

## **7 Foundational Elements of a True Church, Part 2**

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-28

Code: 90-295

We want to continue tonight what we began this morning and follow up on our discussion regarding how to find a church, or how to recognize a church. We introduced it this morning by saying that the question that comes to me so many, many times is: how do I find a church? People say, "I cannot find a church. I'm struggling to find a church." And on the surface that seems like a rather obvious thing, you look for a building that says "church" and you have found one. But not every place that claims to be a church is by any means a church. Some of them fall very short of the definition. Some are far outside the definition. Some are very incomplete as to barely achieve the true designation of a church.

It's important for us to have a foundation. It's important to us to know what a church really is and so that's what we're looking at. And particularly today when there is just so much confusion and chaos about the church. What we saw this morning is that a church is identified, first of all, by a great confession, and then a great communication.

A church is a gathering of people who confess Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord and Savior. And they are devoted to a great communication, the revelation of God in Scripture as the only source of saving sanctifying truth. A church then is devoted to Jesus Christ as Lord and only Savior and to the Scripture as true and authoritative, the only source of divine revelation.

As I told you this morning, that's not the popular view. Seventy percent of evangelical Christians, according to the recent Newsweek survey, seventy percent of evangelical Christians believe that a person can be saved and go to heaven apart from any confession of Christ. Extensively these are people who call themselves Christians and who identify with the church. They do not affirm necessarily, though they themselves might affirm, they do not affirm necessarily the absolute foundation of God's people being this confession.

According to a survey some years ago, one of George Barnus' (?) surveys, fifty percent of evangelical Christians do not believe in absolute truth. That is, they have been affected by the society in which they live, the culture and the thinking of our time, so as to say there's no such thing as absolute truth, absolute moral truth. There's your truth and my truth and everybody else's truth and everybody's entitled to their truth therefore the Bible might be true for me but not necessary for you. That's a few years ago. In a more recent survey, very recently, students were surveyed in evangelical schools, evangelically identified students said, ninety-one percent of them, "There's no such thing as absolute

truth."

The church is fast moving away from the two things that are absolutely critical. One is the great confession, the other is the great communication. So you're going to find all kinds of places that call themselves churches and accommodate these kinds of people. The true church makes the great confession and builds its life on the great communication. In a true church there is the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Savior and the Lord of the church. And there is willing and eager obedience to everything revealed on the pages of holy Scripture and an understanding that it is true and that it is authoritative. Christ is enthroned and Scripture is exalted. Christ is preached and the Word of God is expounded, or explained. That's foundational to a church and these are the words of our Lord. Let's go to Matthew 16 where we were this morning.

It is the Lord of the church who said in verse 18, "I will build My church," who affirms these two things. Peter in verse 16 says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus says, "On this I will build My church. On this confession, you've made the confession, other Apostles are going to be used to make that confession and affirm that truth and write holy Scripture. And it is on the truth of who I am, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God, and on the revelation of that truth in Scripture that I will build My church. And the church built on the foundation of Christ and the Scripture is invincible, not even death, the gates of Hades can overpower it. It is authoritative, according to verse 19, and it opens the door to the Kingdom authoritatively saying, "You are shut out because you do not conform to what the Scripture demands, you are in because you do. And when we bind people in their sin because of their impenitence and unbelief, we are in agreement with heaven because heaven has disclosed what is true in the revelation of Scripture. Heaven, as I said this morning, simply is a way to refer to God. When you do on earth what is in Scripture, you are doing the will of God which is revealed there. When you open the door and tell people they can enter the Kingdom of heaven because they have believed the gospel and repented of their sin, you are doing what heaven desires because heaven has revealed itself in Scripture.

The true church then based upon two great foundations, the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authenticity and authority of holy Scripture. I've often said, I can go in a church and I can tell you in a few minutes whether it's a real church or whether it's just a church in name by their attitude toward Christ and their attitude toward the Word of God.

