Fundamental Priorities of a Good Church
Selected Scriptures
91-4

Those of you who know me know that I am addicted to the church. I'm a fanatic for the church. I love the church. It is my life and breath. It is the source of my highest joy and my most overwhelming anguish. It is on my mind all the time. I sort of live in the aura of the church, all that it is and all that it calls for and requires and provides.

It's a real adventure to be a pastor. I could not be a president, and I could deal with that. I could not be a radio preacher or an author, that would be all right. But if I were not a pastor, that would be the greatest loss of my entire life. The highlight of my life has been a stint at Grace Community Church. The church has never ceased to be an adventure, really an amazing adventure.

The earliest years of life in the church were almost euphoric. The church was growing very rapidly. People were loving the Word of God. Dynamic conversions taking place and far more than anybody ever expected. We were learning as we went. I didn't know a whole lot. I was discovering during the week, preaching it on Sunday, and implementing it the next week in the church. So we were all in this big adventure trying to find out what the church really was, trying to sort out theology, interpret the Bible, figure out how to apply it, and it was just one incredible adventure.

But always from the beginning, the goal was to develop the church in such a way as to make it what the Lord of the church wanted it to be, to look at the Word of God and try to discern there what revelation in the New Testament tells us about the church, and what God's plans and purposes and expectations for the church are, and then figure out how to implement that, and to bring about the perfect will of God in the church through totally imperfect people. Therein lies the great challenge. And they all know that I am equally imperfect, and that even makes the challenge greater. But it has been an immense adventure.

And when I speak about the church, I'm not speaking about something sort of off the top of my head, or off the cuff, or something I hope might be true. But when I talk about the church, I'm talking about that to which I've given most attention throughout my entire life.

And I believe that one can understand what the Bible says about the church. I don't think that's intended to be ambiguous. I don't think the Lord said, "Now go out and build the church and it's all going to be a riddle and see if you can figure the riddle out." I think it's patently obvious what the church is to be.

And so once you discern that in the Scripture, you can move to implementing that in the lives of people. And that's what we've been trying to do in all these many years, and God has allowed us to raise up a seminary where we can train men to do the same thing, and to have influence around the

world with pastors, and teachers, and leaders who want the same thing. And this has been the great joy of my life.

And while some people may assume that the church is somewhat complex, I'm convinced that what really makes the church effective is pretty simple. And that's what I want to share with you. I'm going to unfold some of them, and there are going to be things that I don't think will surprise you. In fact, there may be a certain amount of indifference as you hear me say them.

And I understand that because I've learned something being around for a number of generations in the church. I was there when I was in my twenties, so I was there when the young people really were the heart and soul of the church, and now it's those people who matured and become the elders in the church, who give leadership to the church. And I've seen their children, I've seen their grandchildren. I've watched the processes of generations in one single place.

And I have found that with some exceptions it's generally true that the first generation fights for the discovery and establishment of the truth. There's a real exhilaration. There's a real passion in that first generation, new Christians, people just awakening to the realities of divine truth. There's a passion to learn it, to know it, and defend it, and fight for it.

The second generation tends to sort of try to maintain it, and maybe even extend it. The first 10, 15 years of Grace Church, maybe even heading toward 20 years, we were really working hard to crystallize and clarify doctrine. That's why the church has such an extensive doctrinal statement, which is also the doctrinal statement of the college and seminary.

We worked as a staff at writing papers on all kinds of theological issues. We'd have a staff meeting and I'd assign guys to write papers on various theological things that we needed to hammer out and discuss, and we called them "position papers." And we still develop those kinds of things. But that first generation was primarily committed to the development of the truth, to understanding the truth, to systematizing the truth, thoroughly, consistently with Scripture, not imposing it upon Scripture. Establishing the truth, discovering it, refining it, and establishing it.

And now we're in the second generation and what we're seeing now is this desire to maintain the truth, to guard the truth, to secondly, extend the truth. There came, I suppose, about year 20 at Grace Church this desire to take the truth to the ends of the earth, to get books translated into every imaginable language.

I was talking to one of our guys who graduated from the seminary, who's just back from Croatia, where they planted a training center in Croatia to take the truth to that part of the world. We've got this sort of spiritual young man mentality you find in 1 John, where he talks about the young men who are valiant for the truth. They know the truth and they want to fight for the truth, and they overcome the evil one who is a liar and the father of lies and tries to, of course, destroy the truth.

