

## **“Advancing the Kingdom”**

Series: Focus: For Yourself. For Our Church. For the Future.

*Pastor Jarrett Stephens*

I want to invite in our North Klein and Jersey Village campuses to join us for the message at this time. We've all experienced great worship and now I want us to join together in the teaching of God's word.

We are one church in three locations and this is a rarity that we are doing right here...coming to you like this from our Champions Campus and let me share briefly with you why we are bringing all the campuses in together on this particular Sunday.

At the start of this year, I began my third year serving as Pastor here at Champion Forest – and let me just say this: It is such an honor to serve as your Pastor and to serve alongside the incredible team that God has given us here. My family and I absolutely LOVE being here in Houston and we LOVE what God is doing in this faith family.

When I first got here two years ago, I was asked by various people early on and was asked on a number of occasions, “What’s your vision for the church?” And I would be honest and say to them, “I really don’t have one.”

And I didn’t! I didn’t come here with any grand vision that God had given me for the church. Now, I’ve wanted to be a senior pastor since I was seventeen years old – and I believe that God prepared me for this church and this church for me. And in so many ways, this marriage between pastor and people – I hope that it has felt to you like it’s felt for me – just a “hand in glove” fit.

But, I didn’t come with a vision. In fact, I told our staff and I told the church that my goal in the first year was to not make any changes at all. We would of course tweak things that needed to be tweaked, and we added some ministries that I believe God had birthed in my heart to add like the residency program and CF Connect (our church resourcing and pastor encouragement ministry) but my stated goal in that first year was to be like Nehemiah when we returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.

He started with prayer and observation...and that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to pray down a vision from the Lord. I wanted to observe and see what God was doing here...how he was moving.

You can imagine with three campuses, spread out over Northwest Houston – me being completely new to the area – a lot of staff and people I didn’t even know – it was A LOT to wrap your arms around.

And so, my goal in that first year was to just observe, pray...I wanted to love people and to the very best of my ability preach the paint off the walls! That was the goal!

Now, I don't know that I accomplished the preaching part, but I can tell you I prayed and I observed – and quickly I knew that in year two the emphasis needed to be about alignment.

When you move forward into a multi-site church, you are inevitably adding complexities to your ministry. I so admire the heart of previous leadership in the church starting with Pastor Damon Shook and those who served with him – there was such a priority put on reaching people...it was all about missions and evangelism and that has been baked into our DNA as a church from the very start – even going back to when this church was planted by the founding pastor, Robin Guess and WHY it was planted – to reach people.

And then under the leadership of Pastor David Fleming and the team he assembled, you can see visibly and visually how this church continued to keep the main thing, the main thing in reaching people for Jesus and you can see it! It's reflected in two primary ways:

1. Our diversity as a church – you come into the doors of this church – any of our campuses and no matter what you look like, no matter how much you have or don't have, doesn't matter your ethnicity, the color of your skin, your voice OR no voice at all (deaf ministry)– we are reaching ALL people here – it's beautiful and it is a wonderful reflection of our heart for the Kingdom and what the Kingdom of God should look like and be about.
2. Secondly, this idea of reaching people – you can see it visibly and visually by the decision to go multi-site. Leadership and you as a church decided long before I got here that if we were going to reach even MORE people, one of the most effective ways we can do it is to start campuses.

And so, North Klein was started, and many of you went on mission and now what will be ten years later this September - can you believe that? We are averaging over 1100 people a weekend AND we're out of space! Like we are having to get VERY creative in where we put Life Groups – we have them meeting everywhere – even in Pastor Steven Morris's office – check out this pic from several weeks ago! **(SHOW PIC)**

We're going to have to do something soon – and we are working on plans, North Klein...beginning to really pray through what steps need to be taken and we're going to be coming to you because if we are going to keep reaching people, we have to have a place to put them!

We also six years ago merged with Jersey Village. And this has been a bit of process (merging with another congregation is very different than starting a campus from scratch). We are continuing to get the right staff in place, work to know the community and serve them more effectively. We're grateful for this campus in what is a great location right off 290 – I am praying diligently for you JV look forward to seeing what God has in store for us in the days ahead.

One of my goals in year three, now that I feel more comfortable on the ground here and a bit more at home is to be on our campuses more because I truly do desire to know you and for you to know my heart.

And that's why I'm coming to you like this today. Because the best way you can know my heart is NOT in a brief conversation while visiting your campus or walking the halls here at Champions. The best way the church can know my heart as the Pastor is for you to hear me communicate it like this from the platform.

And gratefully, we have the technology to make this happen! And so, I wanted to come to you like this today so the entire church is hearing the same message – and again, this is a rarity.

