

Title: What really matters to us
Text: Revelation 1-3
Theme: What matters to Christ about his church
Occasion: New Year Sermon December 31, 2017
Prop Stmnt: The health of our church is measured by Christ and his Word

On Friday evening and most of the day Saturday, the elders will be gathering for our annual elders retreat. Our main job is to help our church be healthy. That means that we are charged with helping every member love Jesus more and therefore, look more like him. The message this morning is to help you understand how we think about this. We want all of us to be on the same page. We want you to know what we think matters about the church.

Read Text:

A friend of mine was explaining that being single is like being on a motorcycle. You are free to just hop on and ride. You can zip in and out of traffic, you can park about anywhere you want and you don't have to wait on anyone else. Why would you want a car, or a truck, or a SUV, or a camper, or a Winnebago? Can you imagine trying to zip in and out of traffic in a lumbering Winnebago? True enough, but while it may be exceedingly convenient to ride by yourself, it can be exceedingly lonely. It is helpful to have family around you when you are coming out of surgery or trying to recover from a sickness. It is comforting to have brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews and cousins with you if you have to bury your parents, or face difficult news. So while the Winnebago may be a bit clumsier, you can have a party on the trip and fit enough people inside so that you never travel alone. Not everyone chooses to be single and for those who wish it were different, the holidays can be particularly difficult.

And yet, we live in a culture that prizes this "live only for myself" idea. If I live only for myself then I do not have to spend any time or money on anyone else and I don't have to work around anyone else's schedule, I don't have to be considerate about what anyone else wants to eat, I don't have to care one bit how anyone else wants to decorate, or if I decorate. I don't have to worry about how anyone else likes their coffee, or what time they have to use the car, or what they want to watch on TV or what temperature they like the apartment to be, or anything. I am free to live only for myself. Wouldn't life be great if everyone would just leave me alone? There are places where life is like that. I have seen a lot of Nursing Homes like that. There are people who have spent their entire lives wanting to be left alone, and now, they are. They can watch whatever they want on TV. They can sleep in however long they want. They can stay up all night, all the time if they want. They can listen to their kind of music. And they sit in the hall or by the door and they wait and wait and wait if anyone would ever come to see them.

Some people look at the local church like they do a Winnebago. It looks clumsy. It's not particularly efficient. It's hard to maneuver, and it takes a while to get things done. It's a lot to maintain. All of that is true. But, Christ died for the church. And he designed the church to be the vehicle that helps you get to heaven looking more and more like Jesus.

But, doesn't the church just slow people down? Doesn't it just get in the way? Do we really need it? Actually, we do. God has designed the church to be the greenhouse that raises his kids. We need the challenges of life together; to make each of us aware of how much self-centeredness really exists in our hearts. We need the experiences of one another to help us learn what matters and what doesn't. We need to have opportunities to serve others so that we do not believe the lie that the universe is all about us.

So, if we need the church that much, then what kind of a church should we look for? Or, if it was all up to you, then what would the church be like? When you ask people that question, you tend to get motorcycle kind of answers. In other words, I wish that church started at 8.30 and was done by 9.15. I wish that we didn't sing so many old songs. I wish that it wasn't so hot in the Worship Center. On and on it goes. I've had people, (bless them) say, "I wish that you didn't feel like you had to be done in an hour. As far as I'm concerned, you could go on and on." And when those slightly delusional people say things like that to me, I tell them that they think that because they have never served in the nursery. Serving in the nursery, is a wonderful ministry because it makes you aware of a world that is easy to overlook. So, what should you look for in the church? What should matter to us and what should matter to you? How do the elders determine the health of our church? I want you to know the questions that we ask about the church so that you can know what we are aiming for. But in asking these questions about the church, we are really asking these questions about our lives. So I want you to think about this on two levels: 1) How are we doing as a church family and 2) How you are you doing as a church member?

