Living The Adventure, the Quest for the Kingdom (part 1)  
September 2-3, 2006

Central Thought: Jesus set forth a vision for his followers to pursue in a shared effort—the vision was for the Kingdom of God.

To launch into this new series today, I want you to look at a video clip from a recent series of movies—LORD OF THE RINGS. In this first movie, Frodo, who the smallish hero of the story (a hobbit), takes on the enormous challenge of destroying a source of evil and destruction. It is an evil ring that takes and evil hold on anyone who wears it.

The scene we will see comes at the moment of decision. The council is arguing about what to do about the ring. Who will carry it to the place where it can be destroyed? Who can be trusted? And then Frodo steps up, the smallest of the group, and takes on the responsibility. And when he does, the others in the group are so moved—that they pledge their allegiance to Frodo and to his mission. Let’s watch.

SHOW VIDEO

I love the line in that segment: And you will be called, the fellowship of the ring. What a noble title. The fellowship or small group of committed friends who are dedicated to one another and to an incredible significant mission.

There are two compelling facets of this arrangement: 1) Risk—they were willing to take a huge, life threatening risk in pursuit of something worth dying for; and 2) Relationship—they were going on this adventure in relationship with one another, in this unique bond that is formed only in the pursuit of some great cause.

Life was designed by God to include both of these: Risk and Relationship. In fact, without these two features—life becomes both lonely and boring.

So I was thinking about this. What small groups have come together that have both of these elements? What small groups would I have liked to be a part?

1. Pittsburgh Steelers 2005! Why, they came together as a team, put their bodies on the line every day in order to win the Super Bowl. I
would have loved to be even Arnold Harrison. You say, ‘who’?
Arnold Harrison is a linebacker for the Steelers who never played
one snap in a real game last year. He was only on the practice
squad. But his name is on that super bowl trophy!

2. How about these guys? (show picture) This is the founding group
that started Microsoft. They put their capital together, and their
ideas, and took the risk. Today they are billionaires.

3. Thinking back further—historic small groups. How about the Lewis
and Clark expedition that explored the west for the first time.

4. Or the men who weathered the winter at Valley Forge and because
of their perseverance we have a nation called the United States of
America.

5. Let’s talk about one more small group. In 1914, Ernest Shackleton,
let an expedition to cross the Antarctic. In putting together his
crew for this amazing adventure. He put this advertisement in the
paper:

months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful.
Honour and recognition in case of success. Ernest Shackleton

You would think that with a call like that, you would have very few
takers. But thousands of men applied for the opportunity to join this
small group. Why?

Because something inside of us longs for those two things: Risk and
Relationship. We long to live for and pursue something that is truly
significant. We long to do that in community was a part of a team of
people all committed to one another and to a common purpose.

Now, when Jesus started his public ministry. He began it in a similar
way as Ernst Shackleton.

First, he announced his vision statement:
Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time
has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and
believe the good news!" Mark 1:14-15

Recently, as you probably can tell—I have come to view Jesus in a
whole new light. I think so often, we are used to hearing stories about
him and we have these pre-conceived ideas about him.

Even a statement like this—sounds mysterious and other worldly. ‘The
time has come; the Kingdom of God is near (in a booming spiritual-
sounding voice). But what does that mean? Why was this such good news? What was the big deal he was announcing to the world?

As you study the gospels, you will find that this was Jesus’ primary vision statement. The Kingdom of God is coming. It is near. Something new is on the immediate horizon. Let’s go get it.

Jesus was comparing the kingdoms of this world with the kingdom of God. He was saying look around and what do you see? Pain? Bondage? Loneliness? Relational breakdown? One man taking advantage of another? War? Hatred? Dishonesty? Abuse?

Well, there is good news. The Kingdom of God is coming. God’s original intent for the world and for your life is getting ready to break forth on the earth. Jesus taught his disciples later to pray, and you hear me refer to this often, he said, “thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. This was the vision statement of Jesus.

Pray and pursue the release of God’s Kingdom on earth, where the demon possessed are delivered, and the sick are healed, and the lonely and the outcast find family, and where the needs of people are met and everyone is properly restored in right relationship with God.

He said this is the good news, the gospel for which I have come to give me life. I will spill my blood for this vision to become a reality.

So often the gospel has been reduced to the minimum entrance requirements for a person to go to heaven. Jesus didn’t come proclaiming, if you want to go to heaven at the very least what you have to do. The gospel is not titled, ‘how to get out of trouble with God’.

If that’s all there is, then once we get that settled—we can move on and just live our own lives. “I’m glad I know I have eternal fire insurance”.