But there's more and there could be a lot more said about that, but there's more. There's a third point that I believe our Lord establishes that is very, very important. There is not only a great confession that is at the foundation of the church and a great communication at the foundation of the church, but there is a great contrast. There is a great contrast. And I want you to look at verse 20 because this too is a part of our Lord establishing the foundation of His church. "Then He warned," very strong word, "Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ." That is strange stuff. That is counter-intuitive. That seems like exactly opposite of what you would expect,

having declared that He is the Messiah, having declared that He alone is Lord, having declared that it is through Him and the truth revealed about Him from God the Father in heaven we can open the Kingdom, you would assume that Jesus would say to the disciples, "Go and tell everyone you meet that I'm the Christ." You would assume here something like the great commission, spread it far and wide, tell everyone that I'm the Messiah. But as He often does, He does what surprises us, what shocks us. And He gives them, I suppose you could call it a sort of anti-evangelism command. The warning here is a strong prohibition. And as I said, it is at best a strange thing for Jesus to say to His disciples, "Don't tell anyone that I am the Messiah."

Why did He say that? Well if you remember back in John chapter 6 verse 15, you remember in John 6 Jesus fed the crowd, remember that? He created fish and bread and fed the multitude of tens of thousands of people really, five thousand men but add the women and the children and you're probably up to maybe as many as twenty thousand people, and He fed them. And the people loved that, wow, because they spent their life battling for bread. There was no fast food in those days. You...you made your food from scratch every single day. And here all of a sudden was free food created on the spot. And as a result of this, verse 15 of John 6 says, "Perceiving...Jesus perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone." He got out of there fast. He escaped the efforts on their part to take Him by force and make Him king. They had such a warped view of the Messiah, their view of the Messiah was that He was going to come and provide military power and overwhelm the hated and despised Roman occupiers of Israel. Their view of the Messiah was that He was going to come and give all of the promises to David and all of the promises to Abraham in the Davidic and Abrahamic Covenant to the Jews and fulfill everything, give them their land in prosperity and blessing and all of that and dispel all Gentile influence. And now their new view of the Messiah was that He was going to give them free food. This was going to be the ultimate welfare state. They had reduced the messianic expectation to politics, military might and physical provision. They were looking for an earthly ruler and Jesus didn't want anything to do with that. He warned the disciples they should tell no one that He was the Christ because they had such a warped view of the Messiah. This is the great contrast.

Turn to John 18 for a moment. I think this is really one of the most fascinating conversations in the Bible, John 18. It's conversation between Jesus and Pilate. The Jewish leaders had brought Jesus to Pilate. They wanted Him to execute Jesus. The Romans maintained for themselves the power of capital punishment. They did not allow the Jews to do that. And the Jews didn't want to do it in a mob-violence act because there were some of the people...a lot of the people who were attracted to Jesus still and interested in Him and that wouldn't be good for the public relations of the religious leaders so they wanted the Romans to do it for them. So they brought Jesus to Pilate. In verse 29 they said, "What accusation do you bring against..." he said, "What accusation do you bring against this man? What did He do?" And they gave this ridiculous answer, "If this man were not an evildoer we wouldn't have delivered Him up to you." That's no answer. They don't have anything they can say. Pilate says, "Well take Him yourselves and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We're not

permitted to put anyone to death."

Pilate then brings Him in in verse 33. "After they had accused Him of being King of the Jews, they decided that was the best accusation to stick on Him because it might seem to be a threat to the Romans and to Caesar, a rival king. "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own or did others tell you about Me?" Pilate said, "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and chief priests delivered You up to me. What have You done?" And He said this, "My Kingdom is not of this world. If My Kingdom were of this world then My servants would be fighting that I might not be delivered up to the Jews but as it is, My Kingdom is not of this realm." Pilate said, "So You are a king." Jesus answered, "You say correctly, I am a king. For this I have been born and for this I have come into the world," listen to this, here is His Kingdom, "to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice. My Kingdom is the Kingdom of the truth, hearing the truth, believing the truth, embracing the truth, the truth of salvation, the gospel truth. My Kingdom is not of this world. It does not belong in this world. It does not participate in this world. Frankly, it has nothing to do with the politics of this world. If it did, then My servants would be out there in the political arena and out there in the military arena and out there with everybody else fighting for their little spot in the government. But My Kingdom has nothing to do with this realm, nothing whatsoever."