And so I look at that and I think that that's probably generationally speaking where our church life is. We are passionate about guarding the truth. We are passionate about extending the truth. In fact, one of the guys who was at the Shepherds Conference - never been there before, is from down in Texas - and he said to one of our elders at the end of the conference, he said, "I get it. I get it. I know what this church is all about. It's all about proclaiming and protecting, is that right?" And our elder

said, “Yeah, you’ve got it. It’s all about proclaiming and protecting.”

There’s a passion at that and I think that’s a wonderful place to be, to know the truth, to have established the truth, affirm the truth, understood the truth, and now to be passionately committed to maintaining the truth and extending the truth.

But, there’s a third phase, and historically this is kind of the way it flows. The third generation is apathetic. The third generation is apathetic. They weren’t a part of the process of discovery. They weren’t a part of the process of refinement. So they don’t understand the pain, and the endurance, and the relentlessness that you went through to get there. And they really weren’t, because they weren’t there fighting to understand that truth, they weren’t there fighting to defend that truth, they just kind of show up at some time.

And obviously we have people flowing into Grace Church, we have people flowing into the college even now, people flowing into the seminary, who never were in the battle to define the truth, who never were in the battle to defend the truth, who just show up when all the work is done.

And the attitude that tends to be there is an attitude of apathy. And that’s really sad. You see people who go to church today only if it’s convenient. They’re really not energized by the discovery of the truth. They’re not particularly energized by refining the truth. They’re not very interested in protecting the truth, and proclaiming the truth, and extending the truth. They come whenever they can, and they show up whenever they want.

You take the preaching of the Word of God for granted, you take the truth for granted, because you weren’t a part of the process, therefore it has no value to you. You’re like a rich kid who has all the money to buy things but doesn’t understand the value of anything because no sacrifice was necessary for you to acquire it.

And that’s when church life gets tough. That’s when people are worried about whether the air conditioner is blowing on the back of their neck or not, or whether they can find a parking place, or whether the service time interrupts the plans for the day, or whether the sermon’s too long, or the pew’s not comfortable. And they become absorbed in all that stuff.

I’ve read enough about church history and even contemporary and more modern church history to know there’s a time in the life of the church when that becomes the dominant characteristic of the church because that third generation weren’t a part of the struggle, and that is a frightening thing. Maybe I’ll die before I have to deal with too much of that. But somebody in the future will have to deal with it.

I get a lot of letters. I got I think about a 24-page letter the other day. That’s a daunting thing, you know, you’re so busy. You get a 24-page letter and you say, “Really, do I need to read this?” Usually it’s from some kooky person who, you know, writes with no space, and then writes up the side, and across the top, and down the side, and on the back, and on the envelope, you know?

But this was from a lady, her name is Dorothy. It’s an absolutely - it may be the most incredible letter I’ve ever received and I read all twenty-some pages of it. And I was so moved by it that I had it typed up to keep as a keepsake. This woman went through this incredible process of coming to understand

the gospel. She was from Germany. She came to America. She married a real bozo of a guy. And life was horrific.

She's a writer and a journalist. She tried to find truth. She went through cults. She became a God-hater and a Christ-hater and she goes writing through all of this - and she's a good writer. And as the years go by she's becoming more and more desperate. As a little kid, her mother was involved with the occult. Her father was into demonology. She couldn't sleep at night for fear that she was going to be killed by demons, and she had all these incredible fears. She was abused as a child. And the story goes on and on.

Well, to make a long story short, she turns on the radio. She listens to "Grace To You." And it's a series on the lordship of Christ. She hears the message. She writes for the book. First book she reads is The Lordship of Christ. And she and her husband read it out loud verbatim. That's a pretty heavy introduction into Christianity.

She decided she wasn't sure the New Testament documents were actually accurate so she needed to know about that. So she went and got F.F. Bruce's book on New Testament documents and read that. She came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ was who He claimed to be, the New Testament was what it claimed to be. And riding along in a car, reading - again the gospel of Jesus Christ with her husband - she was converted to Christ.

And then she goes on for about five pages to describe in the most clear way this absolutely insatiable thirst to know the truth. And she says she weeps to know the truth. She falls on her face before God to know the truth. She falls on her knees before Christ and pleads that He would show her the truth. Whatever it is that she comes to understand in the Word of God as she believes implicitly without question, and she is demonstrating the real work of God in a transformed heart.

You know, one could wish to have a church full of people like that, who can never get enough of the truth, who just hang on every element of the truth, because it is like food like no other, because it is so soul-satisfying. And if it isn't soul-satisfying for you, then somehow you've developed bad spiritual eating habits, right?

