

The Anatomy of the Church: The Internal Systems, Part 4

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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One of the most powerful and wonderful presentations of the worthy Lamb, the Son of God, is given in Revelation, chapter 1. And as we come to the study of the Word of God this morning I would like to invite you to open your Bible to Revelation, chapter 1; and I want to share with you the first vision of the Lord Jesus Christ given in this great revelation. Beginning in Revelation, chapter 1, verse 9, we read:

"I, John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, 'I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last': and, what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girded about the breasts with a golden girdle. His head and His hair were white like wool, and white as snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet like fine bronze, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice like the sound of many waters. And He had in His right hand seven stars: and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and His countenance was as the sun shineth in its strength."

John has an incredible vision; and what he sees is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega; and he sees Christ in this vision moving among seven golden lampstands. They represent the seven churches in verse 11. The seven stars in His hand, according to verse 20, are the seven ministers of those churches. So what do you see here? You see Christ moving among His churches. And the seven churches of Asia Minor listed here, to which letters are written in chapters 2 and 3, are representative of all kinds of churches throughout all of church history. And here you have a picture of the Lord moving among His churches, moving among His people, caring for the church which He purchased with His own precious blood; and that hasn't changed.

I believe the Lord is as alive and active in His church today as He was then; and the vision that John has is not just a vision for that place and that time, but a vision for all the time of the church. That Christ is ever alive and moving in His church; and you notice in verse 13 that He is garmented down to the foot, girded with a golden girdle. If you look closely at that, you will find that that could be the

garb of a prophet. It could be the garb of a priest. It could be the garb of a king. And is it not fitting that He, indeed, is King, and Prophet, and Priest? Moving in His church as the sovereign, moving in His church as the One who speaks from God, and who takes the people to God. In verse 14, we see His head and His hair as white as wool, as white as snow, indicating His absolute and utter pure holiness. And so the holy Son of God, perfect King, Priest, Prophet, moves in His church. And as He moves in His church, it says in verse 14, "His eyes were like a flame of fire." That is a penetrating gaze. As He moves in the church, His eyes are searching out its strengths and weaknesses. His eyes are penetrating behind what appears on the surface to affirm and ascertain what is really going on.

Oh, what a marvelous thing it is to know that Christ is alive in His church; that this is not our work, it's His work. That it is not determined by our cleverness or left to our devices to figure out what is being done right or what should be done; but Christ is alive in His church; and He searches with a penetrating gaze; and "His feet are like fine bronze as if they burned in a furnace, and His voice like the sound of many waters." And these are the feet of judgment and the voice of judgment. When He finds that in the church which displeases Him, He comes in judgment. He speaks in judgment to that church.

You say, "Why are you reading that?" Because I think it's a good place to start today, to remember this: that we are the church that Christ is building, right? We are the lampstand that Christ is caring for. We are the light, as it were, that Christ is trimming; and He does so with a penetrating gaze. And He seeks to find that which in us is not right and to bring against that the thunder of His own voice, the strength of His own chastening judgment; because He seeks to refine us. And if we resist the refining, then He will remove His blessing. And one of the mixed passages of all Scripture is Revelation 2 and 3, where you find some churches who are commended, but most who are condemned; for the Lord did not find there what He sought to find.

Grace Church stands, in a sense, in Revelation 1; and Christ moves through this church; and I believe he commends and condemns. I believe He searches out and blesses. I believe He searches out and chastens, as He discovers things that are according to His will and things that are not. And so it is my prayer that, as I stand in these days and share with you the thoughts of my own heart, and I'm just sharing my heart, but I really believe that, as I'm doing this, I stand in, in a place where Christ would stand. I stand in His behalf to tell you what His searching eyes wish to see, and see sometimes and do not see other times. Now, I'm not under some illusion that I am an anointed prophet of God, distinct from any other. I just believe that the Spirit of God has brought us to this time in our church, and the Spirit of God has prompted us to this particular series. When I started to talk about the anatomy of a church five weeks ago, I, I really didn't know why I was doing it. I just felt compelled to do it. Worse than that, I had no idea what I was going to say. I wrote down a little outline, and I'm still working off that same outline, and asking the Spirit of God to enable me to, as it were, be the instrument of Christ as the church is searched out to try to help us to see what it is that He sees.