Paul put it this way. He said that the Kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It's a Kingdom of those who have come to the truth and been made righteous and had peace with God and its corresponding joy. The Kingdom, Jesus says, that is My Kingdom has no connection to earthly kingdoms. Don't tell anyone because they will rush in and by force they will take Me and try to make Me an earthly king. Frankly, it is irrelevant to the Kingdom of salvation what the earthly governments do or what they don't do. The church has no direct role, no direct role in rearranging sinners in to more acceptable life styles. Our responsibility in the world is not to make our culture more comfortable. This is not what a true church does.

I always think about that when I see these so-called reverends, Reverend Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton who have nothing to do with the gospel, nothing to do with the Word of God, use the word "reverend" and go around speaking in churches, leading protests. I have the same thing when I look at all the massive amounts of money that's being spent by the Religious Right to somehow rearrange the society and the culture into a more comfortable posture. That's not what a true church does. As true believers we understand we live in a composite society. We understand we live in a hybrid society. We understand we live in a mixed society . We reject national religion. We reject the classic sacral society. We're not trying to make everybody a Christian by baptizing all the babies, as the Catholic countries did and as the Protestant countries after the Reformation did. We don't believe in a sacral society. We believe the Kingdom of God is separate from the national entity. We aren't called to create a Christian culture or a Christian nation. We are called to influence the world and all that are around us with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are committed to Christianity, not Christendom.

It really does amaze me how much time and money and energy professing Christians and so-called churches spend trying to manipulate the kingdom of darkness. I think there are a lot of Christians out there who if Jesus were to come, their ultimate goal would be to see that He became President of the United States. I really do. I think they would lobby like crazy to make Jesus the candidate to be President. And that if Jesus could just be President, then we could have a Christian nation. We're not trying to rearrange the furniture on the Titanic. That really is immaterial. It's going down, the whole thing is going down. The world is sinking. We've got lifeboats and we're trying to rescue the people that we can before the thing goes down. I'm amazed how much persecution professing Christians will suffer, how much hostility they'll endure, how much hatred and vitriol they'll take from quote, "the liberal left," for their political agenda. They'll get out and they'll scream and yell and have shouting matches and get on a corner and parade signs. But if somebody stands on a corner with a sign that says "repent and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, he's labeled as some kind of a psycho. We are so willing to suffer hostility and persecution for our political views, but not at all willing to lay our lives on the line to proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. The biggest mission field, I think, in the world right now is the professing Christian church. Most of these professing Christians are happy to confront national matters that bother them but they don't want to confront people who are outside the gospel for fear that they might offend them.

The true church understands that we have to see ourselves as a great contrast. We make our great confession, we're committed to the great revelation of God and we know we live in absolute contrast to the world around us. Ours is a spiritual ministry of rescuing people from eternal judgment. We have no concern for what this government, or this world is doing on its own. We want to be good citizens, but as Christian citizens, we respond to the law and we preach the gospel. You can tell a church because they're more concerned, a real church, about seeing people come to Christ than about influencing government. Their passion is for the lost and the gospel.

Well there's a fourth foundation that our Lord establishes here for us, let's call it a great conquest. It's amazing how much is here and how cohesive it is and critical. Verse 21, "From that time on, Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and be raised up on the third day."

A true church is centered on a great conquest, the great triumph of Christ on the cross. The cross is not just something on the wall, something that dominates the life of a true church. He cannot be our Lord and Savior without a cross. That's why the Apostle Paul says, "I preach Christ and Him crucified...I preach Christ and Him crucified." We know that. We preach that constantly and rightly should we preach it. We celebrate the cross regularly by the Lord's table which is serious as we remember the cross, as we go back to the cross and realize that there our sins were paid for, the heinous sins that we so glibly produce in our lives as if there was no price at all for them. We come to the Lord's table in order that we might be face-to-face continually with the meaning of the cross. We

see the cross laid out throughout all of Scripture, a cross that casts its shadow backwards over the Old Testament, forward over the New Testament. We can't think of Christianity without the cross because there the justice of God is satisfied. There the Christ bears our sins in His own body and there our sins having been paid for we are redeemed. He made sin for us that we might become righteous in Him. Everything centers on the cross. The cross presents the righteousness of God, the justice of God but also the love and grace and mercy of God.

