

The Importance of the Church

Preached: 11/7/2021, Germantown;

Scripture

Matthew 16:13-27

Message:

The Importance of the Church

I am a fan of the Church. I believe that the Church has an important role to play in the world. But those of us who have been a part of the Church all or most of our lives, have to admit that the impact of the Church in our world is diminishing. The Church no longer influences the lives of people. It no longer influences the culture of our community the way it once did. The Church has been shoved to the sidelines. It has been replaced by a cultural values dominated by attitudes of self-centeredness, greed, and immorality. Of course there are some people in our world who are glad for this turn of events. They would rather not be under the thumb of the Church. But I long for a day when the Church would be respected again. I long for a time when the voice of the Church would carry weight.

I believe the Church is a means by which God is fulfilling His mission in the world. God's mission is to rescue and redeem men and women who are alienated from Him. James Boice writes: ***"The Church is a stage upon which God has been presenting the great drama of redemption, a true-life pageant in which it is shown how those who have rebelled against God and wrecked His universe are now being brought back into harmony with Him becoming agents of renewal and healing instead."*** And so the Church is the means God is using to make people what He wants them to be – people who live in relationship with Him, who live under his authority, whose lives are shaped by His will and word.

How then can the Church be the positive influence in our world that God intended for it to be? I believe it would be helpful for us to look at what the New Testament teaches us about the Church. I suspect that one of the problems we have is that everyone has their own opinion about what the Church ought to be, what the Church ought to look like. But **what does the Bible teach us about the nature and the purpose of the Church? And especially what does Jesus teach us about the Church?** There are many passages in the New Testament that discuss the nature and purpose of the Church. There are many images that are used to describe the Church:

- The Church of the Living God
- The Church is a spiritual building with Jesus as the chief cornerstone
- The Church is a dwelling in which God lives
- The Church is the Body of Christ
- The Church is the Bride of Christ

Each of these images help us to understand the nature and purpose of the Church. I want to take a look at a passage where Jesus speaks of the Church and discern what He understood about the Church. The passage is the first reference to the Church in the New Testament. We learn some important theology here from Jesus about the Church.

Who is the Son of Man? The conversation about the Church begins with a question Jesus poses to His followers. Jesus is traveling throughout the country with His followers (disciples). He leads them to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It was located in the northern part of Israel. The city was a center for heathen worship. Originally the city was named Paneus, after the Greek god Pan. It was renamed for Augustus Caesar and Herod Philip. That's the backdrop for this conversation. The disciples would be surrounded by evidence of the pagan worship that took place there. They are surround by images of other gods. As they are walking about the city, Jesus asks His followers, **"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** Son of Man is a title taken from the Old Testament that was a reference to the promised Messiah. Jesus here is using the title in reference to Himself. The disciples respond by naming some names they have heard in reference to Jesus. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or some other famous prophet or leader of Israel from the past. However, the more important question is **Who do YOU say that I am?** Peter's answer is: ***"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God"*** Jesus commends Peter for his answer, declaring that Peter has heard the voice of God in stating his answer. This answer has been **revealed to you by my Father in heaven.** Jesus

continues: ***“I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.”*** In this conversation, Jesus reveals to us some important truths about the Nature of the Church:

1. **First of all Jesus calls the Church MY CHURCH.** Jesus suggests that He is forming a **new community of people.** The word that is translated Church is a word that means “called out” The Church is a community of people who have been called together from out of the world. . This community of people would be compared to the Community of God’s people in the Old Testament – the nation of Israel. Jesus calls this new Community, **MY CHURCH.** This is an important distinction. The Church belongs to Jesus. Some people have the mistaken impression that the **Church exists for their benefit** – to take care of them, to minister to their needs. Some people think that they have the responsibility of directing the ministries of the Church. But Jesus makes it clear that the Church is **HIS CHURCH.** It exists for Him. It will engage in activities and ministries that HE directs.
2. **Secondly,** The Church is a community of people who confess that **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.** This is Simon Peter’s affirmation. In affirming Peter’s response to the question, **Jesus gives him the name PETER.** The name PETER is the Greek word for Rock. And then Jesus declares, **“On this rock I will build my Church.”** The two words that are translated Rock, are different forms of the same Greek Word – one is masculine and one is feminine. It is our understanding that the rock on which Jesus will build His Church is Peter’s confession, not Peter himself. What Peter confesses about Jesus is the bedrock upon which the Church is built. No where does the New Testament refer to Peter as the Rock on which the Church stands. Peter does not acknowledge that himself. Instead, in the book of Acts, Peter declares that there is **no other name, besides Jesus that has the power of salvation. Jesus is the Foundation for the Church.** And so our understanding of the Nature of the Church is that is made up of **people who can affirm what Peter declares, the Jesus alone is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.** He is not just an ordinary human being. He is in fact God in the flesh.

As this passage continues, Jesus makes 2 more important points about what He has said about the Church. First, after Jesus affirms that Peter’s confession is the bedrock for His Church, he begins to talk about His upcoming crucifixion and death. Peter – the same Peter who just confessed faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God – tries to convince Jesus that this would not happen to Him. Suffering and death were not part of his plan for Jesus. But Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, suggesting that he has turned from being a mouthpiece for the Spirit of God to becoming a mouthpiece for Satan. Members of Jesus’ Church must understand that He will establish His Church not by going to Jerusalem and overthrowing the Romans. He will establish His Church through the means of suffering on a cross. The cross becomes the means by which people’s lives are changed. If we cannot affirm that the crucified Jesus is the only means of salvation we cannot be a part of His Church.

A second point that Jesus makes is that those who want to be a part of His Church must follow Him in the way of suffering. ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.”*** We must be willing to give up our agenda when we become a part of His Church and yield to His plan. That may prove costly for us, but if we want to see the Church make an impact on the world, we must be willing to do that.

Do we want to see our World change for the better. I believe that Jesus’ Church is the means by which God will bring about change. But that will happen only when we step aside and let the Church be Jesus’ Church.