



Friend of Sinners
Part 3 – Friends of the Crowd
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we're talking about *Friends of the Crowd*. We want to talk about the difference between a crowd and a congregation. I want to start with addressing the crowd, those who are gathered here today because not everybody here is part of the congregation. Not everybody gathered today is a member of Woodland Hills Family Church. We just want you to know, clearly, from the membership, from the congregation of Woodland Hills, we're glad you're here.

You are welcomed here no matter what you're dealing with, no matter what sin you're dealing with in your life, no matter what relationships have fallen apart, no matter how you treated other drivers on your way into the parking lot. And we mean it. You are welcomed here. We have thought a lot about you this week. Our prayer as a church is that we are creating environments and experiences that welcome all people, and can the congregation say amen to that? We want everything about what's taking place today to honor the Lord and to welcome you.

When we talk about a crowd, it's not something you hear talked about a lot at the church, but we have kind of a large crowd. Last Sunday was our largest crowd all year, outside of Easter. I think we had 2,350 people on campus. Here's what I know about the crowd: some of you are here because you have family that was getting baptized and this is your first time at our church. We welcome you to the crowd today.

There are some here that like the energy of a crowd. How many of you love going to a good concert? Let me just ask this another way. If you're a Branson entertainer and you love a crowd, would you raise your hand? What Branson entertainer is going to say, "No, we like it when eight people show up to our show; it's great." There's just no energy when you've got two rows full of people. You like a packed house because there's energy with a crowd.

We also know that with a crowd, there are people who can hide. There are people who enjoy hiding in a crowd. It's one of the reasons we don't put name badges on you when you come into our church. If you're brand new here, we didn't ask you to fill out a card and stick "Visitor" on it like we did at my church growing. We just wanted everybody to know you are brand new, lost, need the Lord; we're going to bombard you with every interaction you have. My pastor would get up and say... And I'm not making up a word of this. My pastor would get up and say, in welcoming... He thought this was welcoming guests. I thought it was a little much. He would go, "If this is your first time or our first time in a long time..." You know what he's saying. "If you're a guest or you're backslidden, would you raise your hand so the whole congregation can know."

So, this message is quite a bit about training as well today as we move from crowd to congregation in just a moment. But I just want to help our congregation with this too because the staff talks about this a lot at our church where we'll meet someone on a Sunday morning gathering... We'll meet someone in the crowd, and we'll say, "Hey, welcome; we're glad you're here. Is this your first time?" And they'll respond, "I've been coming here for nine years." So, let's not ask people if it's their first time; let's just give them a nice welcome, assume it's not their first time. But if it is their first time and that comes out when your greeting them... But there are people that like to sneak in and sneak out. If that's you, would you raise your hand right now? No, I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand. Guess what? We're comfortable with that.

There are also people who feel lost in a crowd and the church, especially this service, can be overwhelming for you. You're walking in thinking, *How am I going to every know anyone?* There are many ways at Woodland Hills to make a large church feel small. We have home groups, community groups, small groups. If you're coming from other churches, whatever your church would call those or if you've heard about them. You can get into a smaller gathering. We're actually changing a lot about that at our church right now under the leadership of Cathy Jensen to really help all of you that feel part of the crowd, and maybe even become part of the congregation through Starting Point. You've never plugged in and this place is just too overwhelming for you, we want to help you make this big crowd feel small. Just to take the pressure off for those who feel lost in the crowd, you do not need to know everybody in here, and don't try to. You're like, "But I'm a party on wheels; everybody wants to know me." It's not possible.

We've heard all the critique on what it means to be a crowd. But we're not afraid of crowds; we're grateful for the crowds. We want to reach the crowds and we want the crowd to grow. Here's the bottom line and what I want us to look at. **Jesus attracted large crowds.** Two thousand years ago upon this earth, he attracted large crowds. And if you believe this, say amen: **He's still attracting large crowds today.** If you want to do this, I obviously can't give it all to us this morning, but if you go to biblegateway.com, or whatever your Bible app is, and do a word search on crowd and just go through the gospels and see how Jesus not only attracted large crowds, but how he ministered to large crowds.