If you are visiting one of campuses 95% of the time, you will get live preaching from one of our campus pastors or a guest preacher we'll host. And we'll do this at the MOST 2-3x a year. So:

- Year one was all about prayer and observation.
- Year two was about alignment – with our multisite approach, we are not three different churches in three locations, we are one church in three locations and the attention has been on making sure that we are aligning staff, programs, ministries and resources in a way that is effect and strategic.

We don't expect our campuses to be identical twins – there will be certain ministries and outreaches that are unique to all of our campuses, but what we do want is to be on the same page BEHIND all those outreaches – the same follow up procedures, the same motivation for doing those events and ministries – we needed better alignment and God has given to us in year two and we'll continue to work on it in year three.

Now, if year one was all about prayer and observation, and year two about alignment – year three, I believe is going to be about working out a vision that I believe the Lord is leading us to, and this is what I want to introduce today.

I have shared what I'm about to share with you with our staff...our senior team and a few others have certainly spoken into it. This is not something I came up with on my own – the articulation of it, yes, but NOT the content. This has been a team effort and I am so excited to bring it to you as a church today.

We're calling this series: FOCUS: For yourself. For our church. For the future.

**Illus. Word for the year** – I love the new year. I don't know about you, but there is something about the turning of the calendar. It just represents a new beginning...a fresh start. And while I like resolutions and enjoy making them, what I've really tried to do in recent years is something I learned from author Jon Gordon and that is instead of picking several resolutions and typically they are over by the third or fourth week in Jan – that's just reality.

Instead, he encourages you to pick out a word – have a word for the year that you continually look to and allow your life to revolve around - and it could be any word! It can be vision, grow, joy – whatever you want – the word is your resolution.

Well, I knew I would be preaching this series to start the year and I was praying while our group was in the Holy Land about what my word for 2023 was going to be...and we were in Jerusalem – the holy city and I was thinking about this series and my word for the year, and it just came together. I immediately texted our COMM team and said, I've got the name of the series and my word for the year: FOCUS.

I want to live in 2023 a more focused life. And I want our church to be a focused church...to continue to build on what you have always been about – reaching people for Jesus.

THIS is the main thing! And in order to make sure we keep the main thing, the main thing, we have to have FOCUS.

And this is what this series is all about. It's about looking at our life and our church – and asking God to lift the fog...to clarify what we are to be about...so that we can make a maximum impact for Jesus.

THIS is what we want! At our best, THIS is what we desire. Personally and corporately, we want to make difference for Jesus in our generation for future generations. How are we going to do it? FOCUS.

Say that word with me, every campus together. Ready? Out loud? **FOCUS**

Now, as we lay this out today, here is how I want to articulate it and every word matters in this. Believe me when I say this...you will begin in the very near future to see this all over our church in different ways and by various means. You will hear it spoken of frequently:

- It's what will motivate our mission efforts...
- It's what will determine how and why we give...
- It's what our life groups and the ministries and events of this church will revolve around...

My prayer is that this will get so deep within us, it becomes just a part of us...here it is:

**Champion Forest advances the Kingdom by making disciples, loving our community and strengthening the Church.**

Nothing new...not rocket science...it's something we as a church have been doing for quite some time. We're just putting bright lights on it today and putting a renewed FOCUS on what we need to make sure we are ALWAYS about – and again, all of this has a personal and corporate element to it.

Let's work it out, and I'm going to concentrate on the first part of the statement today and give a brief overview of what I am calling our FOCUS PRIORITIES and then over the next three weeks I along with our campus pastors will work these out on the individual campuses.

### **Champion Forest advances the Kingdom...**

Our lives and our church should always be about the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Now, when you read the New Testament the word "kingdom" is used over 80x. It's an important word and an important theology that we need to grasp.

Jesus in a conversation with the Pharisees in **Luke 17:20-21** –**“Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”**

Now, the Kingdom of God was something the Jewish people longed for...it represented everything they hoped and dreamed.

The psalmist in **Psalm 103:19** – **“The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.”**

We are told in **Daniel 4:3** – **“His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.”**

And you read the scriptures, specifically the Old Testament you see this promise that God will bring his eternal kingdom to earth one day. We just finished in December our series called, *The Thread: Finding Jesus in the Old Testament*

And what we learned in this series was this promise of one who was to come...a leader...a ruler...a messiah – and the hope...the promise was he would establish God's Kingdom here on earth. We read of this promise...this prophecy of this leader and the establishment of a Kingdom very clearly in:

**Daniel 7:13-14** – **“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven here came one like a son of man (important phrase...this was Jesus favorite title to use in describing himself...uses it 70+ times in the gospels...it's a Messianic title. People say Jesus never claimed to be God...of course he did! Over and over again!), and he came to the Ancient of Days (God the Father) and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”**

Now, in looking at this language and fast-forwarding to when Jesus walked the earth, Israel has been under oppression for years...the Romans had already invaded and captured Jerusalem. The people were paying taxes to Caesar, enduring the reign and harsh rule of the Roman Empire.