How can we move ourselves away from these dangerous places of apathy that so easily creep into our lives? And many of you fit into that sort of third generation category. You come from a Christian home. You come from parents who came from Christian parents. Your grandparents may be know the Lord. You've been raised in the church. You didn't fight for the truth. You just kind of got handed the truth. How do you fight against the tendency to be apathetic about that? How do you avoid the danger of spiritual privilege?

Michael Griffiths, the British writer, said, "Christians collectively seem to be suffering from a strange amnesia. A high proportion of people that go to church have forgotten what it's all about. Week by week they attend the services in a special building. They go through their particular time-honored routine. They give little thought to the purpose of what they're doing. The Bible talks about the bride of Christ, but the church today seems like a ragged Cinderella, hideous among the ashes."

Pretty graphic. And the ragged Cinderella has lost its beauty because it's failed to understand the priorities in spiritual life in the church. If we're going to recover the passion, if we're going to recover

the zeal for the truth, we've got to focus ourselves on the right things. And let me say this as simply as I can say it, you have to focus yourself away from yourself.

Building a church around felt needs is utterly contrary to Scripture. Focusing on you, and your problems, and your dilemmas, and your circumstances, and your situations is counterproductive. And while it may intend to help you, the unintended consequence becomes you are the one being worshiped. This is a problem. You are the center of attention. You are the center of focus.

And then the unintended consequence is when you feel like you don't have any particular needs, or they're not doing a very good job of meeting those needs, you don't need a church. If they fail to deliver what you think you need, you check out.

So we need to get back to what the really important matters of the church are. As the hymn writer said, you want to go to church to get lost in wonder, love and praise. You want to go to church to forget about yourself, to set yourself aside, and to lose yourself in the glory and wonder of God. A God-centered preacher, a God-centered preacher, a God-centered teacher, a God-centered worship is what you want in a church. When you look for a church, that's what you want.

You want those who are consistently being brought before God, who are being brought into the very throne room of heaven to see His glory, and His majesty, and the wonder of who He is, and His righteousness, and His holiness. It's really sad when people don't understand the full glory of God because if you don't - if you don't understand the depth of the being of God, you can't rise to the heights of praise. And that's what dramatically alters life.

Now, how do you pick a church? Look, you come from a church. I know that. We all come from some church. You go to a church. The rest of your life you're going to be involved in a church. The church is going to be the center of your life. It's going to be - some of you are actually going to get married and have children. You're going to raise them in a church.

The church scene is frankly frightening. In the letters that we get at "Grace To You" every – well, every week, I would say that the commonest complaint that we receive is from people who cannot find a church where they feel the truth of God is honored and ministry is done in a biblical way. This is no small frustration.

It's not that there aren't many churches. There are lots of churches. It's trying to discern what is a good church, what is a right church. And I want to help you with that. I want to talk about what a church should be. Now when I talk about this, you know you're getting down to the core of where I live because as a pastor, I have a great love for the church. I've always loved the church. Even as a kid growing up I loved the church.

And Jesus said, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." It's the only institution Jesus ever promised to build, the only one that He is building. And so we have to be committed to the church. But obviously, not all churches are committed to what they should be. So let me give you some principles, okay? What you want to look for in a church. Not just now but, certainly now, and for the rest of your life.

These are not unrealistic expectations. These are not methods, nothing to do with that. These are

not formats. These have nothing to do with style. I've been all over the world. I've been in church from the high mountains of the Andes in South America, to a house church in China, to churches in the Middle East, to churches in Europe, to churches in South Africa. I've been all over the world. Everywhere I've gone I've been in churches and I've seen every imaginable kind of style of church. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about substance. Don't look at style, it's seductive. It's, at best, style can only appeal to the flesh. Substance is what you're after.

The first thing you look for in a church is a high view of God, a high view of God. And this one could spend his entire life discussing, a high view of God. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Everything starts with fearing God. That's the beginning of everything. And that's crystal clear in Scripture. The holiness of God is the first and central element in the church. The glory of God, the exaltation of God.

In the Old Testament, this, of course, is established, I think, in the writings of Moses, most specifically in Leviticus 18 to 20. If you would look at that for a moment, this is just - there are a lot of places you could go but we'll start - just to look at Leviticus 18 for a moment.

