

***U Pick The Sermon: How Can We Shine As A Church When “Church” Is So Messed Up?***

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***June 27, 2015***

***Matthew 16:13-18; 1 Timothy 1:1-8; Ephesians 3:8-12***

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is from Ephesians 3:8-12. Listen now to God’s Word. “Although I, [Paul,] am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

How many of you have ever had a bad haircut? I have. They typically happen when I get a cheap haircut. But I’ve had bad hair cuts from beauticians, from people I’ve visited dozens of times. As a kid, I’m sure I turned the wrong way at the wrong time, but a lot of them weren’t my fault. Maybe they thought my hair would look better their way. You ever have that happen? “It’ll look perfect with a handful of gel I can sell you for \$30!” I never know how I’m going to look when I come out of the barbershop...maybe great, maybe awful.

But I still keep going in for haircuts. It’s absurd, right? Why would I keep paying money to have something done to me that looks bad for a couple weeks? Why would I spend the time and effort? In college, I did ask that question, but you don’t want to see the pictures of me with a mullet. Haircuts may not always turn out right, but it’s still better with one than without one. I have never thought of letting my hair grow down to my feet rather than getting another haircut.

Now it seems trivial to compare haircuts and the church of Jesus Christ. But today, it’s going to make sense. Our question is, “How can we shine as a church when “church” is so messed up?” It’s a really good question, and it affects all of us. It makes us reluctant to reach out to others because we wonder, “If Christianity is so good and right and perfect, then what’s the deal with Jesus’ church?” It leads us to all kinds of false thinking, that other religions are valid paths to God, that everyone just needs to be good, that we don’t really need to tell others about Jesus. We’ve got to deal with the problems of the universal church if we are to get behind her.

And those problems are real; they encompass every part of church. Fallen leaders who have done wicked things chase people away from Christ; Catholic, Protestant, doesn’t matter. The average person in the church isn’t a pillar of holiness, either. Churches are torn apart by lies and gossip, by cliques and unkindness, and unwillingness to do anything that doesn’t directly benefit church members. Arguments about theology, who’s right about this or that belief, have led to thousands of splinter denominations. There are wars over music, wars over liturgy, wars over programs, wars over buildings, wars over pastors. With so much bad behavior in the church, why would anybody ever want to be a part of one? We’ll deal with that first, and then we’ll talk about how we can shine as a church, flaws and faults and all.

*First, history tells us to expect the church to be messed up, because it's been messed up from the beginning.* Sometimes people say, "We want to be an Acts 2 church." It's a lovely thought. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit arrives, Peter preaches, thousands believe in Jesus, and the early days of the church are sunny. They all ate together, they shared what they had, and they gathered daily to study Scripture and to live out their faith in harmony. It's a beautiful portrait.

But that's just what it is – a portrait, a painting, one moment in time. The church described in Acts 2 exists for a few months at best. Luke writes 26 more chapters in Acts alone! The idea of an Acts 2 church is a myth. Churches experience times of peace and growth and fidelity to Christ, but that's not the norm. People who want an Acts 2 church are unrealistic.

Church conflict has been with us since the earliest days of the church. The church is God's people – not a building or program or denomination. Just people. People are broken and sinful and rebellious against God. Which means that the church as it exists in this world will be broken by definition. By Acts 5, church members die because they lie to the apostles and the Holy Spirit about what they've done. By Acts 7, Stephen is stoned to death for his faith and the church is actively persecuted. And it goes crazy from there! Magicians want to buy the power of the Holy Spirit and charlatans want to sell the so-called secrets of Christianity for money!

Virtually every book in the New Testament confronts a major conflict in the church. Paul berates the Corinthians for mistreating one another while letting sexual immorality run rampant. Things are so bad in Galatia that Paul yells, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" False teachings threatened to destroy the early church, and all the authors of the New Testament – Peter, Paul, James, Jude, and John – battled it in their letters. Even at a personal level, there are conflicts. Jews and Gentiles, lifelong enemies, were thrown together in the church, and sparks flew. Paul begs for certain women in the church to get along. In the midst of it, many were losing property, family, even their lives for becoming Christians. What a mess!

Believe it or not, all of this is a good thing for us. It shows that the apostles and disciples were relentless in their pursuit of God, God's truth, and God's holiness. They would not let anything stand in the way of the church becoming the holy bride of Jesus that Jesus said would be prepared for Him. It also shows us that while we fight immorality and false teaching in our midst, this is nothing new. The disciples kept believing. None of them said, "If God was at work, this would be easier." Jesus Himself told them it would be extraordinarily difficult! The very gates of hell are trying to prevail against God, and the church is on the frontline. When the church fails, we mourn, but we do not abandon the church. The church's current failures are no surprise to God that He cannot overcome.