Jesus came proclaiming the gospel, which is that a whole new reality is available to us and that is the purpose and power of God being revealed in our lives, our families and our communities.

And right after he stated his vision—he called his followers.

16 As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.
17 "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of
18 At once they left their nets and followed him. 19 When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. 20 Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. Mark 1:16-20


But these men signed up when called. It was an opportunity of a lifetime, to join Jesus’ small group that would risk it all in relationship with one another to gain the prize of the Kingdom of God.

Series: Living The Adventure, the quest for the Kingdom. In this series we are going to study the vision of Jesus and how we are to pursue this vision in relationship with one another.

The outcome of this series is this: We want you to consider becoming a small group. On week three of this series, we are going to have a Small Group Fair, where you can discover what Groups are available to you. We also are going to follow that up with CONNECT WEEK. During that week, each segment or team of the church is going to have a party or event where you can just come and hang out and meet the small group leaders and make some new friends.

So in keeping with that goal, today I want to talk about 3 small groups in history that the Bible describes for us.

1. Jesus’ Small Group: I want to be a part of a group with VISION.

Let’s go back to that moment in time when Jesus stood and announced his vision. He has just come out of the time of fasting and prayer in the desert. There the devil tempted him, and he overcame those temptations. The Bible says in the preceding verses that the baton had been passed. John had baptized him. The father had commended him...this is my beloved son, I am so very pleased with him.

Now, Jesus begins his ministry and he announces. This is what I am all about. Here’s my life’s mission statement: The Kingdom of God is near. I have come to pursue it. I have come to pray it in. I have come to see it released on the earth.
Then, he invites 4 men to join him. Eventually this small group grows to 12 men, several women. At times there were as many as 70 of them. And yet, the core of the core is established here in Mark 1: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John. These were Jesus’ closest friends throughout life. This was Jesus small group.

They were invited into his life. They did life together. They walked from town to town together. They made fires, cooked food, bedded down for the night. They fished together. They laughed together. This was the life of Jesus—in between the moments of miracles and encounters, there was life with these friends.

And this small group got infected with the Jesus vision. Jesus was proposing a revolution. He was saying, the world as we know it is about to change. We are going to see the Kingdom of God manifest on the earth. The disciples not only bought into the person of Jesus, they also caught his passion—his vision.

And then they quickly saw it become a reality. If you read on in Mark chapter one, you see that right after they said ‘yes, we will follow you’, there were some pretty exciting evidences of the Kingdom coming.

Mark 1:21-27—They go to synagogue together, and as they walk in a demon begins to shriek...what do you want with us Jesus, have you come to destroy us, we know you are the holy one of God...

Imagine that. The disciples may have been thinking, what have we gotten ourselves into? But Jesus says, quiet—come out. And the man was delivered. And they learned...

**a. when the kingdom of God comes—people are set free!**

next the entire town gathers and brings all their sick people to Jesus. Many people were cured immediately of their diseases. Even Simon Peter’s mother in law was healed of her fever. And they quickly learned...

**b. when the kingdom of God comes, sick people are healed.**

Do you feel the adventure that the disciples are on here? Wow, what an amazing journey they are on.
So then next in the Mark 1, Jesus hides away early in the morning in a quiet place seeking His father. The disciples find him and they learn...

c. when the kingdom of God comes, it comes within your own soul—your soul becomes well, full of the Spirit of God.

They learned to live like Jesus. Filled with his joy. Touched by his life. Experiencing his passion.

Finally, Mark chapter one ends as they enter the town next to Capernaum. A leper comes out to meet him. We talked about this moment a few weeks ago. The leper who was an outcast from society. He was considered unclean spiritually and contagious physically. He had deformities all over his body. he was suffering in silence.

he is a great representation of THE ONE, hurting, forgotten, disconnected from God. And Jesus stops and looks at the man. The man asks, if you are wiling—you can make me clean. And the next verse still is something I can’t get over. The vision of this has changed my life.

Mark 1:41-42
41 Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" 42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

The phrase—filled with compassion gets me. Jesus wept over this broken man. And out of that deep compassion, he spoke release to the man in every way. And the disciples learned...

d) when the kingdom of God comes, the outcast finds a family, the unclean become clean, and the broken are restored.

Now, we are talking about small groups this month. But I am personally not interested in just getting together to be a part of a nice church program. Life is busy. So much is going on. Why should I take time out to sit in a circle and talk with people that I don’t really know that well...and am not sure if I am even going to like. I am not interested in just being a part of a small group...