In the minds of the people, what they needed was this leader...this king with all power from God to come on the scene and establish his kingdom!

The problem is NOT that they were looking for a king to come rule, it's that they were looking for a political king...they wanted a military ruler...they thought this "Son of Man" was going to be someone like Alexander the Great...and he would lead a movement to free them from Roman occupation and establish their national destiny once and for all – THIS is the type of king and kingdom the people were looking for.

Once this happened, THEN God's name would be recognized and praised. Then his will would be accomplished and his ways followed because he would be ruling and reigning...large and in charge.

- THIS is what the people were thinking...
- THIS is what the people were wanting...
- THIS is what the people were looking for...

And Jesus shows up and is unlike anything they think...he is a King...and he has a kingdom, but as he told Pontius Pilate when he stood before him in **John 18:36** – "**Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world..."**"

And he tells them in Luke's account we just read "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." They very thing they were longing for was standing right in front of them and they missed it BECAUSE it wasn't what they thought...it wasn't what they expected!

They didn't understand the Kingdom, and so we don't make the same mistake, let's give a working definition of kingdom.

Whenever you hear the word "kingdom" – let your mind go to this definition: **Kingdom: The realm of God's rule and reign**

**Graeme Goldsworthy** is an Anglican theologian from Australia. He wrote a book called *Gospel and Kingdom* and is known for summarizing the Kingdom of God as, "**God's people in God's place under God's rule.**"

There is of course a spiritual element to this. There is an "already happening/not yet totally fulfilled" idea to the kingdom. The kingdom of God existed in eternity and it was initiated on earth when Jesus came for the first time.

**Matt. 4:17** – "**Matt. 4:17** – "**From that time** (from the start of his earthly ministry) **Jesus began to preach saying, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven** (kingdom of God – used interchangeably) **is at hand."**"

When we repent and by faith come to know Jesus we are brought into the kingdom. Jesus speaking to Nicodemus about spiritual matters...talk about someone knowing about the kingdom and looking for the kingdom. Listen to what Jesus says to him:

**John 3:5-7 – “Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”**

And so Jesus brings people into the kingdom of God...spiritually, he saves us and sets us apart and yet while the kingdom is very spiritual in nature, we are told while we are here on earth that we should pray and labor to help bring his eternal, spiritual kingdom to the earth so that it is seen and realized and witnessed in a very real and tangible and physical way.

Were told by Jesus to pray in the Lord’s prayer: **Matt. 6:10 – “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”**

**Matt. 6:33 – “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”**

Really the Sermon on the Mount is all about living in and for the Kingdom. It’s actually book-ended with Kingdom language.

It starts in **Matt. 5:3 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

And nears its conclusion with these words in **Matt. 7:21 – “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”**

Yes, the Kingdom is spiritual in nature, but if we are citizens of the Kingdom of God (spiritually) we will live and act to bring that (spiritual kingdom) to earth and make the rule and reign of God a reality in the here and now.

Now, make no mistake about it...that prophecy of Daniel...that the Son of Man is given rule and reign, and will have dominion and be over a kingdom that will never be destroyed – that is our future...it WILL be a reality!

In the new heavens and new earth, Jesus will reign over his Kingdom and it will be a place of perfection – there will be no more sin...no more pain...no more night! All his ways followed and his will done on earth BECAUSE it is heaven!

But UNTIL that time, we labor and work and pray to bring God’s Kingdom – the realm of his rule and reign - to this broken, sin-filled world.

That’s why Champion Forest we exist - to advance his Kingdom – to advance his rule and reign on earth. We are to be about his Kingdom, NOT our kingdom. We don’t exist to further Champion Forest kingdom...it’s NOT about us! We don’t have a corner on the market of God’s economy!

If he chooses to use us, then glory to God! But we're not praying and laboring for the kingdom of Champion Forest to be expanded – we want to reach as many people as possible and we do this through a variety of means – campuses and outreaches and ministries and planting churches – but the ultimate aim in all of this is we are praying, laboring, giving and serving so that the Kingdom of God is advanced and expanded.

And do you remember the words of Jesus about this? Matthew 13 are commonly referred to as the “Kingdom Parables”...there's eight of them and they are all about the Kingdom.

- It's like a treasure hidden in a field, and when you find it you sell everything to buy that field – the Kingdom is worth it all!
- It's like a pearl of great value – NOTHING is more precious than the Kingdom...
- It's like a mustard seed...

**Matt. 13:31-32 – “He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. <sup>32</sup> It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”**

The kingdom of God is going to grow...it's going to expand...the question is how much are we willing to be a part of it? I want to spend my life NOT focused on my world and my needs but instead focused on what will last...what's eternal. And that is the Kingdom of God.

