



Fighting Against the Arena Culture

Matt Chandler – May 12, 2019

Good morning. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab those. Ephesians, chapter 4, is where we're going to hang out for a little bit. The early part of God's call on my life had me involved in what's called *itinerant ministry*. What that means is I was traveling around doing conferences. I had started teaching at the university I was at, and that was called Grace Bible Study. It actually grew fairly large, and we had tapes. I don't know if you guys have seen that. Google it later.

We had tapes, and we would sell the tapes of my messages in order to pay rent in the building we were working in. Those tapes kind of went with the wind, and then the next thing I knew I was being invited up to metropolises like Pampa, Texas, to do a student event or Borger for a revival. I mean, name a little town in West Texas. I know all about West Texas because of that.

This started a season in which what I was primarily doing was going into either conferences or retreats or venues like that, and they would bring me in to be the preacher or the speaker for that event. God blessed it wildly. By the time that season was coming to a close, I was traveling all over the world. I had been working with a band (I guess you can call them a band) Shane & Shane. We had started a nonprofit together here in Dallas, and we were just kind of getting it.

It did not take me long to grow disillusioned around the effects of conference speaking. I was outside of Denver. We had just done an event together with several thousand young adults, and I was taking a nap in the afternoon, because that was the season of life I was in. Sometimes I fantasize about that season. I don't know about you, but sometimes I'm like, "Remember when you *had* to do that?"

So I was taking a nap, and maybe it was the altitude, maybe it was not, but I just got a really clear sense from the Lord that itinerant ministry wasn't the future he had for me and that speaking events wasn't what he was going to do with me. At that point in time, the only models of pastoral

ministry I had seen did not fit with me. I thought pastors looked weird in jeans, and there was no way I was wearing a suit to work every day.

My style of preaching tended to not appeal to those over the age of 35 in that season. If you were here with me when I first got here when I was 28, you might remember some of that. A lot of vinegar and a lot of misplaced confidence in our way versus other people's ways, and things like that. Hear the word *arrogance*. That's the word I think I'm trying to find there. It was in that season I started researching church planting and what it would be like to plant a church, and that way it could be whatever we built it to be.

To really shrink this story, I ended up here. What had captivated my imagination in those days is what it would be like to get on the ground with people and for 30 to 40 years grow in Christ together. I had seen the limitation of one-shot preaching on disciple-making. What I wanted to do was spend my life making disciples, which means I needed to put roots in somewhere. You're not going to make disciples with a single sermon, no matter how good that sermon is.

Discipleship takes time. It takes high pain thresholds. Preaching doesn't take high pain thresholds. You can carpet-bomb a place and get on the plane and go home. But if you're going to make disciples, if you're going to spend your life with one group of people who are going to learn, "Hey, he might can preach, but he has some serious flaws..." You want to get in the arena like that? That's more difficult.

Long story very short, I ended up *here*. I was pumped about being here. How many of you were with me at Metro before I got here? Here's what was funny. I was preaching to about 2,000 to 3,000 young adults on Monday night, and my first Sunday here there were 168 of us. I loved it, and it lasted about three weeks. That 168 became 600, became 800, became 900, became 1,000, became 2,000, became 3,000, and now here we are. Yet my passion has not changed.

I do not want to be a conference speaker. That is not what we're doing. This right here, this gathering, this family gathering here... To me, this isn't conference speaking. I'm going to run into you at Marty B's. I'm going to run into you at Jason's Deli. God knows I'm going to run into you at Target. Sheesh! At any given moment, half our church is at Target. Sometimes I tell Lauren, "Baby, you go in. If I go in, we're going to be in there for 45 minutes." We're just always in Target together. I've already seen four of you in here who I saw this week in Target.

My point is this is life-on-life stuff. David Brooks wrote an article in the *New York Times*. He's an op-ed writer for them. He called it the *arena culture*. He said that you and I are so overstimulated. You and I are so overwhelmed with fast-paced, energized entertainment that we have developed a really idealized sense of life with a really low pain tolerance. Church herself no longer is about discipleship, no longer is about being shaped, no longer is about being formed, but is about being entertained in the gathering.