And you've responded so well that I know it's of the Spirit. I know it's of God what we've talked about. I've seen it in your response. I have received more mail from the last few sermons than any other I've ever preached, I think; and the, and the mail ranges the gamut. I received two letters that I can think of, more than that yesterday, maybe five or so, but two of them kind of were interesting. One of them said, "I wish this were a black church, so I could stand up and yell, 'Preach it, brother! Preach it!'" And that's all right. You know, I, I've been in a black church where they stand up and yell, "Blow your trumpet," and, you know, I mean that's, that'll get you revved up if you're not revved up to start with. I mean, all the way from that kind of response. I also saw a letter yesterday, and a dear person said, "I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed," and signed it "A Repentant One," having faced the reality of coming very short of what God wanted His church to be. I don't know where you are in the, in the line from standing up and yelling, "Preach it, brother," to feeling quietly ashamed; but I, I've seen God touch our hearts, and mine, as well, through this. And so I want to return this morning to our thoughts about the anatomy of a church and let Christ penetrate our church a little more deeply and, and reveal to us things that we need to see.

Now, we've already talked about the skeleton. We've talked about if we are like a body, if we are using the analogy of a body. And we're like a body; we have to have a skeleton. And we, we talked about those skeletal things: a high view of God, the absolute priority of Scripture, doctrinal clarity, personal holiness, and the idea of spiritual authority. And then we moved into the internal systems: the flowing through of the life principles. Like in a body, the body is dependent for life on the flowing through of those systems. So we are dependent on certain spiritual attitudes; and those attitudes have to flow through the body. And we've been suggesting to you the attitudes that are most critical. We've talked about obedience, which seems to me to be a rather supremely important attitude. The attitude of humility, of love, unity, service, joy, peace, thankfulness, self-discipline, accountability; and I think last time we ended with forgiveness.

Now, all of these are attitudes that must be cultivated in God's people; and when the Lord moves through His church, I believe those are the things He looks for. To see a people who have an attitude of love, an attitude of peace, an attitude of discipline, an attitude of obedience, of, of service, of joy, of thankfulness, of peace; all of those things. Searching out behind the exterior to see what's in the heart, for the Lord searches the heart. And that's eleven of them we've already talked about; and I'm going to give you the remaining five this morning; and I want to wrap them up this morning, so I'm going to try to get through five of them. Number twelve in my list— not that that matters—is dependence. Dependence. If you wanted to put it in negative terms, it would be the attitude of insufficiency or the sense that you are not sufficient, so that there is in you a basic dependence; and this doesn't come easy to capable people. It doesn't come easy to effective, God-blessed churches like ours. See, our church is sort of well-oiled, in a sense. I mean the, the machinery moves. Things get done. We have competent people. We have hardworking people. We have creative people. We have a past program development that says, "Man, we're doing it," see. And, and we can get to the

point where we lose the sense of insufficiency. We lose the sense of dependence, because we've figured out how to do it; and what you're really doing, if you're not careful, is eliminating God. And you come to the point in your ministry where, by virtue of the strength of your workforce and your creative people and the program that's already in place, you just say goodbye to God and take off.

And maybe it isn't so easy to do that if you happen to be a little band of believers behind the Iron Curtain that are living every day in the fear of death with absolutely no resources at all. But for us who have so much, who so very much have been blessed by God, like Israel of old as we mentioned, who having come into the land and inherited a land we really didn't work for, and partaken from wells we didn't dig, we forget God; and we just move out in a flurry of activity and great ideas and bright hopes and challenging thoughts. I guess what I'm saying, people, is that we really don't want to do anything ever that we don't believe is God's perfect purpose for us, and so we must maintain an attitude of dependence. Dependence.

And we could talk about it from a lot of angles. In the Psalm that I read this morning, Psalm 19, David says, "Keep me back from presumptuous sins." It's so easy to just blast ahead without really being dependent on God, without searching for the heart of God and the mind of God. You could sit in a meeting and decide to do this or decide to do that. And where's the prayer? And where is the patience? And where is the enduring communion with God, until the heart is not only free to do it, but has the sense of doing the work of God? I've always, throughout all my ministry, been fearful that I would do something God wasn't a part of. I always want to be sure that I'm just going along at the same pace in the same direction with the same goal that He has, because Christ is building His church, and I don't want to compete with Him. That's a loser. But we can so easily run into presumptuous sins. Great idea and off we go.