I don't need to belabor the point. A true church is cross centered. But not only the cross, Jesus said, "He's going to have to suffer and be killed, but raised on the third day." And Romans 10:9 and 10 says, "You shall confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." At the cross, the righteousness of God is manifest. Sin is dealt with. Judgment is provided. On the cross is our substitute. On the cross, our sins imputed to Christ. On the cross, we see mercy and grace and love and through the cross comes forgiveness, through the resurrection comes new life. And so we preach Christ and we preach Christ crucified. We preach the cross. We preach in preaching the cross all of the elements of the gospel. When you preach the cross, you preach the sinfulness of man, you preach the righteousness of God, you preach judgment and justice and grace and mercy and love, all the biblical themes resolve at the cross. We're not here for cheap entertainment. We're not here for superficiality and shallow pop psychology. We're not even here just to sing Old Testament based songs. We're here to look at the cross and to lift up the cross. And it reminds us of how wretched we are and the price of our sins and therefore how sinful we are.

So when you ask if this is a church, you ask are they committed, convinced and convicted of the great confession, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord and Savior and He alone saves. Are they committed to the great revelation of God in holy Scripture Do they understand the great contrast that we are not of this world? His Kingdom has nothing to do with the kingdoms of this world and we live in transcendence from this world and separation from this world and our responsibility is not to affect this world politically, socially, or culturally but spiritually through the proclamation of the saving gospel. The only thing that will rescue people from the sinking ship is a church if it proclaims the great conquest of sin on the cross which represents both God's righteousness and His love, His judgment and His mercy, His justice and His forgiveness.

Number five in my little list, and the Lord is the one who laid it out for us, when you come to a true church you're going to find in that church a great conflict...a great conflict. What do I mean by that? A true church is actively engaged in a war against Satan. A true church is actively engaged in a war against Satan. This flows out of this text so clearly. Peter pulls Jesus aside and he began to rebuke Him. This is pretty brash. And he says, "God forbid it, Lord. This will never happen to You. Hey, hey, hey, You're not going to die, You're not going to be killed. God forbid it." That's the strongest language possible. That is the strongest language Peter could find, "No way, never." And Jesus turns and said to Peter the most horrific thing that Jesus ever said to any of His Apostles by far, "Get

behind Me, Satan." Whoa...that will stop you dead in your sandals. "Get behind Me, Satan." This is a pretty big move from "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona." How do you go from being commended to being condemned like this in the same chapter? "Get behind Me, Satan." Anything contrary to the will of God, anything contrary to the purposes of God, anything contrary to the revelation of God and here Peter had just had a revelation from the lips of the Son of the living God that He was to go to Jerusalem to suffer many things at the hands of the leaders, to be killed and to be raised on the third day, this is a revelation not unlike but equal to the very revelation from the Father that had come to Peter by which he made his great confession, "You're the Christ the Son of the living God," only this time he will have nothing to do with this revelation and says, "I reject it in total, I won't have it, I won't accept it." Jesus says to him, "You've just taken up Satan's agenda and you are now in My way, Peter. You are a stumbling block to Me, get out of the way."

I think all Peter really wanted to do is be a help. I mean, Peter, all he really wanted to do was offer a plan B, a better way. And he winds up being identified as if he's the devil himself and being told, "You are in My road, Peter, get out of the way. When you side against the revelation of God, you are a stumbling block to the divine purpose and you have taken up Satan's agenda because that's what he exists to do. Trying to hinder My work." He says it at the end of verse 23, and here's the reason, "You're not setting your mind on God's interests." That's the problem. You're not setting your mind on what pertains to God. You're not setting your mind on the divine will but on your own.