Here's my plan today, just so you know. I want to invite you in and simultaneously create a very generous lane out. That's my plan: to invite you in and simultaneously go, "And yet, here's an exit ramp. I love you. God bless you. In the name of Jesus, but head on." Our plan is not to ever develop an arena culture. I'm not interested in it.

I love preaching the Word of God. I feel most alive in that space, but I also love the fact that I saw Claude and Celeste roll up here today, and I have just wet the ground of my living room floor for them, and I know why I have. I see others of you. I saw Mike walk in here, and my face lit up, and I threatened him not to ever scare me with cancer stuff again.

I'm on the ground. I want to grow together, and that doesn't happen by preaching sermons. That happens when we're on the ground together. I'm saying all this because we're about to buy land and build a building. I have no intention of building that building if what I get is a bunch of spectators. Not into it. It's not what I want, not what the Bible paints as church.

Those of you who are serving and are in, you're clapping right now, and other people are like, "Wait. What?" Let's chat about it. I want to try to reorient your mind around what it means to belong to a church. It's not *this*. This is breathing in, being nourished so we can get back out and do the work of ministry. Look at it. Ephesians 4, starting in verse 11. My first series at TVC was actually the book of Ephesians for these very reasons. Let's pick it up in verse 11.

"And he [Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

I just want to chat. My outline is the outline of the text. Here's what it looks like. Jesus loves the church. The church is called his *bride*. He is crazy about the church, so crazy about the church that he gave his life for her. Jesus is in love with the church, and what he has gifted to her via the Holy Spirit are these offices he just laid out.

He has gifted his bride, whom he loves, with teachers and with prophets and with apostles and with all of these things we read in the text. Those gifts aren't meant to terminate on themselves. They're meant to produce something. Each of these gifts or offices exists to accomplish a specific task. I don't know if you know this is what's going on in the church, but let me read this to you. Earlier in Ephesians 3, Paul makes this argument:

"Of this gospel..." The gospel we read about in chapters 1 and 2. **"...I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."**

The church is revealing the manifold, the expanse wisdom of God. Now, personally, I think this is a terrible plan. Has anybody grown up in church? This is a bad plan. Has anybody seen the hypocrisy among God's people? Terrible plan, yet this is the plan. So Jesus loves his church, gives the apostles, the teachers, the shepherds to the church...for what end? Well, you saw it. It was to equip the saints.

I want you to hear me say this. *You...you...you* have been uniquely wired by God and gifted by the Holy Spirit. Let me show you, because you're looking at me like, "Uh..." First Corinthians 12:7: **"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."** It's important that you get this. My job and the job of vocational ministers is not to do the work of ministry but, rather, help you see, spot, be trained in your giftedness and then unleash that giftedness on the world around us. You have been called to ministry.

I'm telling you, we have it all backward. You all think *we* have been called to ministry, and that's why the manifold wisdom of God isn't seen globally. It's not that The Village Church has 50 ministers; it's that The Village Church has 6,000 ministers. That's how the manifold wisdom of God

is seen. Not in 50 who have maybe been to seminary...in 6,000 who have a giftedness of the Holy Spirit and have been placed around the world for the glory of God.

I'm helping coach Reid's little football team, and I'm having a blast. One game left, hopefully for the title. We practice those boys hard. They practice hard. Do you know why? Because they get to play on Saturday. It's stunning to me how many of us have been practicing for 30 years and have never played a snap. You know your Bible, have been in church, know the songs.

You even know when to raise your hands. You're like, "*Now* in the song." But that isn't us. It's the old Baptist T-rex arm worship. "Just not there yet. I'm just right *here*." Then the longer you're here, maybe they come out a little bit more. Maybe you're the one-hander, the chest tap. There are all sorts of variations. Another sermon for another day.