I. The Important Intangibles

When you go to the doctor, he or she may do blood work, check your weight, blood pressure, pulse, cholesterol, etc. Then you wait on those all-important numbers. Are you in the range of what is considered to be healthy? Your sitting pulse rate is a number. Your blood pressure is a number. Your HDLs and LDLs are numbers. But, when you are trying to determine the health of your spiritual walk and the health of the church, statistics may not be all that helpful. We cannot assume that increased membership and offerings mean that everything is fine; nor should we ignore them. I like the fact that we have budgets, leadership meetings, quarterly and annual reports. But, look at how the book of Revelation begins. The apostle John who spent several years with Christ now sees Christ in his unveiled splendor and John is overwhelmed. Christ then tells John to write down what Christ says to these seven local churches. What Christ says is what I am calling the important intangibles. These are things that ultimately matter to Christ, but are often missing from our conversations about the church.

When people ask you about church, or you ask others about church, it is common to talk about the style of worship, the times and length of the service, the size of the congregation, the age of the pastor, the quality of the children's ministry, the activities for the junior high students, the cool factor of the college ministry, the demographics of the attenders, but what is often missing are the things that Jesus talks about. Again, there may

be place in the conversation for some of those things, but the first things, the most important things we need to consider are the things that Jesus talks about.

A. Do we love Jesus above all? – church at Ephesus

There are so many things that the church at Ephesus was doing well. There were evidences of grace in how dedicated and involved they were. They endured hardship. They practiced church discipline and dealt with difficult situations. (btw – the is the church that Paul to Timothy about in 1 and 2 Timothy and it sounds like they took to hear many of the things that Paul said). But their love for Jesus was waning. And if our love for Jesus wanes, then it is only a matter of time before these other areas of strength falter. Our love for Jesus will wane when we fail to remember the gospel and what we have been saved from. Do we love Jesus above all? Do you love Jesus above all?

B. Do we suffer well? – church at Smyrna

Suffering reveals what we really trust in. Suffering reveals if we love Jesus for what we want him to do for us, or if we love him because he is worthy of our affection. Suffering is not our enemy. Unbelief and faithlessness is our enemy. Suffering will not damn your soul, but unbelief will. We should not be obsessed with avoid suffering at all costs; we should be focused on deepening our roots of belief. How do you respond to suffering? How do you respond to the possibility of suffering? What does suffering reveal about your hope? Is your happiness safe in Christ, or can your happiness be stolen?

C. Do we have good theology? – church at Pergamum

The church at Pergamum had serious issues because they were not willing to address the fact that some people were teaching some really bad theology. The really bad stuff that churches get into is the result of not addressing the little stuff along the way. We certainly have no desire to be a bunch of intellectual snobs who always talk with 4 and 5 syllable words. But, we are not going to gloss over things and shy away from substantive teaching. If you are going to suffer well and if you are going to love Jesus, you need deep roots. We need to have deep thoughts about God so that we will have deep love for God. So, we need to ask ourselves about how well we are being taught, how deep our theology is, and you need to ask yourself how you are being challenged theologically. Do you expose yourself to rich theological preaching, teaching and writings? You can pursue that through the ABF's, the Electives, and the bookstore. Why not turn off Netflix and read a good book? Binge read theology and discuss it!!

D. Do we pursue holiness? – church at Thyatira

Your life matters to your church. Your holiness matters. I do not need to hear more stories of how people have blown up their lives and marriages with sin. The world resists the gospel as it is. We only make it more difficult to take Christ seriously when our lives are not really different. If you are not pursuing holiness, you are going to go over the cliff. And when you go over the cliff, you always take others with you. Recently someone

in my family asked how “so and so” was doing. I had to tell them that the person doesn’t look like a follower of Jesus anymore. Conversations like that wouldn’t be hard if we didn’t love each other. But, fundamentally, we are a people who love Christ and love each other. Therefore, when someone who claims to love Christ, loves his sin more than Christ, we are grieved and sometimes the grief makes us feel like quitting too. Your pursuit of holiness matters. My pursuit of holiness matters. Our pursuit of purity matters. The church at Thyatira stopped talking about matters of sexual purity and some of the most serious warnings ever uttered by Christ are given to this church. What are you doing to pursue holiness? Who is in your life that is helping you follow Jesus better by asking you personal questions about your personal habits? What websites do you visit? What movies do you watch? What occupies your time? Personal holiness is never accidental. If you do not purpose in your heart to pursue holiness, you never will.