Any true church is engaged in this battle all the time. We live in the midst of an unending conflict. In the series I did on Jude, I called it the long war on the truth, but it's more than just a war on the truth, we fight against all who reject the revelation of God. We fight against every false interpretation of the revelation of God. We earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We battle against false teachers and false doctrine and deceivers and liars who would come and corrupt the church. When we find a factious man, we rebuke that man and after two or three admonitions we get rid of that person. When we find people in the congregation who live lives in opposition to the revelation of God, we have to act against that. If you find somebody who sins, Matthew 18 Jesus said, what do you do? You go to that person because whether it's doctrinal error, a rejection of the theology of Scripture or whether it's sin which is put in the way of the divine purposes for holiness in the church, whether you're attacking the doctrine of the church or a stumbling block to the direction of the church in the truth of God, or whether you're getting in the way like leaven and polluting your body with your sin, you have to be dealt with. That's why John Calvin said a church is not a church that doesn't do church discipline. If you're not engaged in the battle against the enemy who perverts the truth and brings wickedness and sows tares into the church, then you're not functioning as a church. It's foundational to the church to confront everything that works against the divine purpose, that works against the divine will, that works against the divine word, and that means any error and any iniquity that attempts to thwart the truth of God or the unfolding of the ministry of the Spirit of God. That's why in Matthew 18 He said, "Look, if somebody sins, you go to them. If they don't repent, you take two or three witnesses. If they still don't repent, you tell the church and the church goes after them. And if

they still don't repent, what do you do? Put them out, treat them like an outcast and tax collector, get them out of there because they're a hindrance. You're in the way."

If you're in the church and you're teaching error, you're a stumbling block. You've taken up Satan's agenda. If you're in the church and you're cultivating sin, and sowing sin, and if you're in the church and you're leavening, as it were, influencing for evil the church, you're hindering the purposes of God, you've got to be dealt with. And I suppose it could be said to any of us who by our sin or any of us who by our error hinder the purposes of God and the will of God and get in the way of the revelation of God and the ministry of the Spirit of God that we too have taken up the agenda of Satan and it could be said to us by the Lord Himself, "Get behind me, Satan, get out of my way." you are in the road and you have taken up Satan's posture.

It was in Acts chapter 5 that we remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Peter says to them because they had promised to sell a piece of property and give all the proceeds to the Lord and they lied, then Peter says, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" You start lying to the Holy Spirit, you start introducing deception and lies into the church, and you have taken up Satan's agenda and Satan is at work in you. And you remember what happened. God stepped into the church when they were gathered to worship and took the life of Ananias, struck him dead. And then took the life of his wife and struck her dead on the spot as well. Get out of the way, Ananias, get out of the way, Sapphira, you have taken up Satan's agenda.

Chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians, look at this one. He says, "I have heard, it's actually reported, there's immorality among you." They were condoning immorality in the church. I'm sure that's pretty common today in churches that don't believe in absolute moral truth. "There's immorality among you, immorality of such a kind that doesn't exist even among the Gentiles, someone has his father's wife," that's incest. "And you not only do it, tolerate it, but you're arrogant, you haven't mourned in order that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst." Boy, if you've got somebody like that, you should have them out. Instead of that, you've allowed it and you've not only allowed it, you've become proud of your tolerance.

Down in verse 5 he says, "I've decided to deliver such a one to Satan." That person has already taken up Satan's agenda, that's already a sort of "get behind me, Satan" person, I'm just going to turn him over to Satan completely for the destruction of the flesh because, you see, a little leaven, verse 6, will leaven the whole lump.

How do you tell a true church? A true church is engaged in the great conflict. It's protective of its doctrine and it's protective of its purity. What are we looking for in a church? A great confession, a great communication, devotion to Scripture, great contrast, separation from the world, understanding its gospel agenda, not caught up in politics, social manipulation. At the head of the church is the Lord of the church and the crucified and risen Lord so that church celebrates the great conquest of the



cross and the resurrection. And that church is engaged in the great conflict with Satan and sin and error.

Two more, number six, there is in a true church a great contradiction. And this is very familiar. Verses 24 to 26. "Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me, for whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? What will a man give in exchange for his soul?'"