You kind of learn the culture, but you become a spectator. You watch other people play and cheer them on, but wouldn't it be better to actually be on the field? I mean, gosh! If I'm constantly training these boys to play the game and they never get to play it, they're not going to want to play it. If they're constantly being yelled at and re-repped and ran, but they don't ever get the joy of the touchdown, the joy of the first down, the joy of the tackle for loss...

If all you're ever doing is scheming a plan to execute on a business deal and you never actually execute on it, if all you're ever doing is building out lesson plans but you never teach students, if all you're doing is designing something you're going to build and you never build it... We are a spectator culture, and it's killing the church of Jesus Christ.

God's plan is *you*, full of the Holy Spirit, being equipped, empowered, and released to do work of ministry yourself. If you put all that weight on us, we'll shrivel and die, and I'm certainly not building a building to do that. I'll speak at conferences. It pays better and nobody sees my weaknesses. Let's keep going. So, equip you for the work of ministry. I know somebody is like, "Where's the text?" I'm glad you asked. Second Corinthians 5:17-20.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ..." By the way, that's you if you're a Christian. **"...he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for**

Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

This is important. The work of reconciliation, the ministry of reconciliation has been given to you, and you are ambassadors for Christ. The primary place this is going to play out is not you serving in Kids Village, although we would love to have you. The primary place this is playing out is in your home and where you work. When you start going, "I have work and I have the ministry of reconciliation; I have work and I'm an ambassador for Christ" and you tease those two apart, you're literally robbing yourself of the very purpose for which you're in that domain to begin with.

You're imaging the creator God where you are. It's not that you have a job and you have a ministry. No, no. Your ministry *is* your job. You can't separate those out. How boring does work become if you separate out the most important reality from it and put it in its own category over *here*. No. God's call on your life is you're to faithfully work where you are, doing the work of reconciliation and being an ambassador of Christ in your classroom, in your workshop, in your office, on the field. Wherever you work, wherever you play, wherever you live, this is God's call on your life.

It's why I've argued for 16 years you should never be bored. The eternal weight behind everything you're doing is crazy significant. You shouldn't be bored, and if you're bored...I love you...you're doing it wrong. You're just doing it wrong. Then this is important, because even in the middle of this, he says we're being equipped for the work of ministry, which leads to the building up of the body of Christ, so that the building up of the body of Christ is woven into the fabric of God's manifold wisdom being seen.

So you have you being a minister of reconciliation, an ambassador of Christ in your neighborhoods, in your workplaces, not teasing these things apart, and then that bleeds over into glad-hearted service to one another, so that our equipping in the Training Program, in Residency, in Home Groups, in these different things actually leads to us not just being more faithful at home, more faithful at work, but more faithful to one another.

An arena culture expects everything to be put together when we arrive. Have you ever been to a concert? How many of you have seen live music lately? Some of y'all need to see some live music. That's why you're so grumpy. If you show up at a concert and they're like, "Oh man! Thank God you're here. Hey, do you know how to run sound? Could you come here real quick? Let me train you

real quick on the board. Thank God you're here. Could you help us set out some chairs?" No. You show up and it's all set up.

People think that's what church is supposed to be. That's a concert. This isn't a concert. This is like a family gathering. You go to a family reunion, and hopefully... I know we all have some dysfunction, but hopefully it's not one poor couple that cooks for everybody all week long. Maybe some of you are like, "You don't know my family. We only want that one person cooking. We had somebody die in '08, and that kind of ushered this in."

This is family. This is not a showing up at an event with a swag bag underneath our chair and everything done for us. This is us serving one another that shows our personal preferences are secondary to the manifold wisdom of God being made visible among us. We don't train to train; we train to play. Let me show you a quick video. It's like two minutes, but it's a bunch of different people who are explaining this better than maybe I am right now.

[Video]

Male: I've been serving in Kids Village for about 10 years, and the Training Program has really changed the way I communicate the story of Scripture to kids.