I remember when I was in seminary, in Talbot Seminary, everybody had to preach in those days, twice in chapel. We have more students now; and I don't think everybody has to. But everybody did; and when we preached, the whole faculty sat on the platform behind us. And they had 8 1/2 by 17 criticism sheets; and the whole time you're preaching, they were filling them out, which was a good exercise for them, because it kept them awake during the more boring sermons, I think. But they would sit there, and you'd hear the paper shuffle; and if you were ten minutes in, and the guy was already flipping his paper over, you knew you were really in hot water, right? But you did your best to preach. And I was assigned 2 Samuel, chapter 7; and 2 Samuel, chapter 7, I've never forgotten it. I mean, I wanted that sermon down so pat when I preached that thing that I memorized every single thing in it, even my pauses. I think my breathing I had figured out. I was really going to be careful on that one, and I got into the chapter, and David looks at his palace. He says, "I've got this beautiful palace." He looks at the house of God. God was living in a tent in those days, you know, tabernacle. He says, "It is not fitting that God should dwell in a tent while I dwell in this massive palace," he says. "I will build a house for God. Commendable, huh? Very commendable. And so he goes to Nathan the prophet, and he says, "Nathan, this is my desire," and Nathan says, "Commendable. Go, do

whatever's in your heart, David, a great idea." And God put down the big hook and yanked Nathan over and said, "Nathan, you didn't check in. Who told you to tell him that? He will never build My house, for he is a man of bloody hands." It was Solomon who would build the house; but when God took away something, He put something in its place; and He gave to David a wonderful promise.

So I preached on the sin of presuming on God, of venturing into good things that God isn't interested in. It was really a life-changing experience for me, because that message has stuck in my mind through the years. It's an incidental footnote, however, that, as I was leaving, Dr. Feinberg handed me his criticism sheet. He was the dean. Folded over, and I had felt so good about that message, because it spoke to my heart; and I opened it up; and he hadn't bothered to check off anything. He just wrote across the front, "You missed the entire point of the passage." That was a bad day, a very bad day and a very good lesson. He thought I should've preached on the kingdom promise. It was a choice. I knew the passage promised the kingdom, but I felt my own heart needed to hear about presumption; because I tend to be that kind of person who runs really fast in a new direction, and maybe has great ideas or great vision for what could be done; and I need to back up to the point of dependence, sense an insufficiency that drives me to seek the heart and mind of God. All you got to do is start something by yourself that God isn't in and just get out on that limb and watch it get sawed off a few times. It helps to cure you. What I'm really talking about is prayer. The church must have a spirit of dependence. People, look, we haven't arrived. I mean I, we walk. We got all this stuff. We come here. It's all for us ready to go, all these wonderful programs and ministries; and we can get the idea that we just don't need to depend on God anymore. But it can be gone that fast. There must be a sustained dependence.

Look with me for a moment at John 14, just to touch this concept of dependence from another angle. In John 14, you know the situation I'm sure, in John 14. The Lord is leaving. It's the upper room, the last discourse of our Lord with His disciples, and He's promising them all kinds of wonderful things because they're really afraid. They have depended on Him for everything, everything. They have followed him for three years. He made food that fed them. He caught fish so they could pay their taxes. He told them everything they needed to know about the kingdom, about God, about man, about sin, about righteousness. They were utterly dependent on Him and now He was going away, and they were troubled. They were deeply troubled because they had awakened to their dependence. They needed Him desperately. I mean even when He was there, they floundered rather constantly, didn't they? And so they knew their dependence.

And when He announced to them that He was going away, it was panic time. Really panic time. But in the midst of that, He makes a promise to them that is so marvelous. It's in verse 13 and 14 of John 14. "And whatever you shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you shall ask anything in My name, I'll do it." You can't get a better promise than that, can you? Anything we want to ask in His name, He'll do it. You say, "Well, does it mean, then, anything you ask?" Well, no, anything you ask in His name. You say, "Well, what does that mean? Stick on the end

of your prayer, 'In Jesus' name, amen,' and God has to do it? Some people think that. That isn't what it means. In the Old Testament, God said, "My name is, 'I Am That I Am.'" In other words, "My name is all that I am," and the name of Christ is all that He is, so you ask anything consistent with who Jesus is and what His work is and what His will is and what His desire is and what His plan is and what His purpose is, and He'll do it. It doesn't mean you can ask for anything and slam down on the end of your prayer and get it. It means that, when you ask consistently with His will and His purpose, then He will do it.