In Matthew 7: 28... I'm going to give like three text about how he taught and what the crowds did with his teaching and how they responded to his teaching. They were amazed at his teaching. They were hearing things brand new for the first time.

In Matthew 22: 33, we read they were astonished at his teachings. Brand new ideas.

And this one, Mark 12: 37, you're going to know I loved. They actually enjoyed his teaching. They enjoyed listening to him.

I love what Pastor Mark Batterson in D.C. says. "If your sermons are boring, it's probably because your life is boring."

I'm here to tell you however you read the Bible, I want you to know this clearly. Jesus was not boring. I think too for many churches today, their Sunday morning gathering has just become boring. And they're

not reflecting the joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And when people begin finding freedom, there is rejoicing and there is joy and that's what we want to have happen here. Jesus attracted crowds 2,000 years ago and he's still attracting them today.

The scripture also says about these crowds that they were large (Matthew 8:1). It goes on to say they were so large that at one point they almost crushed him (Luke 8:42). I think we would maybe use the term *mob*. But here's the thing. They weren't just crowds that Jesus came in and out of. They weren't just crowds that followed Jesus. Jesus actually was moved by these crowds.

The scripture tells us, in Matthew 9, **36** *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them...* I hope that's always the heartbeat of our congregation, of our church that when we see the crowd coming in that yes, we can be overwhelmed by it, we can be overwhelmed by the need, but that we always have compassion for those that show up here week after week after week as part of the crowd. He's actually going to give an indictment here on the spiritual leaders of that day because of how they were treating people. **...because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.** These were the victims of the charlatans, and Jesus was giving a whole new message and a whole new way of life and people were tuning in.

Not only were people tuning into what he was saying, many of them were showing up to the crowds because they had great need. May that always be the heartbeat of our church: people showing up here in need. They don't know or realize they have a spiritual need, but they have a physical need, and they have discovered, they've heard, it's been spread through the hotels, it's been spread through community that at Woodland Hills Family Church, they meet physical needs.

May we not so stress over being taken advantage of or not having enough. Let me just tell you that we are doing fine in the budget. We are doing well with your giving. Your giving is generous, it is joyful, we're meeting physical needs and we don't want to keep it a secret that we meet physical needs. We want the community to know we're meeting needs.

We read in Matthew 14, **15** *As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away..."* I probably side with the disciples more on this. The crowds are too much. The needs are too great.

Now this was before we had Chick-fil-A boxed lunches. If you go to large events with large crowds, you know. It's funny; Paul Harris has done a lot of comedy events with me. He didn't really understand Chick-fil-A and the experience. He actually thought Christian churches in the country were under some sort of commitment to only use Chick-fil-A for our large crowds. That's because every greenroom only had Chick-fil-A and at breaks, they serve Chick-fil-A. He goes, "Are we allowed to use other restaurants?" I go, "No, it is the Lord's chicken. We are only allowed to use Chick-fil-A."

The disciples said send the crowds away. Not only did Jesus have compassion, but he met needs. The crowds didn't intimidate him, obviously. **"...they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."** But what did Jesus say? **"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."** We get

these miracles in the scripture of Jesus taking just a little bit of food and providing for everyone. The word got out and I hope the word gets out to our community and I hope people show up to our crowd because we take care of people here. I know that's your heart individually; may it always be our heart collectively.

As you keep going on with these crowds, Matthew 15 says, ***30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others,*** So now, people are hearing about it and they are inviting people to come with them. They are bringing people along with them. ***...and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.***

Matthew 19 says, ***2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.*** This is a very important thing for us to understand. As a church, our desire is to create environments and experiences that meet the needs of people, that honor people, that welcome people. Many people will show up to our crowd as they showed up to the crowds of Jesus. They are seeking relief more than truth.

