

Church Matters

Week 1: God's Desire for the Church

2 Cor. 5:17-21

The Church STILL matters.

Now, that's kind of a hot take, depending on who you talk to these days. I've had conversations with Christians and non-Christians alike who would question that.

I've talked to people who have been followers of Jesus for years, but somewhere along the way they stopped going to Church. Their kids grew up and left the house, and so they didn't make it as much of a priority. Life got busy, and so they do other things. Or, they stopped going during COVID and just haven't come back. I've had people tell me, "I can grow in my faith without going to Church." To them, the Church no longer matters in their life, and they don't see why it ever would again.

I've also talked to people who argue that the Church is an outdated institution with backwards beliefs. That it's no longer needed in our modern society. Some write the Church off as a corrupt organization led by power hungry preachers and filled with people who are more quick to judge than love. And, to be fair, it's not an unearned reputation. There are plenty of examples out there to back all of that up. To them, the Church no longer matters, and they'd say, "Good riddance."

I've talked to others who are worried about the future of the Church and if it'll still matter a generation from now. They speak in terms of a war and talk about losing ground or losing power or having to take back control. To them, they're afraid the Church won't matter 20 years from now, and out of that fear, they fight the wrong battles and push people even farther away.

But then I talk to some who have reached the end of their rope. They didn't know where else to turn, and so they turned to Jesus and His Church and they found the hope they were looking for. I talk to people who didn't know how they were going to make ends meet, or pay off that medical bill, or repair their car, and someone in the Church generously shared their resources with them to make it happen. I talk to people who developed a friendship with someone who just lived their life differently, and now they follow Jesus because of it. I've talked to people who received a diagnosis that brought a lot of fear and anxiety, and the next morning a group of friends gathered outside their house to pray, and the peace it brought them, knowing they're not alone.

When I think about these stories, and the countless others I could share with you this morning, it is abundantly clear to me... **The Church STILL matters, and you still matter to the Church.** Because, here's the thing, YOU are the Church. The Church is not a building, it's the people. God doesn't use programs to accomplish His work, He uses people.

And, the Church matters most when the people who make it up, live out God's desire for it. To be a caring community that shares each other's burdens, that worships and walks in faith, and that partners together to live on mission, so that others may find the hope and the peace and the grace of God that we've found through Jesus.

As we approach the 60th anniversary of Sherwood Oaks on December 4th, we're going to take the next several weeks to talk about why the Church still matters, why you still matter to the Church and play a vital role in it, and how we will partner together to ensure that the Church continues to matter to our community, and those who come behind us, well into the future.

So, let's jump right in. If you have a Bible, or a Bible app you like to use, turn with me to 2 Corinthians 5. We're starting off this series by looking at what God desires for the Church. And, I wanted to start here because, I think it's really easy to get caught up in what WE desire for the Church and totally forget to ask what God desires for it.

And since the Church was HIS idea, instead of starting with our preferences or the things we want in a church..."I wish we had more of this..." "I wish we had less of that..." "I wish we did it this way or that way..." instead of starting there, I want us to build a firm foundation for this series by looking at what God desires for HIS Church.

And, I think our text for today gives us a really good glimpse into that. We'll kind of take it piece by piece, starting in verse 17...(READ vs. 17-18a)

The Apostle Paul says that those who are "in Christ," who have put their faith in Jesus, they are new creations. The image that Paul is using here is of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. It's this complete metamorphosis from the old to the new. And, this isn't a process we do to ourselves. He says, "All of this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ."

That word, "reconciliation" is key to this text. Something is reconciled when it's made right. When it's restored to the way it should be. And when we put our faith in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we are reconciled to God. Our relationship with him, that was broken by our sin, is made right. It's restored. That happens immediately, the moment we put our faith in Jesus, and then the process of transforming into a new creation begins.

Hebrews 10:14 puts it like this...and, if you've been around, you know this is my favorite verse. "By one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever (**reconciliation**) those who are being made holy (**transformation**)."

Reconciliation happens in a moment. We are made perfect in God's eyes because when he looks at us, he no longer sees our sin, guilt, and shame, he sees the perfection of his son. That's what brings us back into a right relationship with him. Transforming into that new creation is an ongoing process. It never ends.