And so we need to learn, as believers, to live in a life of constant dependency, the prayer of which is, "Oh, Lord, whatever is in Your will to do, do it. Do it." So there's no bitterness if it doesn't come off, if it doesn't get done, if it doesn't happen. If we're dependent on Him to energize it and bring it to pass only if it's in line with His perfect will. And, you see, this is the way the Father is glorified; because then the Father is doing what the Father wants to do for His own glory; and then the ministry that's being carried on is the ministry of God in the name of the Son.

And, beloved, that is what I want in this church. I don't want the ministry of clever men. I don't want the ministry of creative people. We want the ministry of the Spirit of God in the name of the Son of God for the glory of God Himself, don't we? And I'm talking to you just in a general perspective sense; but there needs to be in our hearts a sense of insufficiency to know what to do and how best to do it that drives us to dependency on God, where in the midst of our prayers we call out for that which Jesus wants done.

So important, it's the heart of the disciples' prayer in Matthew 6, frankly, where when they came to Jesus and said, "Teach us to pray," He said, "Pray like this. Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by Your name." In other words, glorious be Your name. Holy be Your name. Set apart be Your name. Unique be Your name. In other words, Lord, all we really want is for You to be glorified, for Your name to be exalted, for all that You are and all that You will and all that You desire, to come to pass. Then, "Thy kingdom come": You do Your work Your way in Your kingdom. "Thy will be [What?] done on earth, as it is in Heaven." And so that prayer begins not with give us, give us, give us, but: "Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done." And until we've gotten that perspective in place, we have no right to ask for anything. And so we are taught, I believe there, to pray in a dependent way, in a sense of insufficiency that cries out for God to do His work in His way. That's always been our desire here. That's always been our goal, is that Christ would be building His church, and that we would just be being part of that. And I worry sometimes that we get so program-oriented, we get so good at what we do, we get so far down the line with our plans, that prayer has no part except when the disaster hits. It's after the fact. Oops, get us out of this one, Lord; and we probably wouldn't be in it if we'd have asked.

I don't know about you, but I don't want anything for me that God doesn't want for me. Do you? Nothing, and so I think there has to be an attitude of dependence—and, bless God, there has

been—and I only encourage you that there be that attitude more and more. We have depended on God. We have depended on His Word. We have depended on prayer. But we need more. I think maybe we're caught up in this sort of milieu of contemporary Christianity where we work a whole lot and pray very little. There's nothing more wonderful than having spent time in prayer, to enter into something and sense that tremendous freedom that comes to the heart that knows it's walking down a path side by side with the Savior whose will is being expressed. That's why I said that, because, you know, it doesn't always happen this way; but when I started this series, I didn't really know where the Lord was going to take us. I don't even know yet what I'm going to say till I say it. But I've had the sense of the companionship of Jesus Christ step by step through this whole thing; because I really believe in my heart that, as I sought Him as to what our church needed for this time, and what He wanted to do in our fellowship for these days, He took me this way. And this is the expression of His heart to us; and so this is Him moving, if you will, through the candlesticks. Dependence. We do a lot of things well, not so well we want to do them in the flesh, right?

Let me give you another attitude that needs to be in the church. Flexibility. Flexibility. I'm not going to talk a long time about this, but it's important: Flexibility. That is, we need to be able to change. Somebody wrote a book, said the seven last words of the church, "We've never done it that way before." And that's really true. Some people have substituted what Jesus said in Matthew 15. You remember? He confronted the Pharisees and scribes. They came to Him. They confronted Him, and they said, "Why do Your disciples violate the commandments of men by not washing their hands?" They were eating, you know, without going through, not, not physically cleansing, washing, but ceremonial ritual. And he says, "Why do your disciples violate the commandment of men or the tradition of man, the tradition of the elders?" He says. And Jesus says, "Why do your traditions violate the commandments of God?" Now, let me tell you. We've all had experience. Churches can get piled high with tradition that becomes a block wall to what the Word of God says to do, right? Happens all the time: "Well, we, we certainly can't do that in our church. We, we have this tradition, see." Churches can have an organization that's totally unbiblical. They can have a style of ministry that's utterly unbiblical. And when you try to introduce the thing that God wants under the divine mandate of a commandment from God Himself, it runs right into the stone wall of tradition. And so there must be in the attitude of the church flexibility. Now, if you've been in Grace very long, you've got to be flexible. I mean we just keep changing. People say, "How, how is your church organized? Could you send us an organizational chart?" We get letters like that all the time. That's really a joke. It would have to be a sixteen-millimeter film. Would have to be moving, just like this, it never stops. We can't box it and capture it, because God works through people; and they ebb and flow, and they're strong and weak and committed and less committed; and more people pile in somewhere. We got to do something about it; and so there's a changing, constant kind of organic function that I think is so wonderful; because it never lets us just stop and administrate. You can't ever just sit down and crank out the papers. It's always people; and it's always picking up this and strengthening this and changing that and, and that's wonderful; because we're never confused, hopefully, the difference between routine and reality. We don't want to be confused about that. I mean we don't want to substitute false

