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## Only One Way Off The Island

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# Only One Way Off The Island

Sean Palmer

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*At The Vine Church, where I serve as lead minister, we have four simple “behaviors” which we invite all church members to be a part of: worship, small groups, invest, and invite. Working smoothly, each behavior centers our community on the Great Commission as well as nurturing and caring for one another. Each year I preach a series of sermons reminding and recommitting our community of our essential behaviors. Below you will find one of those sermons, focused on small groups. Hopefully, this sermon integrates a biblical vision and our congregational mission. It is also helpful to know that much of our congregation’s ministry is provided through our small group system; that is, small groups perform ministry independent for a hierarchical structure. This means our ministries are funded by imagination and passion rather than tradition.*

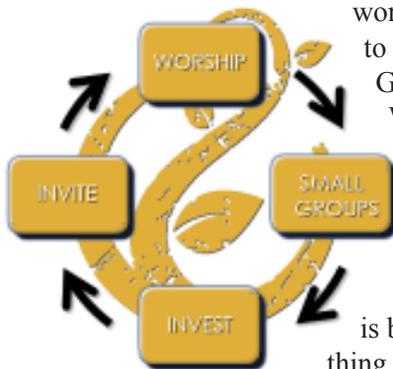
Good morning, everyone. It’s great to see you. If you’re a guest with us this morning, you’re here at a great time because last week we started a series called “Vital Signs.” During this series, we’re talking about the four critical behaviors the leadership of The Vine Church has decided are critical to your spiritual life and sharing Jesus with your friends and neighbors.

Last week we talked about our first vital sign: worship. We shared how worship is the center of our lives with God; that when we show up—as God has time and again in the Scriptures—God provides as he did with Abraham and Isaac.

So we asked the question—knowing that we all get sick and travel and go on vacation and travel for work—we asked that whenever you’re not doing all of that, could you commit to worshipping with this body of believers? Could you commit to worshipping God in this gathering of the saints as a central part of your walk with God? We think that’s the first step to hearing from and knowing God. The second step is to commit to a small group. Now, that’s the whole sermon. We’re going to ask you to commit to a small group, but I’m going to talk for a while longer anyway.

Most of us know we have small groups that can be joined anytime. What is less clear is why we should bother being a part of one. After all, life is busy and full, and schedules get crazy and who in the world needs one more thing to do? As a matter of fact, I’m usually one of the people who believe one of the great faults of the church is that people are busy and exhausted and we keep asking them to do more. But that’s one of the reasons we only ask you to commit to four behaviors—but those four behaviors are absolutely fundamental. And one of them is embracing a small group.

But I know, and you know, that asking you to join a small group is a big “ask”! It’s one of the more difficult behaviors we ask of you. And it’s difficult because it cuts against everything our culture teaches us to be. Don’t believe me?



### “Worry About Yourself”

Maybe you’ve seen the video of the little girl trying to buckle herself into her car seat. She’s full of independence, but lacks the ability to meet her task. Her dad asks if she needs help. She says, “Worry ’bout yo’self.”

Her sister asks their dad, “Are you gonna need to help her?”

The little girl repeats, “No! Worry ’bout yo’self.”

Dad asks, “You want me to help?”

“No. Worry ’bout yo’self.”

“You sure?”

“Noooo! You drive! You drive! Worry ’bout yo’self. Go drive!”

When you see that video, every parent relives the same experience: it’s that moment you heard your child say something and you know they’re saying it because they’ve heard you say it so many times. How many times do you think this little girl has heard her parents say, “Worry about yourself”?

Just imagine. Here she comes tattling on her sister, “Honey, worry about yourself.” Someone else gets to toy she wants, “Sweetie, worry about yourself.” Some other kids are doing something they shouldn’t do and she wants to join in, “Worry about yourself.”

This child didn’t come up with “worry ’bout yo’self” on her own. She’s heard it again and again and again. In one form or another, so have we. We’ve been told that our primary job in life is to worry about ourselves. The message of our world is that our field of concern should be very narrow; it’s a tight circle.

### Focus On The Family

Here’s where I’m going to get in trouble. . . . A series of events occurred in the late 70s and early 80s that shifted the emphasis of the church. In 1977, James Dobson launched a ministry called *Focus on The Family*. Now, whether you like or agree with *Focus on The Family* is beside the point. They started a ministry—ostensibly—for and about families and that’s all well and good. But what happened over time, because of several factors, more and more of American Christianity became focused on the nuclear family. The most important thing about Christian living became the immediate family—just those people who live under your roof, a tight circle.

The late 70s is when youth and children’s ministries began to be launched and other expressions of church abandoned. Gospel and prayer meetings went away and marriage and parenting seminars replaced them. Rather than denominational or doctrinal beliefs, more people began choosing churches based on what was good for the family, by which we meant kids. The major criteria of whether or not movies, music, and most media were “Christian” was whether it was “family-friendly.” So much of our Christian experience began to center around the tight circle of our family. I’m a product of that generation and that time produced many great outcomes, but we were focused primarily on the family.