I want our church...I want Champion Forest to be all about to FOCUS on that which matters most - and that is advancing the Kingdom. Let's not get distracted with lesser things!

**Illus. Branding** - Some of you may have noticed we changed our branding...changed our look. Our Comm team has been talking about this for a while now and I've been holding off, holding off, holding off, but felt now in year three it was the time to pull the trigger.

And they have worked so hard in getting this together – it keeps our identity. You see the leaf shape (plays into Champion Forest) – I'm telling you our Comm team is the best on the planet. They know how to tell a story. It has the cross which is what we are about leaning forward a little bit – we like the word forward...advance.

It's a branding change. We've had four pastors, this is the fourth look. Why do I bring this up? Because at the end of the day some people will like it...some won't...some churches would choose to argue about something like this...change can be hard.

But I want to remind us here of what I was once told by Dr. Elmer Towns...he was in his 80's when I had him for a Doctoral seminar at Liberty Seminary. He told a group of us preachers this mantra and made us repeat it...it's gold:



**Elmer Towns - “Methods are many, principles are few, methods may change, but principles never do.”**

Listen, I don’t know what God has in store for our church in the future. I know there has been some change in these last two years since I have arrived and change is hard sometimes – I get that! I know in the future there will be more change and we will add new staff and some staff members will send out. I know some new ministries will start and some ministries will cease.

Change is a part of life...but what’s never going to change – is what we are about. Advancing the Kingdom. And we will do this by...and I’m going to briefly mention what I’m calling “Focus Priorities” here and our campus pastors will unpack then in detail over the next few weeks.

**Champion Forest advances the Kingdom by:**

**1. Making Disciples – This is the Great Commission.**

There is no improving on the final words Jesus gave his church. This is what we are told to do. If we are to put the term “success” on anything we do as a church or individual, this has to be at the top of the list. Are we making disciples?

**Matt. 28:19-20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

If we want to advance the Kingdom, this is where it starts! Making Disciples has at the core of everything we do. And again, there is a personal element to this! (teacher, businessman/woman, contractor, student) – the Great Commission is for all of us!

**2. Loving our Community – This is the Great Commandment**

**Mark 12:30-31 – “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’<sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

Champion Forest, we going to do what you have always done and that is love our community well. We have our CMC ministry, community partnerships, getting involved in schools, through our BLESS initiative with neighbors – we want to keep doing whatever we can to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our community.

There is a driving question that we will get to over the next few weeks that is behind each of these “Focus Priorities”. The driving question behind this “Focus Priority” and what led us to it was asking this question: If Champion Forest disappeared tom, would our community even know it? Would they miss it?

**3. Strengthening the Church – The Great Commitment**

Notice, I didn't say "build the church". It's Jesus's Church and he has promised that he will build his Church. However, through our spiritual gifts, through being on mission and going all over the world – What happens when we serve? What happens when we go? It strengthens the Church.

And it's capital C – again, this isn't just about Champion Forest. This is about the Church at large...the bride of Christ.

See, the Bible tells us to whom much is given, much is required. And God has blessed us, Champion Forest. He has given us an incredible team...he has blessed us with resources...with influence...

And we have to make sure that we are stewarding this well. And so, one of our FOCUS PRIORITIES is going to be about strengthening the Church.

- This is what our residency program is for – in partnership with the Lanier Library, we have 23 residents serving on our team right now – young ministry students that we will raise up in our organization or send them out to great, gospel centered, like minded churches to do Kingdom work.
- This is what the CF Connect is all about – our pastor encouragement and church resourcing ministry – btw first ever marriage event (30 couples).
- Our Spanish ministry...do you realize under the incredible leadership of Pastor Ramon Medina and his team, we have planted 9 Spanish pastors in churches all over North America – Detroit, Fort Worth, Oklahoma City, here in Texas and we have 11 more in training looking to establish Spanish churches in CO Springs, San Francisco, CA, Jackson, MS, Sacramento, CA – just to name a few!
- Churches all over look to our children's, student and worship ministries to see how we do ministry.
- Jeff Young, our executive pastor has a number of XP's coming in to learn from him.
- We have the Biblical Literacy Class with Mark Lanier which is a resource in and of itself.

How do we get these incredible resources in the hands of other churches so they can be blessed by it...encouraged by it...strengthened by it?

This is an issue of stewardship! We have a responsibility NOT just to strengthen Champion Forest, but to strengthen the Church of Jesus Christ.

And so Champion Forest...I'm asking you to pray about this...I'm asking you to come alongside us...and lets personally and corporately do everything in our power to advance the Kingdom. And we will do this by making disciples, loving our community, and strengthening the Church.

Will you pray with me right now?

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*Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.*