This is the time of year when almost everyone you know talks about going on a diet and de-cluttering their life. For most people it is just words. And while I think that there is something to be said for taking care of the body that God gave you and organizing your life, if you do not purpose to watch what you eat and if you do not purpose to organize your life, you won’t. If you do not purpose to pursue holiness, you won’t. These are good conversations to have with brothers and sisters in the church. The church at Thyatira refused to have these conversations and eventually, that church was known for its immorality.

E. Do we trust in our reputation? – church at Sardis

When you asked other people about the church at Sardis, the response was generally the same. “Oh, that church is a good church.” “We’ve heard some really good things about them.” Do you think that Christ forms his opinion about our church or about your life based on what you put out on Facebook or Social Media? What is the benefit if we manage our image based on how carefully we nuance things? If we keep telling people how great we are, and then we hear from others how great we are, are we really great? No, we may be good at marketing, but Jesus is not impressed with marketing. What does Jesus think about us? What does Jesus know to be true about you?

Women’s clothing stores started “vanity sizing” a while back. What used to be a size 12 is now a size 4 (or something like that). Stores figured out that if they made the dresses bigger, but kept the same designation, they would get “vanity” customers who could say, “I wear a _____.” Look, I know that I am treading on really thin ice here with this illustration, but honestly it reveals how much we tend to resist honest to God reality checks. If we can’t even face issues of our body very well, how do you think we do addressing issues of our hearts? Jesus did not die so that his church would have pretend conversations about our true spiritual condition.

F. Are we faithful to the Scriptures? – church at Philadelphia

There is nothing in here about the size of this congregation. We do not know how many elders they had, how many members they had, or how many came to the annual summer

picnic. What we know is that they kept the word of Christ about patient endurance and Jesus acknowledged that, and affirmed that and was grateful for it.

G. Is our commitment white-hot? – church at Laodicea

The church at Laodicea did not seem to have budget or debt issues. In fact, they were rich. They had prospered. And that is all that matters – right? Dead wrong! In their case, their prosperity was the occasion for them to trust in their prosperity. They didn't need anything. Their prosperity was a curse that drew their affections from Christ. The result was, they did not rely on Jesus. They had a good economy. They had good jobs. Their kids were going to the right schools. Their 401k's had a good year. Things were looking good. The next year looked like property values were going to keep going up, interest rates would be steady, lower taxes were coming for most everyone, unemployment was down, crime was down, people were buying new cars, the city was coming back. Life was good – or was it? Jesus wasn't impressed.

These are the important intangibles. I don't know how you measure them on a graph, and in fact, I don't think that you can. For the elders, we have to ask God to help us be discerning. We really need to, as these chapters say over and over, "he who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." We need to long for faithfulness and therefore for a gospel faith that drives joyful obedience and joyful endurance.

Those 7 intangibles are the fruit that we are aiming for. The second point focuses on how we grow that type of fruit.

II. Essential Marks

A. Is the preaching biblical?

We emphasize preaching because preaching is a God-ordained method for reaching people with the gospel, and growing healthy believers and churches. If preaching is going to be biblical, then the preaching must accurately reflect the Bible. When the main point of the text is the main point of the sermon, then we can say that is biblical preaching. Preaching that elevates God's word is going to elevate God's message, not the messenger. Preaching that highlights God's truth is going to focus on the substance, not on the packaging. We are going to keep preaching it all. That is why our preaching is from the entire Bible. We alternate OT with the NT and we go through books from the beginning to the end because we need it all. We need to emphasize what God emphasizes. We need to hear everything that God says. Next Sunday, I will begin a short series in Joshua that will serve as an on-ramp for our study of Judges.

