

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, On the GO!
(Studies of the book of Acts)

A Dangerous Purpose

(Selected passages from Acts)

Study #24

Introduction: Words...

On my first trip to Russia - which was not my first cross-cultural trip, so I should have known better - I made a rookie mistake in speaking to my Russian-speaking audience.

Todd Havekost and I were speaking - through translators - with a group of Russian pastors. The theme during this session was preparing and delivering sermons.

I was emphasizing the importance of word choice (so my mistake was doubly awful) because, as I said, quoting Mark Twain, *"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."*

Now you, an English-speaking audience living in a place where there are lightning bugs, fireflies, get what I was getting at.

But my Russian audience stared at me blankly, in part because my translator didn't even bother to translate my sentence.

Valeri, my translator at the time, may or may not have known what a lightning bug is. I suspect he simply knew that my sentence wouldn't have made sense to the pastors, and so graciously refused to make me look stupid by translating it.

Either way, it was a bad sentence made up of words that didn't communicate, and it highlights what I want to say now.

Words matter.

Books are made up of chapters containing paragraphs made up of sentences comprised of words. If we don't know what the words in a sentence mean, we won't "get" the point of the sentence, paragraph, chapter, or book.

So, the most basic unit of study there is, is the study of words. We need to understand the words or we won't understand the book. And today, you and I are going to look at a very important word.

Some words are more dangerous than others - and this is a dangerous word.

Inquiring Minds Want to Know...

The word, in Greek, is *homothumadon*. I know. You have long wondered what *homothumadon* means. Relief is at hand.

The word is a combination of the word "homo" meaning *same* or *similar* and "thumas" a word that expresses *passion* or *purpose*.¹

Thus, *homothumadon* describes a group of people who are driven by the same purpose.²

The word is used only a few times in the New Testament, and, with one exception,³ only in the book of Acts.

¹ It is an adverb (the accusative neuter adjectival ending "adon"); in Koine Greek, adjectives were often turned into adverbs.

² In the 4th century, BC, the Greek statesman, Demosthenes, urged the citizens of Athens to resist the attacks of Philip of Macedon. He told them to put aside personal feelings (like fear and anger) and to replace them with *homothumadon* - a purposeful agreement to stand firm, together, as one, against Philip. Moulton and Milligan give another secular example "having received certain information that the inhabitants of the village are **with one accord** claiming your protection."

³ In Romans 15:6, where it is used in a unique sense, which we will also see today.

When thinking of *homothumadon*, we should be thinking of people acting purposefully, moving together to accomplish something.

When humanity came together on the plains of Shinar and built the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), *homothumadon* was at work.

Today, when groups come together for the same purpose, positively or negatively (to make war, to riot, to enjoy a concert, to provide hurricane relief), there is *homothumadon*.

Our word is translated in a variety of ways in the passages where it occurs in Acts: one impulse, one accord, one mind.⁴ For our time together today, I'm going to render the word "***one purpose.***"

We'll first look at this word as it occurs in a scene of violence.

Homothumadon - Purposing to Obstruct and to Oppose

Against Stephen in Jerusalem (Acts 7:54-60)

Stephen was one of the first recognized servants in the church at Jerusalem. He had just finished giving a message calling the Jews to repent of their rejection of Jesus. We read that ***[Acts 7:54]...they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.***

But Stephen kept his focus on God. He was ***[55]...full of the Holy Spirit. He gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.***

He said, ***[56]..."Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*** Those were hit hard and his audience ***[57]...cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE.***⁵

The rest of the scene shows Stephen being stoned to death as he forgives those who are throwing the stones.

Notice that the crowd rushed at him together. They were all on the same page. Their attack of Stephen was unified, purposeful, and effective. That is *homothumadon*. Here, it is the dangerous power of a united crowd to destroy.

And then there is this.

Against Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:12-13)

On the Second Missionary Journey, Paul had a very positive ministry during the year and a half that he was in Corinth. Eventually, though, people from the synagogue had enough of his talking about Jesus and opposed him.

[Acts 18:12] But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE⁶ rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, [13] saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law."

There's our word again. These men from the synagogue were united in their opposition to Paul. Their "one purpose" action resulted in Paul being brought up on charges.

And this, from the Third Missionary Journey.

Against Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:24-29)

While Paul was in Ephesus, his successful Christian ministry⁷ did real damage to the economy by taking away income from those who made idols in the city.