There's a principle that comes out of this very interesting text. The Lord spoke to Moses and He said in verse 2, "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'I am the Lord your God, so you shall not do - " et cetera, et cetera " - what's done in Egypt - ' " and so forth. Verse 4, "You are to perform My judgments, keep My statutes, live in accordance with them; I am the Lord your God. You shall keep My statutes - " verse 5 " - My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.

"None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness - " that would be incest. Don't do that. "I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, or the nakedness of your mother - " et cetera. And goes on to talk about various other things.

Comes to verse 30, "Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you." This is the kind of thing the pagan world does. "Don't defile yourself; I am the Lord your God."

In chapter 19, repeats the same scenario. The Lord says to Moses, "Speak to the congregation, and say, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. So reverence mother, father, keep the Sabbath; I am the Lord your God. Don't turn to idols. Don't make molten gods. I am the Lord your God." Down in verse 10, "I am the Lord your God." Verse 12, "I am the Lord." Verse 14, "I am the Lord," 16, "I am the Lord," verse 18, "I am the Lord," verse 25, "I am the Lord your God," 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 37. Always your conduct goes back to the fact that you have God for your God.

In 20:7, "You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. Keep My statutes and practice them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you." And it goes on like that. Down into verse 26 for example, "You are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine." There's more of this in chapter 21. There's more of it in chapter 22, chapter 23, chapter 25, it goes on.

Now what I'm saying to you is this. The foundation of all conduct is built on your understanding of who your God is. If you understand the glory and the holiness of God, that becomes the main motivation for how you live your life.

It was said by Paul, and it's a really profound insight, in Romans chapter 10, it's worth remembering. It was said by the apostle Paul of the Jews of Israel, this amazing statement. Romans 10:3, "Not knowing about God's righteousness they were seeking to establish their own."

You know, this is really amazing, amazing. What was wrong with Israel? Why were they apostate? Why did they reject John the Baptist? Why did they reject Jesus? Why did they reject the apostles? Why did they reject the gospel? Why did they execute their own Messiah? Weren't they religiously astute? Didn't they know the Old Testament? Hadn't they made commitments, particularly the Pharisees and the scribes, to a fastidious study of every single detail of the law of God?

How could they go so wrong? How could they reject their Messiah? How could they reject the gospel? How could they therefore reject the fulfillment of all that they had anticipated, promised to Abraham and to David? How could it happen? And the bottom line is, Romans 10:3, "You didn't know about God's righteousness." Bottom line, they did not understand how righteous God was.

Over and over again in the Old Testament God said, "I'm holy, I'm holy, I'm holy." But they thought He was less holy than He was and they were more holy than they were. God being less than He was, and they being more than they were, they thought their righteousness was enough. It is always a flawed understanding of God that leads to iniquity.

Soft words produce hard hearts. Remember that. Soft words produce hard hearts. You show me a church where soft words are preached, and I will show you a church filled with hard hearts. Jeremiah said that the Word of God is a hammer that shatters. Hard preaching produces soft hearts. And a love of soft words is a love of a hard heart. Particularly do we have to preach the hard, crushing truth about the holiness of God and the righteousness of God, that He is intolerant of sin, that He hates the sin and the sinner, and that He will judge the sinner eternally.

The Jews didn't know how righteous God was, and that was the fatal flaw. If you do not have a lofty enough understanding of God, that is rehearsed, and repeated, and lifted up before you all the time - and I'm not talking about in songs and choruses - I'm talking about a substantial, theological, biblical grasp on God, then you do not have in place the greatest motivation to godly living.

People don't live godly lives because some guy got up and gave a pep talk about the fact that they ought to live godly lives. People don't live godly lives because somebody got up and told them there are lots of negative consequences and you might not be successful if you don't behave this way. People are motivated to live godly lives primarily from their view of God.

I can walk in a church, I can be there five or ten minutes and I'll tell you - I can tell you - usually how profound their understanding of God is by how they worship. You know, the preacher's responsibility, first of all, is to take people down so that they can go up. That's how I view my role. And what do I mean by that? I mean, you have to take people down into the depths of Scripture, down into the deep things of God if you ever expect them to go up in praise.

And if you have a congregation that don't understand the deep things of God, that don't understand the height, and breadth, and length, and depth of the glory of His majesty and His person, then what they call "worship" is just a form of manipulation. And they're primarily motivated by the style and the

lilt of the tune, and not the content of the words.

And when you get people together who understand the deep things of God, and they begin to sing and to praise God, they're lost in wonder, love and praise, not so much over the musical form as over the gripping profundity of the Scripture and theology set to music. Shallow worship is the byproduct of shallow theology. Elevated, glorious, transcendent, captivating, emotional, enriching worship is the byproduct of a deep understanding of truth.