for the true just because we've always done it that way.

My wife had an old aunt who passed away not long ago, or distant relative, I guess, not really an aunt. But anyway, we used to go see her around the holiday season, take her little cookies and things. And so the last time we went to see her, it was Christmas season. And she said, "Well, John." (She goes to the Methodist church.) She said, "Do you have a Christmas Eve service?" I said, "No, we don't have a Christmas Eve service." She says, "You don't?" I said, "No, we don't. We just encourage everybody to go home and, and be with their family and talk about the meaning of Christmas and the birth of the Lord; but we don't have a service." She said, "Oh, too bad." She was very sad. She said, "You know, at our church, we've always had a Christmas Eve service." I said, "Really?" She: "Oh, yes." I said, "Do you go?" She said, "Oh, no one goes, but we've always had a Christmas Eve service." "No one goes?" I said. She closed the conversation by saying, "Oh, well, it's, it's just too bad that you don't have a Christmas Eve service."

Boy, I'll tell you, we are creatures of habit. You know that? It's both good and bad. You get good habits, it's a good thing you're a creature of habit. You get bad habits. They're tough to break, aren't they? You get a whole collection of people together who basically are created with the habitual tendencies, and they get locked into a certain way to do things, and you try to move them, and it's amazing how resistant they are to that. But sometimes you just have to change things so people don't get confused between routine and reality. So there needs to be a little ebb and flow, a little change, a little flexibility. We all have to be that way; and when you link that up with the prior point that we made initiating the message on dependence, we have to be flexible, because we depend on God, and God may be doing different things. It grieves my heart when a young pastor goes into a church, and he's got a great desire to teach the Word and the, apply the Word, and he runs into a stone wall of tradition, and people won't let him move. They, "Well, we'll really have problems if we try to do that, because we've got this deal over here. Boy, if they, those people'll get very upset." But, but, but why are you letting the traditions of men stand in the way of the commandments of God?

You see, that's what's so wonderful about this church. When, when we started years ago to discover the Word of God, we said, "Hey, that's in the Bible. We got to change that. We got to change that. We have to change. We got to get in line with this." And Grace Church has always been that way. It's so wonderful. Sometimes we send out young men, and they come back bruised and bleeding in six months saying, "I've been smashing myself against this wall of tradition. I don't know if it'll ever change." But we have to be flexible.

It comes down to personal life, too. I always think about Acts 16, and Paul was a kind of a *go-get-'em* guy, right? I don't think he ever sat down. He just kept moving all the time. And he'd finished his ministry in Galatia and Phrygia—that's modern-day Turkey area—and he decided that we're going to go to Asia, south, down into Asia, great place. Boy, a significant place, the seven churches of Asia Minor over there, that area. And he started to go there, and the Bible says in Acts 16:6 to 10 that the

Holy Spirit prevented him. Now, I don't know how the Holy Spirit did it, but somehow put up a big roadblock. Said, "Nope, that's not it, Paul." What do you think Paul did? Go back at home, at home and just sort of say, "Well, they, they don't want my ministry. There's no openings in the Asia ministry." No, he said, "All right, we can't go. We've already been to east. We can't go south. Let's go north. Bithynia, guys. Here we go. Let's go to Bithynia." Holy Spirit: *whammo*, "Can't go there." "Oh, well, let's see, we already been east, can't go south, can't go north. West, we're going west." *Psssssst*, ocean. So he goes to sleep, and he must have gone to sleep probably praying about where God wanted him to go, because in the middle of the night, he had a vision. And there was a man of Macedonia saying, "Come over and [What?] help us." And he went, and the gospel became more than a Middle Eastern sect. It touched the world. Flexibility. Flexibility.