*The second reason not to give up on the church is that the church is the means by which God makes Himself known.* Paul tells us that God's intent is that the mystery of salvation and the manifold wisdom of God should be known to rulers and authorities, to every power, to every person, through the church. Through the gathered people of God, God's wisdom is made known by His express consent.

There is no plan B. God did not say, “I’ll make myself known through the church unless the church is really awful, and then I’ll make myself known through the Internet.” God doesn’t say, “I’ll make myself known through Scripture alone.” The Bible tells us the fullness of God’s revelation, and we don’t believe in any further revelation beyond what it says, but it’s not the primary means that God makes Himself known. It’s extremely rare that someone reads a Bible and becomes a believer and stays isolated until they die. God works through people preaching and teaching what the Bible says, living it out, and displaying God’s love to others.

Inevitably, when people are not in the church, not in the community, they fall into error that has to be corrected, even if they love God and want to follow Him faithfully. In Acts 18, a man named Apollos teaches in the synagogues about Jesus, though he only knows about the baptism of John the Baptist. Two Christians, Priscilla and Aquila, take him in and teach him more adequately. This happens several times in Acts – people fall in love with God, the church comes in and helps them fully understand the faith, and they become pillars of the church.

Even in the midst of church splits and divisions over theology, God makes Himself known. When we debate important issues like salvation or the Trinity or how Jesus is fully God and fully man, God makes Himself known through us. Those debates aren’t an intellectual exercise. They are meant to strength the church, not weaken it. We want God to be represented truthfully. And sometimes when churches divide, God uses both parts to make Himself known to others. We should not want to be divided, but God works in spite of us.

And that leads to the final reason not to give up on church: *the church will stand not because of the fallen people in it but because of the risen Savior engaged to it.* In our passage from Matthew, Simon declares Jesus is the messiah, the Christ, God’s Son. Jesus says, “Simon, you’re a rock. On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Jesus will make sure that nothing overcomes the church, not death, not Hell, not Satan, nothing.

And that’s in spite of Peter, not because of him. He’s a lousy rock. In the very next passage, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” Later, Peter denies knowing Him! Jesus eventually restores Peter, and he goes on to lead the church. But even then, he makes mistakes. Nearly twenty years later, he sympathizes with the Judaizers, a group that said Gentiles had to live like Jews to be saved. Paul called Peter out to his face!

If the first leader of the church, the one Jesus called “the rock,” could be so mistaken, we know the foundation of the church isn’t any human person. It’s Christ Himself. Jesus builds the church with people, through people, bringing people together. Of course it’s going to have problems! It’s amazing it doesn’t have more!

But Jesus is not just the founder of the church and the builder of the church and the foundation of the church – He’s also the church’s bridegroom. In Revelation 19, the wedding of Jesus has come and His bride has made herself ready. Ephesians 5 and 2 Corinthians 7 talk about Jesus making the church ready for Himself as His bride. Even in the Old Testament, the prophets Isaiah and Hosea speak of God choosing His people and preparing them as a bride.

Jesus is not going to let His bride fail or permanently fall. He is never going to stop loving the bride. And since every believer is meant to be a part of the bride, whether they acknowledge it or not, we need to be gathered with other faithful Christians. Jesus washes and purifies and perfects the church. And when we say that about the church, we're saying it about all of us together with all other believers. We are the church. We are the ones who count on Jesus alone to purify and make us righteous. The church will prevail because Jesus prevails.

So that deals with the reasons why we shouldn't give up on the church, even though it's admittedly been a mess. If we've rejected church altogether or thought we could be lone-gun Christians, or if we've been a part of making church a mess for others, we need to repent of those things. Then we can move forward to shining as a church. Let's talk about how we do that.

*We shine by making plain the mystery and unfathomable riches of Jesus Christ together.* That sounds really, really difficult. What mystery? What unfathomable riches? How can we make them plain if we aren't sure what they are? It's actually much simpler than we imagine. The mystery is that salvation from the guilt and shame and punishment of sin comes through Jesus Christ. His life, death, resurrection, and very person are the mystery that save us. For a long time, it was a mystery, but now it has been made clear – believe in Christ and follow Him, leaving your old life behind and taking up His ways, and you will be saved. The riches of Christ are the joy eternal we receive...the knowledge that we are loved, that we are wanted, that we are redeemed, that a wonderful eternity with God awaits us. They are no longer mysteries to us.