Female: I learned how to articulate the story of Scripture, which has been life-changing and something I am looking forward to taking back into my home. I have two young children, so it has been a gift. I'm looking forward to making disciples.

Female: Through the Training Program I've learned how to share the story of the kingdom of God, and I want to share it with my grandchildren and with my neighbors.

Male: Jesus brings us back into relationship with God, and I'm going to take that into counseling, take that into Recovery, with the hope that the answer to our suffering is the presence of God.

Male: For the past several years, I've wrestled through questions of vocation, gifting, and how really I want to spend the rest of my life from a vocational standpoint. In the Residency Program, we spend a great deal of time working through knowledge of self in light of how God has made us, how he has gifted us.

Female: I know God is always calling us to share the gospel, and I've always been afraid and intimidated to do that because I didn't think I knew what I was talking about. Through the Training Program, I've learned God's story, and I'm so excited to take it and share it with my neighbors.

Female: In the Training Program I learned, first and foremost, that God is my Father first, and I have been able to take this into mentoring of others and discipling others as well as discipling and mentoring our soon-to-be daughter.

Male: The last year has helped me to learn a lot more about the biblical qualifications for pastors and elders, so as I start to align my life more and more with what Christ would have a pastor and elder look like and live their life like, I am excited to grow in that way and to continue serving in the local church.

[End of video]

I love that. I love the diversity of it. Although they're highlighting the Training Program and the Residency Program, my point in this is that they trained and now are using that according to their giftedness in the body to build her up and outside the walls to be ambassadors. This is the call on *your* life. This is the call on *my* life. I'm going to have to, according to the book of Hebrews, stand in front of God and give an account for how well we spent our energy to create pathways for you to find your gift and then use your gift.

If I look around The Village Church, I know there's a family that once a week opens up their home for their whole neighborhood to come in, and then they worship and pray. They're just asking the Spirit of God to do... I know for some of you that thought terrifies you. Do you know why? Because that's not the gift you have. Others of you just want to bring order to chaos. You're like, "Let me bring order to this. I don't want chaos; I want to bring order to chaos." Praise God. You're imaging God's love for order when you exercise that.

Whether you're in service, whether you're in business, whether you're in law, education, whatever domain, you image the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit where you are. If you're like, "Well, how long do you do this?" I'm glad you asked. Look at Ephesians 4:13. "**...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...**" So when is it over? Anybody want to take a shot at it? His return, the return of Christ when all things have been made new.

Just so we can rejoice together, here's how, by God's grace, it should work everywhere, and for whatever reason, God has been really generous to let it work beautifully this way here. Those of us who are here should be on this path, maturing, figuring out how to use our gift, figuring out where to use that gift, giving ourselves over to that gift, and then babies are always being born in the middle of it.

Lauren and I are in a new season. Audrey is now driving, which is both terrifying and amazing. Lauren is singing. I'm preaching. Audrey will drive our two littles up here. Prayers, please. We don't give anyone a shower. We don't feed them. We're just like, "Make something." They're like, "What are we having for lunch?" "Whatever you can get out of the cupboard. That's what you're having for lunch." Yet we love other people's babies.

We love to hold those babies, listen to them coo, and then hand them right back. I don't want that baby at 3:00 in the morning. We did that. It ain't happening. No, no. So happy for you, so excited for all you get to do. Go get 'em. What happens in a family of faith is that a group begins to mature, and by the grace of God new life is born, and then those who are mature have an opportunity to come back and not resent, not demand that they become *this* but patiently walk them into maturity also.

The reason we should never be bored and the reason this should always be life-giving is that everyone has been given a gift and everyone then is given an opportunity, when you're known, when you're in community, to give back to those who are younger in the faith while being flanked by those who are as mature as you are. When a church is firing on all its cylinders, rooted in the Word of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, this is what she looks like: those who are mature coming alongside the newborns and growing them, nurturing them into being mature.