And so, the key in looking at a church is is there evidently there, manifestly there, a lofty view of God? If it's all about success, and it's all about tweaking your life, and feeling better about yourself, and solving your problems, and fixing you, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, that's selling short the priority.

There's a whole Jewish religion confronted by Jesus and Paul that was apostate and on its way to eternal hell. As sophisticated as they were in their religious system, they all perished because they had too low a view of God. We face a frightening battle with a man-centered kind of theology today, selling psychological comfort to people rather than exalting God. It was said of John Calvin that no man ever had a higher view of God. And does that ever come through.

It was Isaiah, you know, who had a vision of God, and it just crushed him to the point where he literally cursed himself. But out of the ashes of that destructive experience of seeing the glory of God came his usefulness. And it was Isaiah who, toward the end of his book in chapter 66, the last chapter, gets this word from the Lord. "Thus says the Lord, 'Heaven is My throne, the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you can build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?' " I'm bigger than anything you could ever build. "For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,' declares the Lord, 'But to this one I will look.' " God says, "I'm not looking for buildings. Here's what I'm looking for. To him who is humble and contrite - " or broken " - in spirit, and who trembles at My word." That's what I'm looking for, the one who trembles at My word.

This is of all things an irreverent age, utterly irreverent. It is the hopelessly informal age, you've noticed. I was reading an article not long ago that said essentially, most people - and I forget the statistics, like 75 percent - most people have never been to any formal event. It's a casual world. And for the most part, there is a cavalier and casual attitude toward serious things. And there is a very obvious dumbing down and loss of refinement in the world.

And so we take this casual, cavalier approach, and we adopt it toward God. There's so much of it in the culture. I've been reading Eric Liddell's biography, pretty fascinating, the great Scottish sprinter, you know, who won the gold medal at the Olympics and wouldn't run on the Lord's Day. His mom dropped him off at a missionary school in London and he was seven years old, his brother was nine, his brother, Rob. Both of them went back to China as missionaries. He as a teacher, and Rob as a medical missionary, later on.

But their parents lived their whole life in China. They brought the two boys home, seven and nine, stuck them in a London boarding school, and the mother went away heartbroken, weeping because she wouldn't see them for eight years. And the biographer says, "Seven-year-old Eric received his class schedule - " are you ready for this? " - English, science, mathematics, French, German and Latin." Seven years old. We are a long way from that kind of mental preparation.

And so, what happens is this dumbing down of a whole culture gets brought into a dumbed-down church environment and there's very little ability to rise above that, apparently, and to think great, and grand, and glorious, and profound, and compelling, and searching things about our God. But that's where everything starts. A low view of God produces a low view of sin, and a low view of everything else in the Scripture.

So when you look for a church, look for a church where the preaching centers on God, on His glory, the wonder of His person, and not on you or others around you; where God is constantly being exalted, where the music is filled not with just a kind of style that's popular and enjoyable, but it's filled with a profound level of content that helps you grasp what music in the Old Testament was intended to do. If you want to know what it was intended to do, read the Psalms, where you feel like you're coming to grips with the greatness of your God.

Nobody can make you a worshiper. You worship God at whatever level your understanding of God allows you. If you have a superficial understanding of God, then that's how you worship, because the substance of your worship is the content of your belief, right? We could sing a hymn like, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come," and there would be some Christian people that say, "That's not a very cool tune." Well, maybe they don't know much about God.

But if you find somebody who knows the Bible from cover to cover, "O God, our help in ages past," and all of a sudden into his mind comes the great redemptive history of God unfolded in the Old Testament, and then our - "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come," and then his mind sweeps from the past to the future and he knows enough to know that in the future, God is going to unfold all His glorious purposes on into eternity.

In other words, you bring into the content of your worship whatever it is you know to be true. And so this is where it has to start. So as you look for a church, you find one where God is taken very seriously, very seriously. And you know your God, and you are confronted with His glory, and His majesty, and His holiness. And when you know He is the Lord your God and He is holy, that compels you, then, to obey His statutes, and His commandments, and His precepts, as we read in Leviticus.

There's a second, and I think equally critical, focus. If you are looking for a church, if you want a church to be what it should be, and if you want to bring to your own church experience what is necessary, not just a high view of God, but a high view of Christ, a high view of Christ. Now I don't know that I need to beg that issue or to say too much about it. It should be pretty apparent to all of us. Look for a church where Jesus Christ is exalted, not where somehow they sort of sneak Him in here and there.