About now, you’re asking, “Okay, Sean, what’s so bad about that? Like you said, even you are a product of that generation!” I want to be clear about something: there’s not anything wrong with being dedicated to your family or with focusing on your family. I am saying that focusing on your nuclear family—the people who live in your house and share your blood—is not the New Testament’s best definition of *family*.

Does the Bible speak to that kind of family? YES. Are there household codes and guidance for nuclear families? YES. Should the people who live in your house hold a unique place in your heart? YES. Are the people who live with you everything the Bible means when it says *family*? No.

If you were to start reading your Bible in Genesis and continue to read it all the way through to Revelation, you could not avoid noticing that there is a growing, expanding, ballooning, swelling definition of *family*. The witness of Scripture is that you can’t “worry ’bout yo’self.”

### This Big Beautiful Thing

The Scriptures have a different picture of what it means to be family than just the people living under your roof. I love the way Romans 8 puts it: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family” (Rom 8.28).

Jesus is the firstborn of a large family. Paul then talks about us this way in Ephesians 5: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Eph 2.19).

Paul says it a slightly different way in Galatians: “But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Gal 3.26). This is what the Bible says: “God is our father, Jesus is the firstborn of the Father and the rest of us aren’t merely acquaintances, we are God’s children. We are a family.” You can’t focus on the family and only be focused on your house. A friend of mine puts it this way: When you become baptized, you enter a world where water is thicker than blood.

### **An Important Note**

Again, I’m not saying we need to be any less devoted to our nuclear families. I *am* suggesting, since the Bible thinks we are family, we ought to act like it! One way we have arranged for that to happen at The Vine in intimate, close, personal ways is by being a part of a small group.

### **Rows Not Pews**

The truth is, as busy as life is we have to make deliberate opportunities to be family. I love the way Galatians 6 puts it:

My spiritual brothers and sisters, if one of our faithful has fallen into a trap and is snared by sin, don’t stand idle and watch his demise. Gently restore him, being careful not to step into your own snare. Shoulder one another’s burdens, and then you will live as the law of the Anointed teaches us.  
 . . . Each person has his or her own burden to bear and story to write. (Gal 6.1–5)

You know what Galatians 6 is saying? “Don’t go through life just worrying ’bout yo‘self.” I know, I know, I know. This cuts against the grain of everything we are told is important like independence and self-sufficiency, sovereignty, taking care of ourselves, and not being a burden on others. And I know where all of that comes from and the many benefits of autonomy, but Scripture repeats and repeats and repeats, “One another.” If the New Testament is to be believed, to be a follower of Jesus requires us to love one another, encourage one another, honor one another, accept one another, be kind and compassionate to one another, pray for one another, and bear one another’s burdens. It’s in small groups that we can best perform these “*one anothers*.”

### **The Great Boatlift**

One of the great and untold stories of 9/11 is the Great Boatlift. What many people didn’t realize until the morning of September 11th is that Manhattan is an island, and they were on it. As the buildings were collapsing, people were streaming out of the buildings and began heading south toward the water. They began jumping into the river, trying to do anything to get out of the city. Everything was closed—the bridges, the subway, no taxis were running—boats, for the first time in over a century, were the only way out of Manhattan.

Soon a few ferry boat operators began to head to the city, but there were so many people trying to get on the boats that they threatened to tip over or sink. At the same time, the US Coast Guard noticed what the ferries were doing. They knew things needed to get organized. They put out a call to anyone with a boat to meet at Governor’s Island. Suddenly there were more boats than most people have ever seen in one place. One man, who’d worked on a boat for twenty-eight years, said he’d never seen so many boats before in his life. There were ferries, tugboats, private boats, barges, and yachts. If someone owned it, or anything that floated really, they brought it and got people out of New York.

The Great Boatlift of 9/11 is the largest sea evacuation in history, greater even than the evacuation of Dunkirk in World War II, when 339,000 British and French soldiers were rescued over the course of nine days. On 9/11 over 500,000 people were rescued from Manhattan. It took less than nine hours.

### **Off The Island**

Now that seems like an enormous effort, but the truth is, most people live as if they're living on an island. We all carry our own burdens, but one thing the family of God is supposed to do is help get us off our island. In this community, as the people of God in this place, one thing you'll never have to do is "worry 'bout yo'self."

**SEAN PALMER** IS THE LEAD MINISTER AT THE VINE: A CHURCH OF CHRIST FELLOWSHIP IN TEMPLE, TEXAS. A POPULAR SPEAKER AND WRITER, SEAN OVERSEES TEACHING AND PREACHING MINISTRIES AT THE VINE, LEADS THE MINISTERIAL STAFF, AND COORDINATES THE VISION AND MISSION OF THE CONGREGATION. HE IS HUSBAND TO ROCHELLE STRIPLING PALMER AND THEY HAVE TWO CHILDREN (SEAN@THEVINETEMPLE.COM).