Marty Wolf's one of our elders. I wrote about this in my book on God's will, and I remember when he was going to go to, he had a burden to reach Jewish people, being Jewish himself. And his burden was to go to France and reach them in Paris. And this was his great goal. And so he got involved with the Bible Christian Union Mission serving in France. And, boy, it was exciting. He did all his training and got all his preparation. We put up a plaque in the church. It was my dad's church, and said, "Marty Wolf, France." And the day came when he went to Canada. That's where he went. French-speaking Jews also live in Montreal. God had a different place. Flexibility. That's how it is in serving Christ; and the church needs that flexibility, that sense of dependence, that sense of flexibility that says, "God, we depend on the way You lead us, and we flex when You do." That's so important. Let me just encourage you, when things in the church shift and change and move, just pray with us that God's taken us that direction and be flexible to move with that very important attitude.

Let me give you another one: Growth. Attitude of growth. Attitude of growth. I guess maybe this is as important as anything, that we have the, flowing through us, the desire to grow, the desire to grow, to be in the process of growing. First Peter 2:2 sums it up as, "Babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may [What?] grow." Now, that analogy is marvelous, because it says this. It's not like milk of the Word as opposed to meat. That's a different analogy, 1 Corinthians 3. What he's saying there, as in the say, Peter is saying, "In the same way babies desire milk, you must desire the Word to grow." Now, how much does a baby desire milk? Had a baby around lately? Kick, scream, holler, tantrums till you get that deal in there, right? I mean, basically, babies only care about two things. Give them milk and deal with the consequences. That's the beginning, the end of the whole business. It's that single-minded devotion, see. It's that consuming desire for one thing that Peter's driving at. How strong is your desire for the Word? Can you take it or leave it? Are you a little bored with what's going on this morning? Are you looking at your watch, saying, "I got to get out of this place. The sun's shining for the first time in five days." I mean, do you really hunger for the Word? Is it some kind of a, an exercise in, in tyranny, that you have to open the Bible to read it? Or is there something magnetic about it that draws your heart? Do you really sense you're growing? I mean that's so important.

Now, we all don't have the same capacities to grow. But whatever the capacity that we do have is, we need to grow to that extent. And we grow by feeding on the Word of God. You know, we have a wonderful ministry in our church for some of the folks who are mentally disabled, and some of them are good friends of mine, excellent, good friends. In fact, I think I see Rodney down here in the second row. Rodney's my good friend, aren't you? Right, well, I remember when Rodney was baptized. Do you remember when you were baptized, Rodney? That's been a little while back. And so he said, "Yeah," he said, "I want to be baptized; and I want to be baptized because," he said, "John baptizes everybody else who has Jesus in his heart, and I have Jesus in my heart. I want to be baptized." So I said to Greg Barshaw, "Great." So we were over in the side over here, and I said, "Now, Rodney, I just want to be sure about this." He probably doesn't remember this. I said, "Rodney, just, because you're going to come out, and you're going to give your testimony." I said, "Now, you just tell me. Who is Jesus Christ?" He wrinkled up his nose and says, "You mean you don't even know that?" I said, "What a silly question. Of course, I know that. I'm the preacher. I'm the minister." And he was baptized, and he gave his testimony of his love for the Lord. And, afterwards, I, I had a opportunity to get him a Bible, because his other Bible was all beaten up. And he told me he wanted a Bible with big numbers, because he could see the number I was talking about, and he could see the number of the verses and so forth, and people helped him. A few weeks after that—I don't know if you remember this, either—you came up to the front, and you said, you said, "Sit down." You said, "Sit down after the service." So I said, "Okay." So I sat on the steps, and he said, "I have a surprise for you." And he recited the 23rd Psalm, and that blessed my heart.

You know, we have all different abilities, but the Spirit of God works in the heart, doesn't He, to bring us to love His Word and to grow at the, at the pace that we can grow. And I guess the thing that would put the most fear in my heart would be if the church ever stopped growing. I mean if people just said, "Well, I've had enough. I've had theology all I can take. I've had so much exposition. I, I really, I, I know more than I care to know. I mean I can't even find places for the tapes. I got them in the garage. I got in the trunk. I, and I, I can't even find anybody to give them to, because everybody's got them. I mean, I really don't need to know any more. I, I just, I'm going to fold up my tent and steal away into the night."