We're very familiar with that because we went over it in such intense detail in our study of Luke 9:23 to 27. It's a repeat of that very same passage. The words are virtually identical. If you're going to come after Me, you deny yourself. You take up your cross and follow Me. Self-denial, self-sacrifice, and submission, you give up your life, you lose it. It's an exchange. What good is it going to be that you hold on to the world and lose your soul? Better that you give up everything and gain your soul. How much is your eternal soul worth? It will cost you everything. I wrote about this in the book *Hard To Believe*, a book frankly that's not only titled *Hard To Believe*, but it's hard to sell. Why? Because it has a message that's hard to hear. It's against the grain of the drift in the church. It's the most needed message but the message to which the quote/unquote church is so indifferent.

Look, what do you...just look at the churches that are out there, listen to what's going on. You would think that a church really is designed for people trying to find themselves. And that's what...even the surveys in *Newsweek* magazine, do you go to church so you can feel better about yourself? So many percentage of people said yes. Do you go to church so that you have a sense of God? So many people said yes and so forth. Do you go to the church because it gives you a sense of well-being? Etc., etc. You would think that the church was designed to make people feel good, boost their self-esteem, elevate themselves, feel spiritual, kind of feel like they connected with God and that God is there, you know, as the big ultimate sugar daddy, just whatever you want, whatever you dream, whatever you have ambition for, whatever your felt need is, I'm here to deliver the goods, I want to make something out of you, I want you to be all you can be, I want you to think positively, I want you to be able to create your own world and whatever it is in your mind that you can create, I can fulfill.

That's not the church. That has nothing to do with the church. The church is defined by the great contradiction, everybody who is there is there to give themselves up. It's all about self-denial. It's all about giving up your life, taking up a cross meant you'd be willing to die for the gospel. It's so important that you be forgiven and on your way to heaven instead of hell that you're willing to give up your life if need be and die as a martyr, this is so critical. You're there because you want to obey Christ. You're there not to save your life but lose it. You're there not to hang on but to give it up. That's why Jesus said you can't come into My Kingdom if you don't hate yourself and hate your father and your mother and hate your earthly possessions. It's a desperation kind of thing. It's Luke 18, we go back to that so often, pounding your chest, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I can't even lift up

my eyes and look at You, I'm sick of myself, I want no more of myself. I don't have an agenda. I'm not asking You to do anything for me except forgive me and save me and change me. There is nothing in me worth keeping."

As I told you when we studied Luke 9, to deny it yourself means to refuse to associate with. You're coming saying, "Lord, I refuse to associate any longer with the person I am, I am sick of myself. There's nothing good in me at all. I am...like Paul...the chief of sinners. I am a blasphemer. Forgive me."

I love Psalm 107, it might be good to look at it for just a moment. Psalm 107 sort of depicts this in very graphic language, beautiful language. In Psalm 107 we are called to thank the Lord for His salvation. Verse 1, "Give thanks to the Lord for He's good, for His loving kindness is everlasting." Then verse 2, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so whom He has redeemed from the hand of the adversary." So these are the redeemed and we're to be giving thanks to God for our redemption. And then He gives us four pictures of this redemption that are just magnificent. The first one is of people lost in the desert in a caravan with no food and no water. Verse 4, "They wandered in the wilderness in a desert region, couldn't find a way to an inhabited city, they were hungry, thirsty. Their soul fainted within them." That is they were ready to die. "They cried to the Lord in their trouble. He delivered them out of their distress. Led them by a straight way to an inhabited city. Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness, His wonders to the sons of men for He satisfied the thirsty soul and the hungry soul He filled with what is good."

Here is the level of desperation. They don't have any agenda. They're not asking for anything. They are simply destitute, forsaken, lost in the desert, hungry, thirsty, dying, all they can do is cry out to the Lord in their trouble and ask Him to deliver them out of their distresses.

The second picture is of prisoners, verse 10. "Dwelling in darkness in the shadow of death, prisoners in misery and chains, down in some dank, dark, stinking dungeon." They don't have any agenda either. They're there because they rebelled against the words of God, that's why sinners are where they are. "And they spurned the counsel of the Most High and they've been humbled with labor and stumbled and there's none to help." And there they are in that prison with no one there to deliver them, no one to come to their aid. No one to rescue them and they cry out to the Lord in their trouble. That's Luke 18, that's pounding your breast, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner. He saved them out of their distresses, brought them out of the darkness and the shadow of death and shattered their chains. Let them give thanks to the Lord for His loving kindness and His wonders to the sons of men because He shattered the gates of bronze and He cut the bars of iron asunder." It's just a matter of desperation with no where to turn, no agenda.