I love the fact that many of you are here today because... You didn't start by coming to an 8:30, 10:00, or 11:30 service; you came to Woodland Hills because of Marriage 911. You were seeking relief and help for your marriage. We baptized someone in the first service, precious Phyllis, it took a few minutes to get her into the tub. She's in her 70s. It was a precious time. And let me just tell you something: Grief Share ministered to her. I met Phyllis and her husband a week after they moved to Branson to retire from Michigan. About two or three days after I met them on a Sunday here, he passed away. Our church did the funeral for him. Phyllis immediately found community in Grief Share and continues to seek... We were there for her as a church to meet emotional needs, relational needs.

We're getting to the spiritual needs, but here, people are coming. I don't meet a lot of lost people in Branson that ever ask me, "Does your church teach verse by verse through the Bible?" They're not asking that. Believers who are looking for a church are asking that, but lost people, people who don't know the Lord are not asking, "What current series are you in?" "What will you be teaching this week?" You know the questions they are asking have to do with their life. I'm just going to say it again. Wherever you're at in life today, we're glad you're here. This is a place where you can feel welcomed. This is a place where you are accepted. But know this. We're going to get to it even more, but there is a difference between accepting someone and approving of the way they are living. And the relief you seek is found in Christ.

Maybe you have money issues or relationship issues or health issues and you come here for relief. You're going to hear truth, but may we always be a church that's ministering to the relief of others. James puts it this way: You better be a church of relief. You better be a church of actually meeting physical needs for people and not just talking about it. And we are grateful for everything you do to put shoes on kids' feet to meet the physical needs of students of Stone and Taney Counties. James puts it this way. ***15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed..."*** This person doesn't need a seminar. Look at it. "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed." It's a three-point sermon. It's where Baptists get the three-point sermons.

Don't give them a sermon; meet their need. Do something for them. *...but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?* What good is your preaching if you're not doing something with it?

So here's the big idea out of this as we talk about the crowd. **May we be known for practicing what we preach more than what we preach.** I know believers get excited about the series. "What's our new series we're going into?" But may we remember that the crowd that is coming is not always interested in the next series. They are seeking relief, and as a church family, as a congregation, we need to constantly be meeting the needs of the crowd. We need to be finding ways to meet their physical needs, their emotional needs, their relational needs, and their spiritual needs.

We can attract large crowds without compromising the message. I think last week was an example of that. We know what we believe about marriage. We believe marriage is between a man and a woman for a lifetime, and we're not compromising that message at all. But the tone in which we share it, we can work on that. The way in which we deliver it, we can work on that. There is nothing changing about our message, but our methods are constantly changing. We're not afraid to reach the crowd.

Here's the difference as we move from crowd to congregation. Understand when we talk about the crowd, **we do not expect lost people to act like believers.** We do not believe in behavior modification at this church that you need to clean yourself up before you come here. We want you to come here, find Jesus, and let Jesus clean you up. That's the bottom line. But... and this is a very important but. Everybody's got a but. Take that in context. **We do expect believers to not act like lost people.** You see the difference there. It's like, "No, I just kind of like the crowd."

Today, we are inviting people from the community into the crowd. We've been doing that so far all morning, but we're also wanting to invite people from the crowd to the congregation and for some of you, you've been a part of the crowd for years. You've never placed faith in Jesus. You've never made that decision. When we start talking about membership, it gets you all weirded out. But we do have a different standard, a different way of living for those who say they are believers. We want our beliefs and our lifestyle, our beliefs and our practices to match.

I love how Joe White puts it. He said, "I love coming to Woodland Hills, Ted. Almost every time I'm there, I smell marijuana on someone." Well, we hope that's not a believer. But now it gets really hard to determine and we've said it and you hear me, this is an illustration used over and over again, but I think it sticks. If someone flips you off on the way into the parking lot, your first thought would be, can you believe that person at Woodland Hills did that? For that person, it may be their first Sunday here and they are as lost as anyone. We're glad they are here. Now, we hope believers aren't giving you the bird in our parking lot. We've told our elders to stop that along time ago.