But, you know, there needs to be that ongoing hunger to grow, doesn't it? I just pray God we never lose that attitude. You know, Peter said it in another way in his second epistle, chapter 3, verse 18. "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We're not just learning facts in a book. We're growing in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We're not getting to know facts. We're getting to know Him, right? You see, when you're born into the family of God, 1 John 2:13 says you're a little baby, and you know the Father: *da-da, goo-goo*, basic. And then you become a spiritual young man, the Word of God dwells in you. You're strong. You overcome the wicked one, but it doesn't end there. First you know God in a simple way. Then you know doctrine, and then it says you become a spiritual father who knows Him who is from the beginning. We're not learning to know doctrine. We're learning to know God; and the more you know God, the more the

fellowship is enriching.

Listen, think of the most wonderful person in the whole wide world, the most wonderful person you ever met, and think how great it would be to just have that relationship grow and grow and grow; and then compare that with knowing the infinite Holy God of the universe in a growing relationship, growing. Feed on the Word. Do you have a hunger for it? Do you meditate on it? Do its truths run around in your mind? Is it your daily food? Can you say with Job that you love the Word of God more than your necessary food?

We ought to be growing, and you say, "Well, I've been here a long time. I know so much." Well, if you've gotten to the point where you think you know a lot, you're just at the point where you really don't know what you ought to know; and that is that you don't know enough. Oh, you may have enough facts; but are you telling me you know God as well as you'd like to get to know Him? See, when I study a passage I always look for what I can find out about God's character in there, so I can know Him better; growth.

Let me give you two more attitudes: Faithfulness, faithfulness. Boy, you know, there are an awful lot of Christians that are sort of spiritual sprinters. *Choooooo*, they're done. They sign up, blast off, *boomp*, it's all over. They're looking for spiritual retirement, and what God is looking for is marathoners, long-range people, distance runners. "Moreover, brethren," 1 Corinthians 4:2 says, "it is required in stewards, that a man be found [What?] faithful." Something to be said for endurance, for long-term spiritual commitment: I love it when older people say to me, "You know, oh, you know, could you slow down, because I have trouble getting all my notes down." And somebody said to me recently, is in their 80s. I just love that. Eighty-year-old taking notes? Still excited, still faithful to the Word of God, the truth of God, the life of God, the church of God, the ministry; I mean, they haven't bailed out.

And there are those people who teach year after year after year, who disciple year after year after year, who make long-range commitments and follow through. Though, they're the real stalwarts of the faith; because, you see, what they do is not based on an emotional appeal. It is not based upon immediate response. It is based upon character, and character has that enduring quality. There, there are lots of people who come to Grace Church whenever they can, and who might even do something whenever they can; but they usually can't because they have other things. And then there are those who just faithfully move on. Oh, how we need the spirit of faithfulness. The mark of real character is enduring commitment, enduring commitment. Look at 2 Timothy. Let me just kind of use Paul, who, of course, is a model. And in 2 Timothy 4, verse 6, he says, "For I am now ready to be offered [and he knew he was going to be a sacrifice] and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course; I have kept the faith." Boy what a, what a great statement. He, you know what he's saying? "God, I can die now. I'm done. I'm done. It's over. I've carried it out. I've finished the course. I've fought the fight. I've kept the faith."

Oh, you know, that's so wonderful. I guess it's kind of sad when you see a saint grow old and indifferent, or one that belongs to Christ get old and bitter; and sometimes you even see preachers or teachers or whatever Christian workers. They get old, and they get kind of sour and kind of bitter and sort of self-centered and whatever; and you just wonder what went wrong. But where you have that sweet grace of growing old in a life of faithful service is such a beautiful thing. Such a beautiful spirit: Faithfulness, faithfulness.

You have a responsibility, and you're there, you fulfill it; and when the Lord's people meet, you're there. You know, we've always said if everybody that says they go to Grace Church actually came here, it would be amazing. It would be amazing. I mean, I meet people like that all the time. I mean all the time, no matter where. If I go to the market with my wife, I push the cart, she buys the stuff. Somebody'll come down the aisle and say, "Oh, I know you. You're John MacArthur. I go to your church." "Oh, do you? Well, how wonderful. Uh, I haven't seen you there." "Oh, well, well, I come. Yeah, I come." "Oh, do you really? Were you there Sunday?" "Oh, no, I wasn't there Sunday. No, oh, it's been a while. Oh, we love it." "Oh, good, good." That's kind of, kind of sad, you know? Makes me feel a little bit badly. Or I hear, "Well, when we go, we always go to Grace. We enjoy it." Faithfulness. Faithfulness. Just being there to worship consistently, to serve consistently, to pray consistently, all these things; and it's such a distracted society where we're all ripped umpteen directions. It's hard to keep the priorities.