I think God's ultimate desire for us, His Church, is that our faith and love for Him grows. And that out of this vibrant relationship, we find ourselves getting caught up less and less with the worries and cares of this world, and caught up more and more with the cares of the Kingdom. That we become more like Jesus, caring about the people he cares about. The outcast, the marginalized, the broken, and the hurting. Those Jesus came to seek and to save.

As our life, and our values, and our behaviors begin to be transformed by this renewed relationship with the Father, we are sent out into the world to continue the mission that Jesus started. In a way, we become the second incarnation as the body of Christ, sent out on a rescue mission to those around us. Paul puts it like this, going back to verse 17...(READ vs. 17-20a)

Those of us who make up the Church, God's reconciled and transformed people, we have been entrusted with this ministry of reconciliation. We have been sent out to continue what Jesus started, and be a part of bringing people back to the Father.

And, notice the language Paul uses here. He says we are Ambassadors of Christ. An ambassador is someone sent by their home country to be its official representative in a foreign land. They represent and speak for their sending authority. That's God's desire for the Church. For us.

Scripture says that this world is not our home. That we are aliens living in a foreign. And our role in those places where we live, work, and play, is to be an Ambassador of Christ. Living and loving and serving the way he lived and loved and served.

And, Jesus is our perfect model of how to be an ambassador in this world. We see four characteristics in Jesus that I hope to see in my life and in our Church. Jesus was **Eager** to love and serve. He was eager to do the will of the Father and that eagerness drove him to be **Present** in the lives of hurting people. All of Jesus' most impactful moments happened because he was with people. He ate with them, walked with them, shared life with them. He was present.

And, because he was present, Jesus was also **Empathetic** to their pain. Sometimes physical pain, sometimes emotional, sometimes even spiritual pain caused by their religious leaders. Jesus was empathetic. He felt what others felt and he came alongside of them. And Jesus was **Thoughtful**. He was intentional in how he lived and where he went and what he did.

Eager, Present, Empathetic, Thoughtful...I can't think of four better words to describe how we can live as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God here on earth. That's how I want to represent Jesus, and it's how we, as God's Church, can be Christ's Ambassadors in Bloomington, Bedford, and beyond.

My prayer is for these four characteristics to become the driving traits for how we relate to one another in the Church and pursue our vision to **Unleash the Church with the love of Jesus to make an eternal difference in the lives of at-risk people.**

We want to be eager and present and empathetic and thoughtful as we partner with others to tear down barriers that keep people from Jesus. As we cross every socioeconomic divide to care for people and work for their good, believing each person has dignity and value in the Lord. And we want to be eager and present and empathetic and thoughtful as we go to any length necessary to give hope to the hopeless and freedom to those held captive by their hurts, hang-ups, or habits.

We're not going to rest on the church that we were and dream about the "glory days." We're going to eagerly attack the mission and opportunities in front of us to reach and serve new people. As I've talked to church leaders from across the country, and even in our own community, I've come to the conclusion that Too many churches are more concerned about who they've lost than who they've yet to reach.

They're more concerned about the church they used to be than the Church they are becoming. And, listen, the truth is, we're not the church we used to be...I'm reminded of that quite often...but we're also not the church we're going to be. In fact, we'll never reach a place where we're satisfied because if we ever sit back and say, "You know what, this is good enough" we'll lose sight of our mission and what God desires for us.

God's desire for His Church is that we would be Ambassadors for Christ in this world. That those who are being transformed into new creations, reconciled back to God, would take this ministry of reconciliation and, not only share it with others, but participate in it by renewing and restoring things back to the way God desires for them to be. And helping more people find and experience the love and grace of the Father that we've found.

God has sent us out with this ENORMOUS task, and our message as his Ambassadors is simple. Verse 21...(READ)

That's our message to this hurting and broken world. God has taken all your regrets, all your mistakes, all the hurt you've caused others and yourself and others have caused you...he took all of it and piled them up on Jesus.

On the cross, Jesus bore the weight of our sin and the sin of others. And, when we put our faith in his life, death, and resurrection, the Father no longer counts them against us. We are brought back into a right relationship with him, transformed into a new creation, and then sent out on mission to be Christ's ambassadors. This is God's desire for His Church.

So, at Sherwood Oaks, may we be eager to share this message and ministry with those around us. May we be present in our community as the hands and feet of Jesus. May we empathetically and thoughtfully love and serve those who don't yet know and follow Jesus. And may we share the good news of God's grace with them in the way we live and love as we invite them to find and follow Jesus with us.