit. They tried it. When they came back, we asked how it had gone, and she mentioned that the pastor of that church had frosted hair—kind of a southern California thing. She said,

> When he came out, I just started to cry. And I thought, “I don’t want some frosted-hair pastor. I want my old white-haired pastor.”

That’s speaking the truth. Not much love actually—but it was the truth. In this new kind of community, people would say, “Where did they get this idea?” Well, they got it from Jesus, from moments they could all remember. For instance, they were walking along somewhere and Jesus said to them,

> “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet, because they had argued about who was the greatest. (Mark 9: 33-34)

Wouldn’t you love to hear that argument about “Who’s the greatest?” Then Jesus, Who knows what is going on, asks,

> Hey guys, what are you talking about?

They’re all looking down at the ground,

> Oh, you know—the Bears. Nothing much really.

Who wants to tell Jesus,

> We were arguing about which one of us follows You the best? About which one of us is the most advanced at picking up our cross and denying ourselves?

That’s the way we all work, and that’s who we are. Jesus has an amazing response. He doesn’t say,

> Well, you guys are all fired.

He doesn’t take the Donald Trump approach to discipleship. He doesn’t just ignore it. He doesn’t say to Himself,

> I’m afraid that if I raise this issue, they’re not going to like me, so in the name of love, I’ll just pretend like I didn’t hear anything.

He doesn’t say,
We’ll just do happy talk and talk about light things.

No. He doesn’t do that either. He exercises great skill. In this particular instance, He just asks them a question:

Hey, guys. What’re you talking about?

And they learn from Him about how transformational communities work. They learn a lesson from the Master.

At one time, Peter gets off course and starts to get kind of legalistic. When he’s with one group of people, he’s one way and when he’s with another group of people, he’s another way. Paul says, So I spoke to him face to face. That’s how it works. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. The idea here is that when they would meet together in these little communities in each other’s homes, they would learn together about what Jesus taught, not just for the sake of information, but to ask,

How do we do it? How do we live what Jesus said?

They devoted themselves to that. They said,

Let’s hold each other accountable.

I want to tell you about my commitments to live out what Jesus said as the Spirit helps me. You ask me how it’s going. We can do that as we get to know each other in little groups. We can talk to each other about our character, how we’re handling our finances and our time and our sexuality and our spirituality in these little communities where we speak the truth in love. That’s the “Be With Plan” for doing life together.

**Lesson Number 4 from the Master:**

A great group is not a place where there is no conflict. It is a place where conflict, which is inevitable, leads to reconciliation and growth.

The disciples learn this in their little group. Their little group bitterly disappoints Jesus in the crisis of His life—at the moment of His greatest pain—when He’s going to the Cross. The small group that He has been with and poured Himself into for three years—they all run the other way. Peter, His good friend, denies Him three times.

You know the story. After the Resurrection, the disciples are out fishing, and Jesus comes to the shore. He’s standing there on the shore before a fire of burning coals with fish and bread. New Testament scholars say that the reason the text tells us Jesus was standing before a charcoal fire is probably because Peter was standing before a charcoal fire when he denied Jesus, and that scene is being recreated.

My wife was teaching on this in “Sanctuary” last week. “Sanctuary” is a group that involves a lot of young, single men, and she said that the reason the text mentions a fire is to tell us that a man was cooking and what a good thing it is for a man to cook, and that probably the reason so many women follow Jesus
is that women love a man who can cook. That’s not what New Testament scholars say! They say that Jesus is recreating the initial scene. Peter denied him three times, so now Jesus says, “Peter, do you love me?” He forces Peter to say,

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Peter knows he has been reconciled. The conflict wasn’t brushed under the rug. It wasn’t like, “Let’s just never talk about it again.” It’s reconciled in this new kind of community.

There’s a legend, and nobody knows if it is true or not. In subsequent years, when somebody wanted to taunt Peter, they would do it by crowing like a rooster, just to remind him of Jesus’ words to him:

Peter, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times. (Luke 22:34)

But Peter knew he had been reconciled to Jesus. He remembered that. He carried that with him for the rest of his life. When he’s writing to another community, many years later, he writes,

Live in harmony with one another. Be sympathetic. Love as brothers. (I Peter 3:8)

You know there are hearts in this room, Lord, that need to hear these words today. God is speaking to you through these words:

Be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult but blessing. (I Peter 3:8-9)

Peter says,

I know, I’ve been there. I’ve learned from the Master.

Last Lesson from the Master:

Great groups have a mission beyond themselves.

The plan was to “be with” them and send them out. What if the twelve had said,

You know, we like to be together so much—we don’t want to be sent out. We want to keep it just us?

I wouldn’t be here. Jesus’ plan has always been for Him to be present with His followers and then to spread His presence and joy and love through them to the world. We have so many little groups around here who serve:

Groups in Shepherd’s Village serving children;
Go Teams that travel to some part of the world like Ethiopia;
Groups that make backpacks for under-resourced children;
Groups who feed homeless people at a homeless shelter, who visit AIDS patients, who tutor students, or who form book clubs so that people who don’t know about God will have a place to learn about Him.

That’s the “Be With Plan.”

Now I’m going to send you out.

He does that with the first group.

I think sometimes about what it must have been like when that first group was reunited in Heaven, because that really does happen. One by one, maybe John was the last one. He was an old, old man living on the island of Patmos. Then they are all finally together before Jesus, and they remember when they were just young men, and Jesus said,

I’ll make you fishers of men.

They gave Him their lives. Then one day they are with Him, and they want to know,

“Did we do well?”

And Jesus says,

I told you that no one who gives up anything to follow me—father, mother, brother, sister, houses, land—ca n but receive one-hundred fold, one-thousand fold in return. Now is the time. Now the “Be With” really starts.

They think to themselves,

What if I had said “No?” What if when that young carpenter turned rabbi came to me and said, “I want you,” what if I had said “No?”

What made Jesus’ small group the greatest small group in the history of the world, of course, was the one who was leading it—Jesus. But here’s what’s amazing. Jesus says in Matthew 18,

For wherever two or three people come together in my Name, there am I. (Matthew 18:20)

That’s the “Be With” plan.

You come together in my Name and devote yourselves to each other, I’ll be right there with you.

Some of you are not in a little group like that. I don’t know how to put this, but you just need to get in one. It’s Jesus’ plan. It’s how lives are changed. Some of you have been with Jesus for a long time, and you could lead a little group like that. It’s that time in your life because you know Jesus, and there are others who need someone to help them to create a little community like that. I hope that you’ll pray about that and, if God nudges, that you’ll respond. Either way, you can go to the Connection Center and get more information about next steps to get into a group or help lead one.
Some of you are leading one, and it gets hard sometimes. Your life gets full sometimes. And you’re not sure what to do sometimes. You feel inadequate sometimes. So I just want you to hear these words:

You are not crazy to do what you do, to sacrifice to make the effort. You are not crazy. This is Jesus’ plan to change the world through little groups in which ordinary human beings can be transformed into His character and loved into His community and called into His work. We talk about TLC. That’s what we want to have happen in these little communities: Transformation, Love and Calling.

That’s His plan.
That’s the “Be With” plan.
That’s the Lesson from the Master.