These craftsmen ***[Acts 19:28]...were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, "Great is [the goddess] Artemis of the Ephesians!"***

⁴ Acts 7 - one impulse; Acts 18, 19, 4; Romans 15:6 - one accord; Acts 1, 2, 15 - one mind.

⁵ NASB "***one impulse***".

⁶ NASB "***one accord.***"

⁷ Specifically, his casting out of a demon from a young servant-girl who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling.

[29] The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE⁸ into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia.

This crowd, united in purpose, made a mess of the city. They wanted to stop Paul and his message, and they did so, together.

Unity of purpose is a dangerous and powerful force. A group united in a purpose to oppose and to obstruct will do damage.

But, of course, if this “*one purpose*” energy can wreak havoc on what Jesus’ people are doing, it can also be used by God to push forward Jesus’ mission. “*One purpose*’ is a great danger to the enemy who wants to steal, kill, and destroy.

For instance...

Homothumadon - Purposing to Unite for God

Depending on God as We Pray

Purposeful prayer for the arrival of the Spirit (Acts 1:12-14)

Near the beginning of the book of Acts, Luke takes us to an upper room in Jerusalem. The first disciples are gathered there.

Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. He has made post-resurrection appearances to these men and women over a period of forty days. And now, they are waiting for what He had promised: the arrival of the Spirit of God.

And what were they doing? They were praying.

[14] These all...were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

⁸ NASB “*one accord.*”

They were praying was for the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them that the Spirit would give them power to be His witnesses from Jerusalem to the remotest place on earth.

So, this was a prayer meeting with a purpose.

[14] These all with homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE⁹ were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

These disciples were all on the same page, were all seeking God, were all praying for what they needed so that they could do what was in their hearts to do for God.

Fast forward a few months to another scene of prayer.

Purposeful prayer for direction (Acts 4:24-31)

What we see in Acts 4 takes place right after the apostles Peter and John had been released from jail in Jerusalem for speaking out about Jesus.

They were warned to not do it again. They were even threatened with terrible punishment of some sort if they did talk about Jesus. And Peter and John assured their opponents that they would certainly keep talking about Jesus.

When they were dismissed they made their way back to their fellow disciples, and, together, they all turned to God in prayer.

The prayer is recorded for us. It begins with the worship and praise of God, and then moved to petition.

In light of the threats against them, they prayed, ***[Acts 4:29] “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, [30] while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”***

⁹ NASB “*one mind*”

The result of this prayer meeting was that, **[31]...when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.**

So, that was the prayer and that was the result. Now, listen to the mindset of the pray-ers at the beginning of a prayer that ended with a shaken house and emboldened believers.

[24] And when they heard this (i.e. - Peter's and John's report about being told to not talk about Jesus), **they lifted up their voices to God with homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE...¹⁰**

These Christ-followers wanted nothing more than to be used by God to spread the message. They were desperate that they not shrink back in fear. And, united in that purpose, they prayed. Their prayer was passionate and purposeful - and God said, "Yes."

*****YOU and ME and US and prayer...**

Back in April, when you and I began making our way through the book of Acts, I started noticing how frequently our "word of the day" - *homothumadon* - appeared, especially as the early church faced critical junctures.

Then, as spring turned to summer and now to the fall, our church has reached a critical juncture.

If you were present for our Next Steps meeting on September 24th, you heard Jeff Harrison give some details about the sale of the property the church owns.

This two-million-dollar PLUS event presents our church with a unique opportunity to steward something of great value in a way that honors God and that moves Jesus' mission forward here in San Antonio and elsewhere.

You also heard me outline - with some urgency - our church's mission (make disciples, develop leaders, launch and support ministries, plant churches) as we take "next steps" with Jesus.

Northwest Community Church is at a critical juncture, a moment of open doors and opportunities to take great strides forward in obedience, faith, sacrifice, and love.

Now is the time for *homothumadon*. One purpose. And, as the first Christ-followers expressed that one-purpose mindset in prayer, now is the time for us to do the same.

No exaggeration. I can't think of a moment over the past thirty-five years more perfectly "fit" for *homothumadon* than right now.

We desperately want to move forward with what we believe is our mission. We are burdened to be the best possible stewards of the treasure represented by the land sale we can be so that we, as a church, will hear from Jesus, "**Well done.**"

Now is the time to pray. Now is the time, as Jeff urged us on the night of that meeting, to be a church on our knees.

There is another scene in Acts where "**one purpose**" surfaces. We see it at another pivotal moment for the early church.