There's more. A person with a terminal illness, somebody who because of their iniquities is afflicted with an illness and their soul has reached the point where they hate all kinds of food. When people

get near to death, they have no appetite. And here they draw near to death and they're so near to death that they can't even eat and they cry out to the Lord in their trouble. And all they want to be is delivered and rescued and He sends His Word and He heals them and delivers them from the pit, or from destruction or death. And so they thank Him and they offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and they tell of His works with joyful singing. These all picture the desperation of the sinner.

And then the final one in verses 23 to 32 is somebody in the sea in a ship caught in a massive storm, tossed up and down. The language is very vivid. They're melting away in their misery, verse 26. They're reeling and staggering like a drunken man. They're at their wits end. They don't have an agenda either. They're not casual about this issue. They are desperate. They are at the edge of death and they cry out to the Lord. And He brought them out of their distress. Caused the storm to be stilled, the waves hushed. They were glad because they were quiet. He guided them to the desired haven. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his lovingkindness and His wonders to the sons of men. Let them extol them in the congregation of the people and praise Him in the seat of the elders.

This is the desperation of the sinner. I tell you, folks, I've seen this in metaphor watching all these people, particularly a few days after the hurricane Katrina hit the south. These people had no agenda. All they wanted was help...help, somebody help. That's the cry of the sinner. That was a metaphor.

You know what was so fascinating to me...as I look at things I interpret things obviously from a spiritual standpoint. All those people a few days before that and probably for all of time before that, living their lives, wearing all the masks of satisfaction and fulfillment and happiness and going through the routine of their life, living in their little houses, doing their thing, going to their jobs, having their forms of entertainment, filling up life the way they fill up life, wearing the mask, everything's fine. And then all of a sudden they're stripped of everything and they're afraid they're going to die. And all they want is somebody to come out of the sky and pluck them up. The masks were off and we saw the true desperation of the soul. They were panicked that they might die. That's the desperation of a true congregation of believers in Christ. We're just thankful to be delivered out of the desert before we died under the burning sun. We're just thankful to be rescued out of the prison of our sin. We're just thankful that the Lord plucked us up from the deathbed. We're thankful that He stilled the storm and led us to a haven because we were going to perish.

A church that is a true church sees people perishing, it sees them on the brink of eternal death and damnation. It understands that that's what people need because that's what the true church has experienced.

What marks a true church? What are we saying here? Humility, selflessness. It's not about self-promotion. I get chills sometimes watching so-called pastors of so-called churches who are engaged in massive self-promotion where their names are bigger than the name of Jesus Christ, far bigger, if you can even find the name of Jesus Christ occasionally. What marks a true church is a brokenness

and a contrite heart and humility and meekness and gentleness and submission. They have the mind of Christ who humbled Himself. The church is made up of humble people who were desperate to be rescued. God gives grace to the humble and He resists the proud, James 4 says. So humble yourself, mourn over your sin. This is the true church. Christ-exalting, Scripture committed, separated from the world, centered on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, engaged in a conflict with sin all the time both in doctrine and in life, and self-denying, self-sacrificing, and humbly obedient.

And finally, there's one other element. When you have a true church, you have a gathering of people who look to a great consummation. Verse 27, this is so fitting. "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels and will then recompense every man according to his deeds." You know, when you have a true church, it's a Second Coming church. First Thessalonians chapter 1, what a good church the Thessalonian church was, a true church, 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, Paul says I'm so thankful for you, your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope. I know you're beloved of God, elect. I know the gospel didn't come in Word only but in power and conviction. You became imitators of us. And he goes on, you became an example.