The mature don't go, "Gosh! Get your act together. When are you going to...?" In the same way, you don't grab a newborn and go, "Start to walk!" That's not what you do. You nurture and you love and you encourage until they do. You rejoice in their crawling. You rejoice in their first couple of steps. Do you remember when your kid held the bottle for the first time? I think I burst out in tongues. When you didn't have to do that and they just held it, you were like, "This is the most magical moment of my life. This might have just beaten out the day of their birth. I don't have to hold this anymore."

These are these moments where we get to celebrate babies growing into what God has for them.

Sometimes all it is is "They're holding a bottle! Praise his name!" But if you're so mature that everybody has to be as mature as you, then you're actually the infant. I'll say it again. If you're so mature that you're the standard by which everybody gets measured, then you're actually the infant, if you're a believer at all.

This is why this is important. What I mean by that is ongoing maturation. This text lays out some things we don't talk much about anymore, but I think it's important to talk about it. Why in community ongoing maturation is so important, he says, is so that you wouldn't be children, tossed about by every wind and false doctrine.

It's important to note that you and I live in a day (this has actually always been true; it's just our turn, and culturally things are a bit different) where whatever you think the Bible means, that's what it means...except that's not true. The Bible means what it means. It's not like, "Hey, there's this one text, and there are 700 different ways you could define this text." No, no. There's not. Biblical theology, orthodox Christian faith is pretty set.

The closed hand of theology is set. God is triune. He is Creator. That's set. Christ has atoned for sins. That's set. You start believing outside that, you're outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity. You're believing something else. It's make-believe by you; it's not biblical. Yet I don't think you should weaponize that and carry a club and just wait for somebody to not nuance something the right way and *Kapow!* pounce on them. There's a generous orthodoxy around secondary issues while there is a tightness around orthodoxy.

There *are* false teachers, and there *is* false teaching. In a day and age where it has to be right for you and it's right for me and we can all believe what we want, that stuff will kill us. There *is* truth. We said this last week. Truth is fixed, and it's not inside of us. It's fixed and it's outside of us, and it's shown to us by the Word of God. That's not to say there aren't going to be some things on the secondary front that we argue about until Christ comes back and lets whoever know they're right, but I think in the face of Jesus we won't care.

I just think... Maybe I'm wrong. I just can't believe there will be one side of the eschatology debate that's like, "Told you!" when Christ is right there. "In your face, Presbys! Told you! Immersion." I just have a hard time believing that's actually going to happen when we finally know. Until then, we're going to be generous and kind, trust the Lord, and love one another well.

The other thing I want you to see here is that there's human cunning and craftiness in deceitful schemes. We live in a day where the institution is always wrong and individual people are always right, yet the Bible is like, "No, there are wolves and there are dogs that will infiltrate the church for the purpose of destroying the church from inside." It's like there's no category for that.

If you'll watch on social media, there's no such thing as a crazy ex-church member. That does not exist. There are only churches that want to crush people and destroy them and take advantage of them and steal their money. I'm not saying those things don't exist. I'm just saying there's no category for human cunning and the crafty deceitfulness of human beings, yet it's all over the Bible.

Paul often warns... This is to the Ephesian elders: "After I leave, ravenous wolves will infiltrate from your ranks and devour the church." How do you fight that? You walk with one another in community, you encourage one another in your giftedness, and you embrace that you've been called a minister of reconciliation and an ambassador for Christ for the building up of the body.

As I look into our future... We're about to purchase land, and then we're going to have to build a building. I want you to lean into this. If you're not a Christian, there will always be, by the grace of God, a seat for you to come and wrestle with the claims of Jesus Christ. If what you want is to get popcorn in the foyer and come and just listen to good music and hopefully good preaching, I want to love you well by saying there are churches that that's their whole methodology, and I would love to create a generous exit ramp for you to go find one of those.

Now let me tell you who I'm *not* talking to and who I *am* talking to. If you're banged up... You've limped into The Village out of a very difficult season, and you're like, "I have nothing to give right now where I am. I have *this* going on with my kids. I have *this* going on. I have nothing to give." Bless you. Sit here. Heal. Rest. Breathe for a second.