While we talk about these things in our everyday lives, helping people to know who Jesus is, the central way we proclaim this is gathering together every week. When we come here every Saturday night, we are doing what God asked. We worship Him. At the same time, we make Him known to one another. Whether it's through me preaching or Rick reading the Scripture or Tracy leading the Prayer of Confession or Darnell singing, we all play a role in preaching the gospel to each other. Because we all need to hear it all the time, even if we've believed in Jesus all our lives. We always need to hear the gospel. We always need to hear the good news. We always need to be reminded that Jesus died for us, that God is for us, that we have renounced our old way of life, that we are on a new path, that we can leave refreshed and renewed to serve God in the world around us.

When we invite people to church, we invite them into the mystery. We invite them into the community to get a glimpse of what God is up to. Because Jesus is the head of the church, its builder and architect, He will work in hearts as they come to the gathering. We go out to them; we don't expect them to come on their own. But when they do come, it doesn't have to be for a special visitors' week when we present the basics. God is here and moving every week. As we sing His praises and preach His holy word and pray and confess and receive assurance of forgiveness, He meets us. He will meet anyone who comes if they are willing to listen. The gathering is the means by which God has appointed He will bring together His people. We don't have to meet here – we can meet anywhere. In a couple weeks, we'll meet in a park on Sunday morning and encourage folks to join in some games and fellowship with us. But God's people, His church together – we are the means that God uses to bring people to Himself. If we will do that, if we will not neglect coming together, He will shine through us.

Next - *we shine by inviting the broken to be a part of the broken church – because that's what the church is and that's what it's for.* It's easy to think that people won't fit our church or our church won't fit them. That's true no matter what person you're thinking of and what church you're a part of. People are strange. We're people – and we're all strange! We are quirky. We don't fit. We're too loud or too quiet. We're either mean or passive-aggressive. We argue with people we love and we honk at people who make us mad on the Interstate. And we're Christians already! Non-Christians look even worse!

But on the flip side, the church is just as broken. You don't have the world's best pastor. I'm not great at pastoral visitation and calling people up to see how they're doing; it's easier for me to study and write than to be on-call socially. Our music team is not the greatest musically. We're tiny. We don't have our own space to call our own. Sometimes we aren't as kind and loving or thoughtful as we should be.

And all of that is OK because the church is a hospital for sinners, not a rest home for saints. Jesus taught that the doctor comes to heal the sick, not the healthy. Jesus saves sinners and binds up the broken; the only people He has nothing for are those who believe they are well and need nothing. Yes, the church as an institution is broken, but that means that broken people, if they're honest, can relate to it. None of us would fit in a perfect church; we'd break it. As Groucho Marx sarcastically said, "I don't want to be part of any organization that would want to have me for a member." A church cannot be all that God made it to be if it thinks it's perfect or refuses to reach out to the broken. But a broken church that knows it's broken can shine for Jesus because we're the perfect place for broken people to come and heal – not because we are fantastic, but because we know the One with the cure. God's not done with us yet, so we'll make mistakes – but God is working in us, so we can forgive each other and move on.

*Lastly, we shine as a church by focusing exclusively on Christ.* Jesus is the only thing we have. The world can put on a far better rock show; the world can teach you how to manage your money; the world can entertain your kids more than we do; the world has better social programs. The world can beat out even megachurches in those things. But the thing is, we aren't made primarily to do those things. As we act like Christ, we will help others; we will give out groceries; we will sing songs and be good neighbors. Those are great. But that's not our focus. The one thing, the only thing, the church has to give that the world cannot give is Jesus. And as it turns out, Jesus is the one thing that really matters.

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul describes his visit to Corinth. He says, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In Paul's day, most teachers tried to persuade people through their speaking skills or secret knowledge. But Paul says Christ alone is enough. All that really matters is that we share Christ with those who comes.

But that also means that we don't have to be ashamed of our church. If we focus on Christ, we have enough. We may not have a hundred programs or ten Bible studies or a thousand people, but we have Christ. If we keep Him at the center of what we do, even if it takes a long time for people to see Him through us, *He will be seen.*

The church is not perfect, and never has been. We will not see perfection until Christ returns. But that's no reason to abandon the church. Instead, let's make Christ the center of our personal lives, our hearts, and our gathering together as His people. As Jesus tells us in Luke 12, "Seek God's Kingdom, and all the things you need will be given to you as well. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's pleasure to give you the Kingdom."