I remember seeing a program at a large seeker-friendly church, and during this program there was - it was strange - there was music and there was even some cursing, and very kind of non-Christian event. And the idea - this was done in the church, people were brought to this thing, and it was - there was really nothing Christian about it. And at the end, a statement was made, and this is a quote, "In some way, shape or form, Jesus has touched all our lives. Good night."

Well, I don't even know what that means. In some way, shape, or form Jesus has touched all our lives? That doesn't mean anything. But I suppose that was some effort to, I don't know, sanctify the

event. One thing you're going to find in the New Testament church is the centrality of Jesus Christ. He is not an addendum. He is not a "P.S." He is not a postscript at the end of the program. He is not sort of stuck in at the end after you have been the focus of the preacher's attention. That's why if I had my choice, I would rather preach the gospels than any other part of the New Testament because - and I think that's why the bulk of the New Testament is the gospels and the gospels are the life of Jesus Christ, the life and work of Christ. And the Old Testament, Jesus said, are those that speak about Me. Jesus Christ is the center of all our worship. There wouldn't be any worship without Him.

And I just - I'm saddened. I listen to TV preachers who talk about all kinds of things, about people's problems, and needs, and I just don't sense the centrality of Christ. If you preach the gospels, it's Christ in every verse. If you preach the book of Acts, it's the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit in the church. If you go to the book of Romans, it's the great treatise on the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ. If you go to the book of Hebrews, it's the glory of the great high priest. If you go to the book of Revelation, you're going to see the glory of the returning and exalted Christ. And He is the theme of Scripture. There must be a high view of Christ.

And I don't mean that in some esoteric sense, or some sense of respect. I mean that in terms of a passion on the part of the worshiper. I love to sing hymns about Christ. I love to sing songs about Christ. I love to preach about Christ. There's no greater subject than Christ to preach on. I find it almost impossible to give myself to speaking about issues that aren't related either to the greatness of God or the person of Christ, or the work, of course, of the Holy Spirit. But I'm saddened by the fact that the glory of Christ has been diminished in churches that are so focused on the people.

Turn in your Bible for a minute to Philippians chapter 3, and I can comment on this briefly. And this is a familiar portion of Scripture, Philippians chapter 3, so familiar, I go back and read it all the time. It's basically falling out of my Bible here. Philippians chapter 3, well, we can pick it up, you know, it's verses 3 through 6, where Paul talks about all of his accomplishments as a religious Jew.

He - verse 4 - talks about his "confidence in the flesh: circumcised, of the nation Israel, tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews; a Pharisee, as regard to the law; persecutor of the church, which defines his zeal; as to the righteousness which is in the Law - " at least outwardly, certainly not inwardly, " - he was blameless." And all of that he had spent all his life accumulating, up until his true conversion.

But I just, I think it's just a powerful thing in verse 7, "Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ." He spends his whole life accumulating all this, all this self-righteousness, all this religiosity. And then he says, "I met Christ, and it was nothing but loss. I had put it in my gain column, you know, like an accountant would do on the profit side. I put it in the gain column, as if it was advantageous to me. And I met Christ and I realized it was all loss, because all efforts at self-righteousness are damning efforts and they don't accumulate anything helpful." So he says it was all loss.

And then in verse 8 he says, "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Now there is a statement that at some point in your Christian life, you have to come to grips with. "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but excrement - " is the Greek word " - in order that I may gain Christ."

Everything in this world is in the King James “dung, manure,” compared to Christ. I mean, that is an incredible statement. I don’t care what it is: Your worldly accomplishments, your achievements, your material possessions, your career, whatever it is you own; all that, and even your own sense of well being, your own confidence, your own self-esteem. Paul says, “All the best about me, all that I spent all my life accumulating, a reputation - ” and he had a noble reputation. He was a funded persecutor, funded by Jewish money to persecute and kill Christians. He was considered a noble defender of Judaism.

And when it came to his religious achievements, nobody could give a more impressive list. And he said, “It’s all manure compared to knowing Christ.” And the question that rises out of that is how important to you is it to know Christ?

He says here, “I count all thing to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” And yet in another place, you remember he said this, “That I may know Him, that I may know Him.” Go down to verse 10, “That I may know Him.”

What are you talking about, Paul? You just said you know Him, now you say you want to know Him. What is he talking about here? He’s saying I know Him, but the knowing is not sufficient. I want to know the power of His resurrection. I want to know the fellowship of His sufferings. I want to be conformed to His death. What do you mean? I want to really know Him. I want to know Him better than I could ever know Him knowing what I now know.