Seeking God's Direction (Acts 15)

Among the most critical issues confronting the early church was this. How should the Jewish majority deal with the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus? How were they to be incorporated into the church?

The issue erupted in the multi-ethnic church at Antioch when some Jews from Jerusalem started telling Gentile Christians that they had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses or they couldn't be saved and, of course, they couldn't be a part of the church.

¹⁰ NASB "*one accord.*"

Paul and Barnabas, who were in Antioch at the time, said, “**No way!**” to that demand. The resulting debate led to what we call The Jerusalem Council.

Delegates, including Paul and Barnabas, were sent from Antioch to Jerusalem. They met with the leaders of the Judean churches.

After deliberation, the delegates reached some decisions, and they drafted a letter that was sent out to both Jews and Gentiles. Here’s the part of the letter that gives the essential instructions:

[Acts 15:28] For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: [29] that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.

This is a great letter. For one thing, it made the Gospel crystal clear - faith alone in Christ alone saves. Period.

The letter also clarified that Christianity was not a Jewish sect. While it did ask that Gentiles - for love’s sake - not violate Jewish taboos, it made no demands that Gentiles follow Moses.

Finally, the letter elevated accommodation (“*We’ll make room for you*”) over assimilation (“*You change if you want to join us.*”).

The process the Council followed to get to the decision involved testimonials, debate, theological discussion, and (we’ll assume) prayer. And when we examine the decision made by the Council, we see wisdom, biblical insight, cultural sensitivity, and a priority on love.

Now, let me back up and read the beginning of the letter the leaders wrote.

[Acts 15:23]...“The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

[24] “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, [25] it seemed good to us, having become of homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE¹¹, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul.”

The early disciples tasted *homothumadon* / ONE PURPOSE as they engaged in honest, respectful dialogue, submitted to Scripture, and sought the Lord’s direction.

And again, here Scripture speaks to our current moment.

*****YOU and ME and US and seeking direction...**

For one thing, the specifics highlighted at the Jerusalem Council are always relevant to every church.

We always want to be clear about the Gospel message. Anyone who ever receives eternal life from God receives it as a free gift. Not on the basis of works, forgiveness of sin is all of grace.

And we want to nurture a culture of increasing unity in our church as we welcome increasing diversity. We will follow the Jerusalem Council’s resolution and will not require that those who come to us become like us in culture (assimilation), but will rather flex to make room for them (accommodation). Certainly, as our church trends toward a God-honoring diversity, maintaining unity will require some honest, engaged dialogue.

But, aside from age-old challenges that every church has always faced, Northwest is facing its own unique pivotal moment.

Rarely does a church of our size (or of any size) have to / get to wrestle with the problem of what to do with a sum of money that is about 5x its annual budget. And yet that is what is before us.

We honestly believe that this money is a stewardship from God. The proceeds of the land sale belong to Jesus, not us.

¹¹ NASB “*one mind*”

We are grateful beyond words that the Lord would entrust this treasure to us, to invest in His mission.

We are praying for wisdom from God about this stewardship. If you are able to join us on Tuesday evening in the coffee shop for an hour of concentrated prayer for this issue and more, please do so. If you can't be there, please set aside some time alone to pray.

In the months ahead, in addition to prayer, there will be dialogue. Honest, respectful dialogue, in submission to Scripture, as we seek the Lord.

And then there is mission.

Our church's Mission Statement says, *"We help you take next steps with Jesus, so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus."*

Living out this mission means that each of us are asking ourselves,
"What do I need to do today to go deeper with Jesus? What needs to change? What repentance? What new practice? What new resolve? Who will I ask to help me?"

AND

"Who will I help take a next step? Who will I approach with an offer to help?"

To be on mission, means that we are helping each other grow as disciples. We move forward, if we move for at all, together.

We need God's wisdom for direction with respect to mission and stewardship just as surely as the early church needed direction about what to do with those Gentiles.

My hope and prayer is that in the months ahead, as our mission of disciple-making comes into clearer focus and as the direction of our stewardship takes shape, we will be able to say to each other, *"God has given us 'one purpose.' We have begun to taste homothumadon."*

And even more, that we might have the sense that Jesus is saying to us, as He did to the faithful slaves in the parable of the talents, **[Matthew 25:21] "Well done."**

A final, key use of our word in Acts is found, as you might have expected, when Luke describes life in the exciting first days of the church, right after Pentecost.¹²

Simple Church (Acts 2:41-47)

The First Church of Jerusalem, established after Peter preached a sermon that saw three thousand people come to faith in Jesus, was marked by the kinds of things that you and I want to see here.

