

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

In preparation for our elders' retreat, we sent out a survey this week to the membership and we were so helped so much by the fact that well over three hundred of you responded. Thank-you for taking the time to do that. Your serving us in this way helps us to know how we are serving you, and how we ought to serve you. There were a couple of themes that were consistently expressed and for the most part were done kindly – and that is always good. They were: we love quality of the teaching and the preaching, however, is it possible to keep the quality but perhaps dial back a bit on the quantity. In other words, give us steak, but perhaps slightly smaller portions. Secondly, there is a growing desire to care for one another. The fact that we are a family, that we are to know one another, pray for one another, listen to and care for another is a growing desire and conviction. But, reality is this: time! So, one of our discussion points was, can we adjust things that would help facilitate this? We are thinking about how we can shorten the length of the AM service a bit, in order to add a little more time between our Adult Bible Fellowship hour and the AM service. It really makes sense, and while we don't have all the details worked out yet, we wanted you to know what we were hearing from you and how we were thinking about addressing this in a helpful way.

Read Text:

Last Sunday, we did an overview of the letters that Jesus, through the apostle John sent to 7 local churches that were in existence around 90 A.D. What we learned from these letters is what is important to Christ. If we are followers of Christ, and if following Christ means that we are redeemed in order to become part of a new people (the church), then we need to inform our selves on what Jesus wants his church to be and we need to be intentional in pursuing that. So, what we learned from these letters to the seven churches is what I have called the important intangibles.

### **I. The Important Intangibles**

Our temptation is to find things that make us feel good about ourselves, and to neglect some of the things that really matter. For example, let's say that your high school basketball team has 10 guys on it that can dunk. That is impressive, at least to me. And let's say that no other team in your conference has more than 5 guys who can dunk. But, let's say that your high school basketball team is the Cleveland Browns of your conference, meaning, you haven't won a game all season long. If you haven't won a game, it doesn't matter how many guys can dunk. What matters is if you win the game.

So, again, when we are evaluating our church, we have to learn to ask the right questions. We have to prioritize the things that Jesus prioritizes. So, last week, I used the letters to

the seven churches to form 7 questions that we need to ask ourselves about our church and about our own hearts.

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

B. **Do we suffer well?** – church at Smyrna

Do we suffer with joy? Do we suffer in faith? Do we see suffering as an opportunity or just an obstacle?

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

Do we prioritize learning about God for the purpose of growing in humility, godliness and love for God and others?

D. **Do we pursue holiness?** – church at Thyatira

Pursuing holiness is not like learning to ride a bike, that once you get it, you are good. Pursuing holiness is like pursuing physical fitness. If you are not pursuing holiness, you are going backwards. If we have an impressive building, polished preaching, skilled musicians, well-staffed children's ministries, energized student ministries, with a fundamental lack of holiness and purity in our lives, those things do not matter, in fact, they may in one sense be an obstacle because we are trusting them instead of Christ.

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

Yelp, Google review, Facebook likes or the number of Twitter followers holds no weight in glory. If a church is smaller than us, we are tempted to think that we are better because we are bigger. If a church is bigger than us, we are tempted to think that we are better because they are probably not as spiritual as we are. It takes a desperate, take-no-prisoners humility to ask ourselves hard questions like, are we really dependent on Christ? Do we really love lost people enough to share the gospel with them? Do we really sacrifice so that others can hear the gospel? Or, are we willing to trust in our reputation without seeing if it is real?

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

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

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.

When a church is healthy or is pursuing health, there will be a hunger on the part of the people for the Word. We will not promote a come experience our worship or come see our building or look at our organization" or see how nice we are or cool and trendy we are or how much we care for needy people or look at all of the things we are doing or all of the people you can network with or all of the 4-5 star power players who attend our church. None of that will be our emphasis when the Word is esteemed. And the Word is esteemed when it is unleashed week after week after week in faithful preaching. And the preaching is biblical when the main point of the text is the main point of the sermon. The preaching is biblical when it takes you time and time again to Christ because Christ is the hero of the Bible. Therefore, the preaching is biblical when it is going to remind you of the gospel. Good preaching will help a congregation develop an appetite for good preaching. It will not only inform and deepen your knowledge of God, it will convict, it will encourage, it will give you hope and it will help you love Jesus and look like Jesus more. Preaching that elevates Christ and the gospel will cause us to be a people who want to "come and hear the gospel" and we will want to bring others to come and hear the gospel.

### **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 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?**

A fundamental characteristic of life is the ability to reproduce. If something is living biologically, it has the capacity to reproduce and it pursues that. A fundamental characteristic of spiritual life is reproduction. Followers of Christ desire for others to come to faith in Christ. We evangelize others 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. Membership in a local church is a biblical practice that enables the church to know who claims to be a follower of Christ and wants to be part of the family. Without a means of knowing who we are responsible for, the elders would not be able to know whom to shepherd. I did not emphasize like I should have 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? A healthy church is going to be characterized by relationships of care. Good friendships are marked by care and commitment to the good of one another. Friendship is the building block for discipleship and intentional discipleship is another phrase for counseling. Counseling one another is quite honestly being a good friend to another believer. Even what is often called church discipline is people caring enough for one another to help rescue them from going down a wrong path.

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, because 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.