It's why Amy says we are never getting me the license plate that says, "Pastor Ted." I don't want that license plate; I want a car that blends in. Not because I give people the finger, but because I honk. And if we're going to be welcoming people from our community into the congregation, this is the takeaway. You need to take it with you right now. I only honk at out of state tags. I don't honk at Missouri because it's probably one of you. But you could giddy up a little bit.

If you yield one more time in the roundabout, I'm rear-ending you, alright? I'm taking you out. You've been here long enough; it's time to get in the program, okay?

Let's move from the crowd to the church. Today, right in this room, we have the crowd and the church. Jesus had all different sorts of people in the crowds that followed him. Here's just three of them:

Committed followers – people who left it all behind, left family, left jobs, left their belongings, and left their livelihoods and said, "We will follow you." They followed Jesus.

Curious Seekers – "I hear this man is saying things I've never heard before," so they were around, really wanting to learn.

Critical Skeptics – There were people that were coming at Jesus.

We've heard all the criticism on a church that's growing or a church with a large crowd. It's a watered-down gospel. They're liberal. My favorite one is it's the feel-good church. We say we would rather be called the feel-good church than the feel-bad church. That doesn't make any sense to me. I know what they're trying to say, but let tell you that the attracting of large crowds drew a lot of criticism toward Jesus. And the crowds that Jesus is drawing today still comes with criticism.

Jesus had a crowd gathered that invited him for dinner. Luke 5 says this, ***27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.***

29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples... People will be critical of what we're doing. It just comes with the territory. We have to be okay with it. People say, "They're not preaching the gospel there." "They're not standing strong on truth." That's why we're doing this series. I think we're declaring we can stand strong on truth and be an over-the-top loving church, a welcoming church, a growing church. ***"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"***

31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." I think you get that in a lot of our teaching here at Woodland Hills. We're speaking not to the healthy, not to the already convinced, but we spend a lot of time talking to those who are not, to those who are broken and to those who are hurting.

Jesus says, ***32 "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*** Remember, Jesus is the friend, I am the sinner. In this church, we welcome you, we're glad you're here, but please understand yes, you're seeking relief, but ultimately, we're getting back to the message and calling you to repentance, repenting of the lifestyle where you're shaking your fist at God and saying, "I'll live any way I want to live." "I'll sleep with whoever I want to sleep with." "I'll sleep with as many as I want to sleep with." "I'll get drunk and I'll smoke my weed." "I'm going to do it all and you're not going to tell me. I'm going to live my life."

There are many ways that seem right to a man, but in the end, lead to destruction. Jesus is here to call you and he's here to call me to repentance. And we can be accepting and loving, but not approving. We can be accepting and loving and call each one of us to repentance. That's the difference between the crowd and the church.

We just had Starting Point. Starting Point is our gathering. You can sign up for it on our website. It's our gathering where we move people from the crowd to the congregation. You sign a membership covenant, saying, "I'll protect the unity of my church by acting in love toward other members, by refusing to gossip, by following the leaders. I will share the responsibility of my church by praying for its growth in the crowd, by inviting the unchurched to attend the crowd, by warmly welcoming those who visit. I will serve in the ministry of my church by discovering my gifts and talents, by being equipped to serve, by developing a servant's heart. I will support the testimony of my church by attending faithfully, by living a godly life."

Can I just now turn toward the congregation, those who have made the decision to follow Jesus and those who have become a member of the church that all of us would **care more about helping people find Jesus than we do about what people who follow Jesus say about it.**

Pat Kershaw brought to me a sacred echo after the last service. She goes, "I read this quote this week: 'May you be reaching out to lost people constantly and in a way that is constantly frustrating believers.'" I think I paraphrased that a little bit. But may we always be reaching people and welcoming people even though it's going to draw the criticism.

In Luke 7, it says, **34 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard...'** The sin is in gluttony, the sin is in drunkenness and Jesus was sinless. He was God and man, fully. No sin in this at all. You have to understand that when we hear friend of sinners, we kind of see it as something positive, but it was never given as a positive comment; it was given as a critical statement. He's **...a friend of tax collectors and sinners.**

Jesus reminds us he's calling us to repentance, and remember as he was accused of all this, Luke 19 says, **10 "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."** That's our desire at this church, to constantly be welcoming people into the crowd, but then challenging people to move from the crowd to the congregation.