You ought to go to church and say the goal of going to this place is I want to know Christ better than I know Him. I want to know Him far better than I know Him. I want to know everything about Him. I want to know everything about His character, everything about His mind, the mind of Christ. I want to know everything about His attitudes. I want to know every word He said. I want to understand it. I want to grasp it. I want to understand the depth of His compassion, the greatness of His affection, His love.

I want to understand the zeal that He had for the truth, and I want to understand the heart of anger that went out against sinners when He made a whip and cleaned the temple. I want to understand every nuance that the apostle Paul unfolds in the Scriptures concerning the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ. I want to understand that. I want to know the same power that raised Him from the dead. I want to understand that power and know it as He lives in me. I want to know the fellowship of His sufferings.

What does he mean by that? He said, “I want to suffer the way that He suffered. I want to have a partner in my pain. I want to have Him understand that I am suffering for the same truths and the same realities for which He suffered; not atoning for sin, but suffering the hatred of those who resented the truth.” Paul said, “I want to be conformed even to His death.” I want to die the way He died, faithful to God, for the truth. I want to know Him. And I question whether in contemporary evangelicalism there’s very much of this desire in the hearts of people to know Christ like this.

Can you actually look at all the stuff in your life and say, “It’s just manure to me”? What really drives me is to know Christ, to know Christ. As I said a moment ago, I particularly love to preach the gospels. It takes me a long time to go through the gospels, but I have to tell you this, slower is better

than faster, folks, because I don't want to miss anything. And one of the deep regrets of my life an it is a serious regret that I live with, and I don't often talk about it, but it is one of the really deep aches in my heart, and it's been there for many, many years is that I know some things about Christ from my study of Scripture that I don't have the time or the opportunity to tell other people.

And that's one of the - you talk about preparing a message for me, I never prepare - I never study the Bible to make a sermon, I study the Bible to understand it. And having understood it, I can usually think of something to say. But what comes out of that sermon might be a tenth of what I have come to understand. Sometimes it just sort of leaks out in conversations, and occasionally in spaces like this when I share those things. But it's one of the frustrations.

Somebody asked me about the book I wrote, The Battle for the Beginning and somebody was, you know, saying they appreciated the book, and they asked me how I felt about the book. And I said, "I'm not happy about it. I really am very unhappy about that book. It bothers me a lot." And they said, "Why?" I said, "Because when I went through Genesis 1 to 3, the book should have been this big, and it was this big, and there's all that that nobody is going to know." That's very frustrating to me.

So as I said, you're fortunate that I don't even go slower and longer. Somebody said my preaching is like my golf, long and to the right, and always near a hazard. But I'm not running out of material. I'm running out of time, I'm running out of time. I'll be dead before I can get to it all. And I will have - and this is interesting for a preacher - I will have so many things that I will die knowing but never having told you.

Well, let me give you a third thing to think about when you're thinking about a church and where its focus should be. And by the way, a church that is consumed with the glory of God and the majesty of Christ is really going to be a wholesome, healthy, holy place. But there's another thing that is obvious. I mean, I hardly need to say it and I'll just say it in passing. You need to be in a place where the Scripture is exalted, where the Scripture is exalted. Not where somebody's ideas are punctuated with Bible verses.

Psalm 138:2 says, "God has exalted His Word above His name." Jesus said, "We live by every word that comes out of the mouth of God," quoting from Deuteronomy. You need to be in a place where the Word of God is proclaimed and explained. I've been saying the meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture and nothing is as powerful. When you understand the meaning of Scripture, you have just tapped into the most powerful truth in the universe.

It doesn't make any sense to be in any place where the Word of God is not proclaimed. You know, 1 Timothy, over and over again, Timothy is instructed about the Word and about how important it is to be faithful to the Word, and in chapter 3 there's a reason sort of summing it up. He says, verse 15, "The church of the living God, which is the pillar and support of the truth."

We live in a whole universe of lies. Satan is the father of lies. He fathered them in the garden, as we all know. The world is full of lies. There has to be someplace where you can go and hear the truth. Not man's ideas, not man's impressions, not man's insights, but the truth, the truth, the truth.

It was some years ago when the publisher of the L.A. Times and five or six other national newspapers, and the owner of a dozen network affiliate television stations took me to lunch and

asked me a question. He said, “You know, I’ve come to listen to you a few times, and I just want to ask you a question. You have this audience. You have this influence. Why don’t you ever give your opinion on things?”