- They were depending on God, as is seen from their devotion to prayer (v. 42) and worship. (v. 46)
- Scripture was central as they were all devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. (v. 42)
- There was genuine relating as they had connected deeply - koinonia! - with each other. (v. 42)
- Generosity flowed to those in need. (v. 45)
- Homes were places of spiritual nurture where meals were shared and faith was built. (v. 46)
- As they brought their friends to Jesus, more and more people were believing in Jesus. (v. 47)

Not surprisingly, this description of life in the church as it was meant to be includes this:

[Acts 2:46] Day by day continuing with homothumadon / ONE PURPOSE¹³ in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

¹² There are other uses of the word in Acts I'm not including in this message, but which are, of course, worthy of our study. Check out Acts 5:12, 8:5, and 12:20.

¹³ NASB "one mind"

There was a purpose driving the interactions and the activities of the first church. So, what was that purpose?

Well, it wasn't politics. I can't quite see James the Jewish nationalist member of the Zealot party and Matthew the tax-collector agreeing on the state of Roman/Israeli relations.

People in the church may have had very different opinions about how to handle finances. They may have been rivals in business. And, coming from different countries as they did, they may have had very different tastes in music, dress, and food.

But despite these differences, the one thing about which they were of "one purpose" was Jesus. When it came to ultimate purpose, they were on the same page, caught up in what Jesus was up to.

And this, PURPOSE, is where I want to wrap up this morning.

Conclusion:

We all want to lead lives of purpose and meaning. It is inspiring when we hear someone say that they have a life purpose. It's inspiring to think of a church - our church - being a "one purpose" church.

But, in the words of Pastor Andy Stanley, purpose has a "catch."

Think about the things in your home. Everything has a purpose. If it didn't have a purpose, you wouldn't keep it. Shovel, vacuum cleaner, toilet plunger, fly swatter.

Everything that has a purpose is a means to an end. We don't keep a shovel around just because we want to have a shovel. We keep it because it works better than anything else when we need to dig a hole. That is its purpose. It is a means to an end.

So, embracing a life of purpose means that we are saying "Yes!" to being the means to an end. I am not the "end" for which I exist. I am not the point. It's not all about me.

If I want meaning and purpose, I will agree to be the means to an end that is greater than I am. And this is true across the board.

It's true for you and me, personally. It's true in business. A company doesn't exist for itself. Its purpose is to serve and supply its customers. A school doesn't exist for itself. Its purpose is to educate its students.

If I devote myself to myself, at the end, all I've have to show for myself is myself. Same for you.

But, if we devote ourselves to something greater than ourselves, our lives have purpose.

"*ONE PURPOSE*" disciples of Jesus and "*ONE PURPOSE*" churches embrace the idea that we are means to God's glorious end. THAT is our purpose.¹⁴

You will find meaning and purpose in life to the extent that you present yourself to God as His tool.

A shovel is never happier than when its digging a hole. A hammer is delighted to bash in nails. A knife loves to cut stuff.

You will find joy and meaning and transcendent purpose when you give yourself to serving God. And when we here at Northwest link arms and together serve God, well, there's power there.

On my last trip to Russia, on the last night we were in Kursk, our team of Russians and Americans went to the city's concert hall for a balalaika concert.

The trio of musicians who performed played great traditional Russian music. It ranged from classical to folk. Some was upbeat and funny. Some was high-brow and serious.

¹⁴ Dare to Serve (Cheryl Bachelder) "The point of purpose is to determine how you will serve others. If you don't have a plan to serve, you don't need a purpose."

It was a magical night of great music. At the end, the Russian audience showed its approval with a standing ovation. The applause was thunderous from the hundreds of people who were there.

It went on for probably thirty to forty seconds of very energetic applause. And then something happened that I never saw coming.

The applause had been what I now call "American." It was certainly loud, but then the applause turned Russian.

As if on cue, the clapping unified. Within five seconds, the concert hall reverberated with a synchronized clap, clap, clap. All together. What had been boisterous and loud and energetic became powerful.

There is power in a fellowship of disciples that is all about Jesus.

More powerful than lots of disciples serving Jesus is disciples of Jesus serving together. All on one page. United in purpose. *Homothumadon*. This is our birthright and destiny. And it starts with each one of us agreeing to be Jesus' tool.