Then, when you are part of the congregation, we're going to ask you to take another step and become part of the **committed**. Here's where I just love this; it kind of puts me at ease. Rick Warren drove this into me 20 years ago and I think about it almost every time before I speak. He said, "Long before you ever preach your sermon, people who are visiting your church have already decided whether or not they are going to come back." What he's saying there is that's on me. Not in here, but out there. You understand they are making decisions out there long before they walk in here. They are making decisions on whether or not this is a welcoming, warm, inviting place.

If I could just encourage all of you who serve in this church and all of you who volunteer... We're talking now from the crowd to the congregation to the committed. Those of you who serve, I hope you

understand how important it is to show up. It's a big deal. Why? It's because parents are bringing their kids into Critter Street and Wild Woods for the very first time and I think they are pretty impressed with the security measures and the thumb print and the background check we do of them. There is a lot of security. We take the safety and security of kids seriously, but when they show up to a room where the leader is not there or the leader is there and just stressed out, Mom and Dad aren't feeling as safe. They went through the thing and they're getting ready to hand their child over and the leader is panicked. Or – we had this last week – the rooms were big with a lot of kids. Moms and dads are making the decision, *Did this leader really want my kid? Did this leader want to spend an hour with my kid?* I think when a kid is bawling and screaming and yelling, what an opportunity for the church to go, "Bring it in. Give me that kid." Rather than cringing and saying, "Let's not start this relationship off like this."

In the parking lot... Even though you don't serve in the parking lot, how you treat people in the parking lot is a big deal. Welcome them. I always love how after we talk about this, the lines are going to be ridiculous in a couple of minutes because everybody is going to be like, "No, you go." "No, you go." Let me give you a rule on that. You only have to let one car in; that's it. Don't some of you go acting all super Jesus on me and letting three, four, five cars in. You're going to screw up the whole thing. One car. Can I get an amen on that? But you understand how important that is. If someone lets no car in, we're going to assume you're part of the crowd.

I'm grateful for our prayer team. They prayed with folks after the first service. Our prayer team, never have they been so well trained and prepared for people to come and share. We're teaching them emotional safety. You come down and you want to share your heart. As you confess your sin to someone, you're not going to be met with gasps and judgment. You're going to be met with someone that gives you a hug and shares with you the good news of Jesus and explains to you the truth about what a relationship with Christ can do.

Some of you are coming today for the first time from the community and into the crowd and today is the day that you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that he has been raised from the dead and you're being called to repentance that you would repent of your sins.

Some of you today have been in the crowd for a long time and it's time for you to take the step into the congregation. Others are in the congregation and you're doing a great job welcoming people and inviting people into our church, but you're being called to take a step into serving and you're like, "I don't have time..." You do have time. Stop by, fill out a Sweet Spot card, find a place where you can be there, welcoming, taking the edge off of people who are coming in either trying to hide in the crowd or feeling lost in the crowd or just liking the energy of the crowd. Be someone who can be a voice and a welcoming presence in the life of people that are coming into the church.

Let us not be like the disciples in that story where they said, "Let's send them away..." As a church family, let's say, "We're together, desiring to see people come to know the Lord. They may be here for relief, but we want them to find a savior. We want their lives to be changed. So, if that's you today in the congregation for a while, stop by the welcome desk and fill out a card. All of those who are serving, show up on time, prepared and ready and excited, welcoming people in.

Father, in the name of Jesus, may this church continue to grow, not just in number, but in love for you and love for one another and in love for our neighbors and in love for our enemies. May this always be a welcoming church.

It grieves us to hear when someone feels they have slipped through the cracks or they weren't welcomed or cared for when they showed up. May we as a congregation take that charge today and love people well, welcome people well. May we always be about creating and preparing for and showing up for environments and experiences that ultimately call people to repentance, and may we see lives change. We are grateful for that.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.