I want to be a part of a group with Kingdom VISION.
I want to be in a group that is pursuing THE ONE, that is believing for people to be healed, delivered from life controlling issues,. I want to
be in a group that is growing spiritually and becoming healthy in soul. I want to be in a group that is restoring the broken, including the outcast, and seeing the Kingdom of God come in all of its glory.

you may say, well I’m in one, but it isn’t like that. But why not? This is what the Small Group of Jesus was: A small group with Kingdom Vision.

THE SECOND SMALL GROUP I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE BEEN A PART OF WAS:

2. David’s Small Group: I want to be in a Small Group with evident DEDICATION!

David gets his start in life in an amazing way. After spending his teenage years tending sheep on the back side of the desert. God propels him forward to prominence. And in the first moment of victory in his life, he is basically alone.

Standing out in the middle of a battlefield, facing a giant named Goliath. It was just David and God against the giant. And the giant was no match for David and God. In one swing of the sling, the giant fell.

There are times in your life when it is just you and God. No one else is around. You have to learn to lean only on God. And you find that you and God are enough. The giants of your life will fall as you step out in faith and depend on God’s promise.

But this ‘me and God’ moment did not become a ‘me and God’ lifestyle. In fact, David was a man of great relationships. He formed a life time friendship with Saul’s son Jonathan. And then when David found himself on the outs with Saul...he had to flee the palace, and hide in a cave.

There David found refuge in a small group.
1 Samuel 22:2—All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader.

I love to use this verse to discuss small groups, because it describes the conditions of the kind of people most fit for a good small group. They were the 3D group, Distress, Debt, Discontented. And David brought them together and gave them a vision of what they could be. They were redeemed under David’s leadership. And he was a great
small group leader for them. He shepherded them with integrity of heart and with skillful hands the psalms says.

Many of these 3D Men became the Mighty Men of Valor later in David’s day. They had names for these guys. The THREE. Josheb, Shammah, Eleazor. One killed 800 by himself. The other two defended important battle ground on their own until reinforcements could arrive.

And they were incredibly dedicated to one another and to their small group leader, David. This is another story that I often tell because it is an example of this kind of relational dedication.

David is in the middle of the battle (you can read this in 2 Samuel 23). He is tired. He says under his breath, I wish I had something to drink from the old well in the town where I grew up. That would refresh me. So THE THREE battled through the enemy lines, walked to David’s city and got the water for their leader.

Wow! What amazing dedication. Now, I know I am talking idealistically. Some of you would say, ‘that kind of dedication is not found every day’. This is true. I am not trying to build up your expectation to say, if you join a small group the people there will automatically commit to your personal success like David’s mighty men did.

These kind of relationships don’t develop easy. All relationships take work. All have a degree of risk. To be balanced with David’s small group, he was also betrayed by some of these guys. His top advisor, Ahithophel helped Absalom lead a rebellion. And David himself cheated on one of his top 30 men. He slept with Bathsheba the wife of Uriah.

Relationships can get messy. And there is risk. And it takes effort. And sometimes you feel like your group is filled with EGR people, Extra Grace Required. You are sitting in a room with the discontented, in debt, and distressed. And you may wonder, why am I doing this again?

Because you signed up to be a follower of Christ, and that means an adventure. The quest for the Kingdom remember. Two things involved in that: RISK and RELATIONSHIP. Sometimes they are one in the same.
If you would have asked David at the end of his life, was it worth it? would you do it again—relationships with your small group. He would say, absolutely. There were trials. There was pain. Sometimes I was betrayed. But these guys became my closest friends. I was able to watch them become giant-killers in their own right. it was totally worth it.

In fact, I was talking on Wednesday night with my Father. He pointed out something to me that I did not remember.

Once again there was a battle between the Philistines and Israel. David went down with his men to fight against the Philistines, and he became exhausted. And Ishbi-Benob, one of the descendants of Rapha, whose bronze spearhead weighed three hundred shekels and who was armed with a new sword, said (boasted) he would kill David. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to David's rescue; he struck the Philistine down and killed him. Then David's men swore to him, saying, "Never again will you go out with us to battle, so that the lamp of Israel will not be extinguished." 2 Samuel 21:15-17

We know about the first giant that David faced—Goliath. When David fought Goliath, it was just a ‘me and God’ moment. But there was a second giant, that came at David later in life. Ishbi-benob. And David was exhausted from fighting. He was vulnerable and almost died. When one of the guys from his small group showed up and struck the Philistine down.