B. Is the teaching sound?

We will continue to emphasize theology in the preaching and the teaching. We need to be a people who understand what God says about himself, what he says about his word, what he says about our sin, what he says about our Savior, what he says about our

salvation, what he says about the church, what he says about angels, and heaven and hell and the end of all things. We need to see how these truths are foundational for how we live, how we work, how we face death, how we raise children, how we think about our jobs, who we marry, who we date. For example: You need to see why believers can only marry other believers. Sound teaching is going to teach you that God is truly glorious and that everything he does is for his glory and that we exist for the glory of God. That means that my life and everything I do is to be done for the glory of God. An unbeliever does not think that way. An unbeliever lives for the glory of himself. Marriage is a dance. Marriage is a duet. But dancing together and singing together only works well if you are dancing to the same music or singing the same song. A believer and an unbeliever are listening to two entirely different soundtracks for life. So, this hugely important issue is actually rooted in the doctrine of God's glory. Do you know why some believers think that it is okay to date non-believers? It is either ignorance or it is rebellion. I can't fix rebellion, but I am responsible to address ignorance. I want you to be well taught in all areas. But you need to see how the foundation of all issues of life is theology.

C. Is the gospel clear?

The gospel drives everything that we are and therefore it drives everything that we do. Everything in the Bible points in one way or another to Christ and the gospel. It is always about the gospel. And I/we want you to see that because we want you get that. We want the gospel to ooze from your pores.

Biblical, expositional preaching, sound teaching and gospel clarity are going to help us love Christ above all, suffer well in adversity, think right thoughts about God, pursue holiness and personal purity, trust in Christ and not our reputation, cherish and obey his Word, and have a white-hot passion for Christ. This will also bear fruit in these areas that I call important characteristics.

III. Important Characteristics

A. Do we understand conversion?

Conversion is repentance and faith. The Bible is specific about what saving faith and what it isn't. Some of you are fuzzy on this. I hear it when you talk about people who died who did not follow Christ as Christ defined it. Some of you view conversion as praying a prayer once, like a rabbit's foot. If there is not a turning away from sin in affection and a resulting action and a turning to Christ in affection and a resulting action, you cannot call it conversion.

B. Do we evangelize others?

We evangelize others only to the degree that we believe the gospel and love others.

C. Do we engage in missions?

We actively engage in missions (again) to the degree that believe the gospel, love others and are willing to obey what Christ has commanded us to do.

D. Do we understand membership?

For 2,000 years, Christ has ordained that the local church be the embassy of his kingdom and the chosen means by which he advances the gospel all over this world. Do you understand that commitment to the church is not my idea? I did not emphasize this early on in my ministry here because I didn't understand all that Christ had designed the church to be and do. Membership enables us to ...

E. Do we watch over one another well?

Do we have sticky relationships?

1. Friendship
2. Discipleship
3. Counseling
4. Discipline

F. Are we serious about worship?

Is our worship entertainment, is it mindless traditionalism, is it hype or, are we serious about engaging with God? Is our goal to make people feel good about what they experienced or helping people see and savor God for who He is and what he has done for us through the gospel?

1. Christ-centered
2. Word-driven
3. Gospel-based
4. Dependent on God
5. Congregationally engaging

G. Is our leadership biblical?

What is our polity and even more important, what qualities do we expect from our leaders? This is often a minefield, but you simply cannot compromise on this without doing long term damage to the church.

Conclusion:

This is daunting. This is humanly impossible. This is overwhelming. We need Christ. We need his grace. We need his enablement. We want ease, but we are in a war and the stakes are high. But, we are not alone in this battle. Let's lean into Christ and cry out for mercy and help for the year before us.