We were sitting at lunch and I said, “You really want another opinion? You don’t have enough? You know, can you really benefit by another opinion? You’ve got a whole opinion section in your paper every day, you want more?”

“Well,” he said, “Come to think of it, it’s a good point.”

I said, “However, I would be very happy to write a column for you that’s not my opinion.”

“Well whose opinion would it be?”

“It wouldn’t be anybody’s opinion, it would be the truth of God. I would be happy to do that.” Never heard back about that. I’m not about opinions. It’s all about giving voice to God.

I was sitting in one of those - they used to have, what they called “serendipity sessions.” It was group therapy. I'm not real big into group therapy. People were sitting around saying all kinds of things they shouldn’t say. And so they said, “You know, we want you to get in touch with your deepest inner self.” And so they passed out little paper cups to everybody and they said, “Do to that cup what will be a representation of how you view yourself.”

So I have this little cup in my hand and I’m sitting next to a guy, he’s a pretty complex guy, and he’s making an origami thing, you know, like the Japanese deal out of it, like the bird they make out of paper. He’s - I’m sitting there thinking, “What am I doing to do with this cup?” And they give us like 45 minutes. So I just sat there and watched all these guys with the nuances, you know, trying to reflect all the complexity of their personality. Finally it struck me. I just punched the bottom out. I was done.

And then they came around and they decided to ask certain people to explain themselves with their cups. This was kind of an epiphany for me at the moment, and they picked me. And so I said, “Well, it’s pretty simple. I just see myself as a channel through which the truth of God can flow.”

Oh brother, how boring. How one-dimensional. And that’s how I see myself. Every opportunity for me, whether it’s at the college, or the seminary, or Grace To You, or Grace Church is the same. It’s about the truth, it’s about the truth, and it’s about divine truth. And divine truth is what energizes me. Divine truth is what’s been deposited to me. It’s a treasure that I have to guard, and it’s a message I have to proclaim, and I’m accountable to God for doing it.

But it’s not something I do reluctantly. It’s something I do passionately. And when you choose a church, you find a church where the people who are shepherding, the people who are preaching and teaching have this passion to proclaim divine truth accurately, faithfully. Anything else is a misrepresentation of their responsibility.

I remember reading about a Puritan who - this is an American Puritan back on the east coast in the 1800s – who took a church and told the people he was going to preach through the Bible. And the

leaders of the church were so mad, they locked the pews. Have you ever been in an old church in New England where they had a swinging door and a lock and people bought their section like box seats at the Dodger Stadium? And the rich people bought the boxes up front, and the poor people got the little ones in the back, and a guy stood above with a little long fishing rod with a ball on the end to whack kids in the head who talked. That's how it was.

Well, these guys were so mad that this preacher was going to preach through the Scriptures that they locked the pews so that the people who wanted to hear him had to stand around the perimeter. So he preached to people standing around the perimeter through the Scriptures for nine years before they unlocked the pews. That's commitment, that's commitment. He knew what he was supposed to do and he did it.

Now I admit you could get carried away. There was another Puritan who came to a church in New England and said he was going to preach through Isaiah. He preached there over 25 years and died in chapter 8. That's too slow. Well, you understand.

When you find a place that teaches the Word, you'll find a place where doctrine is clear. You'll find a place where holiness is pursued. You'll find a place of spiritual authority, all very, very essential in your spiritual development and to the glory of God.

Father, we thank You for our time and reminding us of what is Your desire for Your church. We want to exalt You, and Your Son, and Your Word. And we need to do a little inventory in our lives to find out if that's really important to us.

I pray for the students for whom church is a real burden, who go because they have to go, who sit there with indifference and apathy. They didn't fight the battle to discover the truth, and to refine it, and they didn't then live the wonderful passions of protecting it, and proclaiming it, they just showed up. And there's a general apathy for that truth.

I pray, O God, that You would grant them by Your Holy Spirit grace to pursue the knowledge of the holy, to pursue the knowledge of Christ, and to pursue the knowledge of the truth. And in that increasing and deeper knowledge of You, and Your Son, and Your Word will come the glorious new love for Your church as the place where the deepest longing of our soul is met.

We want to know You, O God, and Christ, and the Word, for in that knowledge comes our soul satisfaction, comes our power, comes our joy. Put us in places like that all through our lives, and even use us as leaders to assure that the church is what it should be. We thank You in our Savior's name. Amen.

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