A last, wish I could say more about that one. Time's gone. A last attitude is hope. Hope. Oh, what a great word, hope. It means security for the future. It means we don't fear death. It means we actually look forward to what's ahead of us in life and death. In fact, I love the expressions in Romans 12:12, "Rejoicing in hope." Hey, death holds no fear for us. I mean, we have a, a funeral service around here and it's a celebration. And we rejoice and we praise God because one we love has passed from this vale of tears into the place where all tears are forever dried. Place of disease to a place where there's no more disease. A place of death to a place where there is no death; a place of limitation, to a place of unbounded realization. We live in hope. We've been learning that in Romans 8. We are saved in hope. We are saved in hope, and we look forward to eternity, to being like Christ. We look forward to the fulfillment of the promise of Romans 8 that we'll have a redeemed body to go with our redeemed soul, and we'll be in the image of Jesus Christ. We live in hope. Oh, people, we've got to have a hopeful attitude. And what that says to us practically is this. We don't get too bound up in what's going on here, right? I mean we get the picture when Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, thieves break through and steal: [Matthew 6:19 to 21] but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust doth not corrupt nor thieves break through and steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

So if our heart's up there hoping in eternity, our treasure's going to be up there; and everything else is going to go with it. I hope you're not living for the time. I hope you're not living for the temporal. I hope

you're not living for the passing. Listen people, we should be living in hope, and hope means that we are far greater in our commitment to invest in forever than we are in time. And so our energies and our thoughts and our prayers and our dreams and our visions and our money and all that we possess is only held as a means to invest in an eternal reality. We live in hope. We live in the light of eternity. It's a wonderful day as we look into that future.

Yesterday, I went to the hospital. Jack Coleman—who was our choir director, warm and gentle and loving, wonderful man—was having heart failure. And I went into the room and we prayed with he and Sarah, and he said, "Three days ago, I almost died." And he said, "I, I knew I had just a few breaths left, and, and I'm still here." And Sarah said, "You know when he, when he was just about dying three days ago, he kept saying, 'And I hit him with a right, and I hit him with a left, and I hit him with a right. I hit him with a left.'" And she said, "I don't know what he was doing. It's not like him to box, you know?" So she said to him after he came out of it, she said, "What were you doing?" she says. He said, "I was hitting the devil, and I knocked him out." See, he had the idea the devil was trying to take him early, and he had a few things yet to do. And he said to me, he said, "I wrote you a letter, and I wanted to be sure that I could write you that letter and send you a picture." Well, I mean that's probably one of a lot of little things that he didn't quite yet get done; and so he wasn't ready to say, "I finished my course. I kept the faith. I'm done. Take me out of here." So he in his mind thought he was having a boxing match with the devil who was trying to check him out early. Now, I don't know all the spiritual ramifications of that, or if, in fact, that was true; but that's the way he perceived it. But we rejoiced together, and we prayed together, because if he goes to be with the Lord, that is the ultimate promotion. That's hope: Would you like to live in this world without that? Then bless God for our hope, huh? And if we have that hope, John says it is a purifying hope. First John 3:3, "He that hath this hope in himself purifies himself."

Listen, if you really live for eternity, it's going to change dramatically the way you exist in time. It really is. Oh, attitudes flowing through the church will make it what Christ wants it to be. Let's bow.

Our Father, we thank You that You again have given us such a clear Word. You've called us to obedience, and humility, and love, and unity, and service, and joy, and peace, and thankfulness, self-discipline, accountability. You've called us to forgiveness, dependence, flexibility, growth, faithfulness, hope. And, Lord, this, so that we may be Your church magnifying, glorifying, praising Your name; and so that You may bless us in response; move through us, oh, Christ, and trim the lamp. Search us out. See where we are weak, and bring the loving hand of chastening to us to conform us to Your holy purpose. Be our priest, and prophet, and king, our example of pure holiness, and may we be a church in which You are glorified.

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