But if you've been here eight or ten years and the extent of what it means to be at The Village, go to The Village... "Where do you go to church?" "The Village," and what that means is once a month you pop your head in here, I'm just saying people do this better than we do with lights and clouds and zip lines and fireworks and a swag bag under your seat. I love you. Listen. No knock on you. That's not what we're going to do. I'm not going to try to raise the kind of money we're about to try to raise just to make seats for people who have no intention of joining the kingdom of God.

If you just like what we do, all of it's online for free. Just listen to it on Tuesday and go where there are fireworks, because I don't want to turn away people who don't know Jesus so you can come and listen to the music you like or because you think occasionally I'm funny. I don't want to not have seats for those who say, "I want to grow in my gift. I want to know what it's like to live for Jesus 24/7 wherever I can live for Jesus." I want space for that.

I'm not mad at you. I'm just saying there are places that do *this* in a more entertaining way than we do, and I just bless you in the name of Jesus as you go find it. But for us, I'm asking you to lean in. Maybe you *were* leaning in and some things happened and you kind of backpedaled for a while. I'm just encouraging you to lean in again. I know we're entering into the summer months and program stuff is thin in the summer, but there are a couple of ways you can take a step forward in it.

Let me give you two in particular. One is Go Groups. Go Groups is a 10-week intensive discipleship that'll take place over the summer that's meant to help you share the gospel and make disciples in your neighborhoods. One of the things I miss about 2003 to 2006 is just how grimy it was and how many... We did not want transfer growth. If you were coming from another church, no thank you. We wanted new Christians.

Then by 2008 we were like, "Jesus, send us someone with a Bible. Please, God, send us someone who taught Sunday school somewhere else or was a deacon somewhere. Please, Jesus, send us someone to help disciple all of these people who are becoming Christians." I've felt probably the last five or six years there has been a lot of transfer growth and not as much... We've seen plenty of conversions, but not as many.

Go Groups is about sharing the gospel and making disciples. It's 10 weeks long. It's done in community. There are those there who will teach you how, walk with you as you do this. I would just encourage you. This is a way that you can take a step into the life of our family of faith here at TVC. Another way I could lay before you, specifically if you're 20 to 30, young adult, single, is they're going to start to have what they've called *Summer Nights*, starting June 11. You can find that on our website. They're going to get together and just grow in grace with one another.

Again, there are Bible study classes that'll be firing up. There are GroupConnects that'll be firing up. I want to press the issue...*Is this your family of faith?* If it's not, great, but I need you to go and find the place that is. I want it to be us, but I'm well aware that we're not for everybody. We have a distinct flavor here. Some people like the aroma; some people do not like the aroma.

I get it. That's why there are multiple local churches and not just one. It's why you're not at First Baptist Jerusalem right now. You're not. You know that, right? You're at The Village in Dallas so that God might show his manifold wisdom in the heavenly places. There is more in you than you think there is. One of my favorite things as a pastor is watching that come alive. Let's pray.

Father, help us. We need you. We are, in a very real way, overly entertained, overly stimulated, low pain threshold, always wanting high energy, hyper-idealized, no tolerance for difficulty. Thank you that you have given to each of us, every one of us, a manifestation of your Spirit for the building up of the common good.

I pray we'd step into that, lean into that, rejoice in that, marvel at the fact that you've called us according to your purposes. We love you. For those who are in a difficult season of life and have nothing to give, I pray they would feel your peace, they'd get a sense of it being okay to rest a while longer, but for the consumer I pray conviction. Not guilt...conviction, the sweetness of being invited into something greater.

I pray that you would disperse the spectators and that you would call your people, specifically your people here at The Village Church, into love and good deeds. Thank you for the uniqueness of their gifting, the uniqueness of their placement, and I thank you that your glory will cover the earth like the water covers the seas. You've invited us to play, and that's amazing. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.