

# By the Spirit of God!

Psalm 36:5-10, Matthew 12:15-37

“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” Jesus gathers the disciples around him. He gathers the people whom he heals. And he gathers the crowds who watch the healings and realize who he is. Not everyone wants to be included, but Jesus keeps on gathering. He is gentle with the weak, the tired, and the lonely. Those who think they are strong enough to do without him receive harsh treatment, to try to call them to their senses. Jesus goes about his task, inviting, gathering, healing, comforting, restoring. One by one, around the world, people’s lives change. Others see and wonder. People gather to praise God. The gospel is preached. Faith awakens. The gathering grows. Then it starts all over.

“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” This tells us a lot of who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. In him, God is working his purpose out, gathering people to be with him. There are other forces at work in the world to scatter us. There are forces that wish to divide and conquer us. The powers of disease, decay, decline, and death do their worst. Personal problems twist and distort our lives and destroy our relationships. The world’s stockpiles of nuclear weapons threaten to scatter us across the universe like so much star dust. But there is Jesus, still gathering people to himself. Here we are, yet today, gathered in his name. We may not look like much. But think what this means. God has not forgotten us. God has not left us here on our own. God in Jesus Christ is gathering us as his own. That counts against every power in the world that tries to hurt or divide or destroy us. Even the power of death cannot separate us from the love of God. Here is good reason to sing God’s praises and to give God thanks.

“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” We are more than beneficiaries and recipients of the gospel. We are also workers and agents of the gospel. We are not only gatherees but also gatherers. We have been called together to call others together. This is part of what it means to be Christian. This is part of what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ. This is who we are. We can do no other. Christ allows no neutrality. There is no middle ground. Not to be with Jesus is to be against him. Not to gather with him is to scatter. We can not stand still, not individually, and not as a church. Businesses either grow or die. There is no standing still. Organizations either move forward or backward. There is no staying the same. And churches either gather more people to

Jesus Christ or scatter them away. There is no in between. We either serve Jesus Christ or we serve the enemy. It is that simple.

Who is this Jesus Christ, who has gathered us here and for whom we are to gather others here? The prophets tell of a servant to come. They also tell of a king to come, descended from David. What they never tell is that it is the same person. A servant is lowly. A king is high and mighty, so much so that we did away with them in this country. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is both. Even as the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus, he kept healing the sick and told them not to make him known. He was a quiet, gentle, and faithful servant. He could not conceal his ministry. Yet his ministry—his servanthood—went beyond his work and sufferings to include his death that was being plotted. His healing went beyond those whom he touched to the whole world he embraced when he stretched his arms upon the cross. Only then do we know who he is.

At the same time, his mighty deeds convinced the crowds that he was the long-expected king. They brought him a man who was blind and dumb. This is a peculiar combination. It is more typical to be deaf and dumb. These afflictions of being blind and dumb were attributed not to natural causes but to the enemy of God. Jesus healed the man of his blindness and dumbness. The man spoke and saw. By the same act, he healed the crowds. They had been blind to Jesus and silent about him, but now they saw who he was and said aloud, “Can this be the Son of David?” They realized and confessed that Jesus is king. Yet they could hardly know that he was not simply the son of David and the King of Israel. Jesus is the son of God and brings in the kingdom of God. In his name all the nations of the world have hope. Jesus, the strange servant-king who dies for us, is lord of the universe. This is the one who says, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.”

How does this apply to us today? First, looking back, we want to remember, to realize, and to rejoice that each of us has been gathered to Christ, to be with Christ. Some may not remember a time when this was not the case. Others may have come to the faith recently. Either way, think about who first told you about Jesus Christ. Who introduced you to Jesus? Who first read the Bible to you? Who first taught you to sing hymns of praise? Someone, at some time, gathered you to Jesus. It might have been your parents, your grandparents, your spouse, or a friend. Someone loved you, cared for you, and brought you to Jesus. Whoever it was that introduced you to Jesus, someone introduced him or her to Jesus. This goes all the way back to the first disciples when Jesus walked the earth. We do not want this long chain of events to stop and to come to a dead end with you or me! We want to continue it, to extend it, and to expand it.

Second, looking around, all of us have, in the providence of God, been gathered to Jesus Christ in this time and place. We are not first generation Christians. We are not a part of the Russian Orthodox Church, to name one on the other side of the world. We are not a New England congregational church. We have been gathered here, in Richmond, Virginia, in A.D. 2000, as Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. Again, think about how this happened. Who first brought you here? It is good to remember and to rejoice in how and by whom we were gathered here. But more to the point, let us ask why. Why are we gathered here? Because we have a job to do for our Lord. We are gathered here, not only to worship God, and not simply to enjoy each other's company, but to do a job. We who have been gathered to Christ and to his church are now to gather others to Christ and to his church. To fail to do so is to scatter people to the enemy.

How do we, as Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, go about gathering people to Christ and to his church? First, we regather the members of the church who are not here. We want to pay special attention to the sick, the lonely, and the distressed. We want to pay special attention to those who are shut-ins and are unable to be with us for worship. We want to reach out to the children and make sure they are included. A church that loses as many or more people out the back door as it gathers in the front door would not be making any headway.

Then, we look out beyond the church and gather those who are not members. In some cases, this means introducing people to Jesus Christ for the first time. In other cases, it means inviting people who have been Christian for a long time into the life, worship, and mission of this congregation. This means inviting and bringing to church other family members, friends, neighbors, school mates, and coworkers. Eighty-five percent of the people who come to a church do so the first time because a friend or relative invites them. Think what it would mean in the faith and life of this church if each member gathered one other person into the church. There are thousands of families within a few miles of Grace Covenant who need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are people who need to know the good news: God has not forgotten us. God has not left us here on our own. God in Jesus Christ is gathering us as his own. This counts against every power in the world that tries to hurt or to divide or to destroy us.

Some may want to know, Where is this gathering taking us? What is happening to Grace Covenant? We do not know where this is taking us. It is not our place to know. It is our place to obey. It is important that we do not attempt to place any limits on what God may do with us here. We are to gather young and old, male and female, long time residents and newcomers, rich and poor, black and white and Asian and hispanic, all to the glory of God. We find ourselves in a new and different

situation. It is exciting and gratifying that our visitors are helping us begin to see what our faithfulness may involve in the future.

I talked earlier about remembering who gathered us to Christ and who brought us to church. Think now of whom we have gathered to Christ and whom we have brought to church. This inviting and gathering and bringing and welcoming is not reserved for the pastor or the evangelism committee or a few members. This is an essential part of what it means for each of us to be Christian and what it means to be the church. At the end of time, when Jesus asks us, “Whom have you gathered for me?”, I do not want us to have to stand there with nothing to say. I do not want us to be condemned as scatterers. So, let us work hard and joyfully and faithfully for our Lord, filling this church to capacity several times over, so one day we can hear Jesus say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servants; you have gathered a bountiful harvest; enter into the joy of your master.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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