That’s what I’m talking about. You need people dedicated to your spiritual success. For there is a time in each of our lives, when we are too tired to fight for ourselves. We will need someone to stand in the gap for us. And there are times when the people around us are too tired to fight for themselves. They need us to stand in the gap for them.

I don’t just want to be a part of another church program. I want to be a part of a small group with evident dedication!

3. The Acts Church Small Groups: I want to be in a small group with ongoing TRANSFORMATION.

Jon Ortberg speaks about a book by Rodney Starr a professor of Sociology at the University of Washington, called The Rise of Christianity. He calculated how it is that Christianity spread in the Roman Empire at the rate of 40% per decade. In the year 40AD, a
few years after Jesus died, there were roughly 5000 Christians in the world. That looks pretty insignificant and negligible. That was .0075% of the population of the Roman Empire. Then it starts to spear and keeps going until by 350 AD there are about 33,000,000 or 56% of the Roman Empire, who named the name of Jesus. How did that happen? The Roman Empire was collapsing, yet this movement of Jesus kept spreading.

Partly it happened, Ortberg writes, because people throughout that part of the world had never heard a message like this one before, and they had never seen a community like this one before. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of a group like this one:

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

Acts 4:32-34
32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. 34 There were no needy persons among them.

There are many pecking orders. In the chicken pen, for example, there is no peace until the chickens find out who is the greatest and who is the least. The top chicken eats first and can peck on any chicken it wants. The middle chickens are pecked on by those above and those below. The bottom chicken is pecked on by everyone. That’s life’s pecking order.

Ortberg again writes, ‘ironically, although there’s been a lot of research done on this, nobody knows what makes a chicken dominant. Why is one chicken exalted and another chicken humbled? Nobody knows. Lots of animals have pecking orders. Animal behaviorists know about orangutans. Orangutans have a pecking order. Part of their backside is blue, and those that are bluest are the highest on the
pecking order. Researchers took an orangutan that was lowest on the ladder in one community and painted that area of his body royal blue. He became the Number One Orangutan. All the other males deferred to him, and he had all the dates he wanted. Then came bad news. One day, his blue paint started to fade, and he started the long trip down the ladder of success in ‘orangutanian. He ended up one neurotic orangutan. Pretty silly system.

The world operates by the pecking order approach to life. But when the Holy Spirit was poured out in the book of Acts, all of that was turned upside down. There was no longer a pecking order. Each person had value. Every person had intrinsic worth. Jesus said, If you want to be great in this kingdom, you have to be a servant of all.

So the wealthy were selling properties to have resources to give to the poor. Those with status were taking on the attitude of servants. There were no needy persons among them. What an amazing statement.

They were involved in one another’s lives—meeting in each others homes, eating together. There was joy and laughter. They really cared about each other. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

It was this dynamic among them that caused Christianity to go from 120 in the upper room to 33 million people, dominating the Roman Empire. Why? There was genuine transformation happening. Souls were being saved, miracles were occurring, people were being healed. But even more than that—the hearts of the people were changing. They were relating to one another differently. And people were beating down the door to be a part of it. And you can see why.

The good news is: You can be in relationship with God. You can have your sins washed away through the blood of Jesus Christ. You can be filled with the Holy Spirit. And you can join a small group of believers that are living a Kingdom oriented adventure, where they were dedicated to God and to each other, and were every day there was some new amazing thing that God was doing.

The fact is, you cannot truly be a follower of Christ without committing to relationships. Christianity is all about relationships. The Great Commandment says, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, our your soul, and all your strenght. That deals with the vertical relationship, your relationship with God. That is the ‘me and God’ part of life.
But the gospel is not just about restored relationship with God. It is also about restored relationship with others. The second part of the Great Commandment says, Love your neighbor as yourself.

So it’s time to step into what God is doing. You either need to join or choose to lead a group of people into the adventure that God has for us, it is a quest for the kingdom.

I am personally making these statements:

- I want to be in a small group with a kingdom vision!
- I want to be in a small group with evident dedication!
- I want to be in a small group of ongoing transformation!

It begins by just asking God: Help me find that Lord. If it is not there right now, direct me into the relationships you want me to be in. If I am in a group, how can I make my group more about the Kingdom. Maybe its time to step out and lead one, Lord I am available to you.

So now, we are going to take communion. Communion is a function of both vertical and horizontal relationship. We need to make sure we are right with God and with one another.

1 Cor 11:28-32

man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

Questions:

1. God is there anything that is standing in the way of my relationship with you?
2. God, is there anyone in my life I need to forgive? Anyone I need to seek forgiveness from?
3. God, how can I live my life in Kingdom relationships with other people?