But he faces the chapter, the very short chapter in verse 9 and 10 and he says, "You turned from God to idols to serve the living and true God." There's that contrast we talked about this morning between idols and the living God. You turned from idols to serve the living and true God. And listen to this, "And to wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." A true church is all caught up in the glory of the future and not caught up in the present. In fact, in some ways the things that we endure in this time in this place are minor details. The sufferings of this world are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. In fact, we actually count it all joy to fall into various trials because they have a way to perfect our faith and to strengthen our hope. And the more we suffer here, the sweeter heaven becomes and we look more longingly toward the coming of Christ. And by the way, whoever has this hope purifies himself, says John. A true church has a Second Coming perspective. We understand this is a brief veil of tears. Life is a vapor that appears for a little time, vanishes away. Soon we're going to see the Savior in death and soon He's going to come and gather all who are still alive and take us all to eternal glory. We live for that. Titus 2:14 tells us what our view of the future is. Listen to these wonderful words. "Looking...verse 13...for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession."

You know what makes heaven so good? It's the anticipated purification. We look forward to the time when we no longer have sin, we no longer have the battle with the flesh. We look forward to the time when we see Jesus face to face. We look forward to the glories of perfection, perfect righteousness, perfect praise, perfect service, perfect fellowship in heaven. Paul said to the Colossians, it's to be the preoccupation of your life if you've been raised with Christ, seek the things which are above. Get your heart in heaven where Christ is, see it at the right hand of God, set your mind on things above, not on

things on the earth for when Christ who is our life is revealed, you'll be revealed with Him in glory. All the little trivial aches and pains and disappointments of this life are minor. The church is not in the world to offer solutions for problems in this life. The church is not here to help people get over the humps of their felt needs and their little petty disappointments. You're never going to get rid of all of that. This is a fallen world and you're a fallen person, forgiven but fallen. We live in the light of heaven. We set our affections on things above. We put our treasure in heaven, not on earth. We purchase friends for eternity. We serve, giving the Lord in our service gold, silver, precious stones that they may stand the test at the end and we may be rewarded with the privilege of greater service to the Lord in days to come. Far better we believe to depart and be with Christ. In this body we groan waiting for the redemption that is to come.

Second Corinthians chapter 5, a wonderful passage, "We prefer...says Paul...to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." We're not caught up in this world. We're not caught up in the issues of this world, even the disappointments, the illnesses, the losses, the sufferings. We count it all joy to suffer in this world knowing that it perfects our faith, it draws us to the Lord, it strengthens us, it enables us to comfort others. There's all kinds of good things. It proves our faith because when you persevere through hard times, you know your faith is the real deal. And that's the greatest thing you can be confident about is that you're truly God's and that enlivens the hope of eternal life. A true church is a church that has a heavenly view and not an earthly one. A true church is a congregation of people who gather together stimulating one another to love and good works but always looking at the approaching day when we'll see our Lord.]

So, if you're looking for a church, what are you looking for, a steeple? Stained-glass window? A sign? Architecture? Ritual? Liturgy? Style of music? That doesn't tell you anything. Looking for a place with good parking? Good babysitting? Good feelings? You may find a place that says "church" but it might not be one. The Lord of the church said, "I'll build My church and I'll build it on the great confession Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord, the Messiah, the Savior, I'll build it on the Scripture, I'll build it on the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of salvation, I'll build it on the truth of the cross and the resurrection, I'll build it on holiness and purity in doctrine and practice, I'll build it on humility and obedience to Me and I'll build it on anticipation of what is heavenly and what is eternal. That's a church. And your response is, "No wonder a church is so hard to find." You can thank God if you found one. The church must be if it has the name church what Christ said His church is to be.

Our Father, we come to you now understanding the richness, something of the depth of the words of our Lord and the way this text is arranged, maybe we've gone over it a number of times and never really seen all that's there. How wondrous is Your mind, how wondrous is the Spirit's revelation to pull it all together in such a dramatic way. And, Lord, with all our hearts we want to be this church, we want to be the church of the Lord Jesus Christ that He has built and we believe by Your grace that we are. We don't want to be proud about that. We don't want to set ourselves above, we want to be even more humbled. We want to be more thankful that we have been so graced. We pray that You'll give

true believers discernment, that You'll give Your true shepherds and pastors discernment to understand the church that is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. May You be pleased that we bear the name "church" because we are a true reflection of what You desire. We thank You for Your grace to us. We thank You for calling us into the *ekklesia*, the called out ones who are Your church. In our Savior's name. Amen.

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