

Well, this evening we come to our last lesson in our series on the church. It has been a joy for me to reflect upon these great truths from God's word over the last few months. In our last lesson together, it might be wise to look back over the truths discovered and put them into a little different framework... to come to these same truths and now see them as a measure of a church. What does a healthy, mature church look like? What characteristics does it possess and what values does it hold? We would be hard pressed to address them in order of importance... as they are all pretty important... so we will just take them in the order in which we explored them.

The first thing that we looked at many weeks ago was the majesty of the church. And we found that our majesty... our value... was found in our identity in Christ. So this is the first thing we will look at as a measure of how well a church functions... it's spiritual "health" if you will. A believer must have a strong understanding of their identity in Christ as it is foundational to so many aspects of our walk. Paul takes the first three chapters in his letter to the Ephesians to remind and teach them of their resources in Christ and what He has given. Only then, does he go on to exhort them to walk in a manner worthy of their calling and identity. He also reminds them that they were chosen by Jesus into a personal and deep relationship with Him and with the Father. We cannot appreciate who we are until we appreciate whose we are. We belong to God, and are secure in his continued faithfulness. He reminds us of the sufficiency of who He is and what He gives... that we have been blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places". A healthy congregation has a good understanding of its place in God's heart... that they are loved, protected, disciplined, and cherished by the Lord who sacrificed Himself on their behalf.

The second thing we looked at together was Jesus' identity as the master of the church. The healthy church has a high view of God and acknowledges Him as their master... their king. They submit to Him as their head and look constantly to His word for their direction and edification. They acknowledge His ownership of all things... themselves included... and seek to be obedient, respectful, and humble before Him. They come before Him with thankful hearts for His purchase of their redemption through His blood and for His faithful provision and ongoing care for them. The mature church is a church submissive and obedient to its master and His Word.

From here, we went on to look at the metaphors of the church and, here too, we find insight into a healthy church. A healthy church is one who understands that the direction, power, and life of a church must be derived from the indwelling power and life of Christ himself. He is the vine and we are the branches. We can do nothing in our own power but are wholly reliant on Him for our growth and maturity. Programs, while often helpful, are no substitute for yielding to the Spirit and word of God and relying on His indwelling life to grow and sustain His church. When we turn to the metaphor of Jesus as Shepherd, we see this same truth... that we are reliant upon His leading and guidance in determining the timing and direction of our course as a church. The mature church is one who finds its sustenance in the rich fields and pure streams of God's Word and eats and drinks deeply from it.

Another metaphor that gives insight into the operation of a healthy church is that of the church as a body. A healthy church is one who understands and acts upon the reality that we are all interdependent and the health of any member affects all other members. We weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. A healthy church is composed of those who understand, and are committed to act in accordance with, their individual calling and giftedness. They are a church of ministers, not spectators. While we meet to grow into the image of Christ and to glorify our Lord, we also meet to uphold, encourage, and edify our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we come to the mission of the church, we find that the healthy church is a holy church... a church passionate about being like Jesus. It is a church where sin is confessed and turned from. It is a church where there is a strong desire to be cleansed from sin and to mature in faith, hope and love. It is a church that examines itself and seeks to remain apart from worldly desires and clings to the promises and precepts of God... setting its eyes on "things above". And it is a church that seeks to glorify God in its thoughts and actions, fleeing opportunities and avenues of temptation.

We also saw in our study on the mission of the church that we are called to glorify God in all that we do... and then looked at specific ways we are called to demonstrate that glory. We learned that we glorify God through our prayer and praise... a healthy church is a praying and thankful church. We acknowledge that God's ways are above our ways and demonstrate it through the humble prayers of a thankful heart.

We also saw that we bring glory to God by maintaining our unity... in our single minded pursuit of Christ. When we live harmoniously with one another, seeking the things of God together with humility of mind, we bring glory to His name. This, too, is the mark of a healthy church. A healthy church is one filled with people who value the well being of their brothers and sisters over their own. They are quick to overlook a wrong and equally quick to forgive in order to preserve unity and harmony in their relationships.

Another way we glorify God is through our testimony... and a healthy church is one who exhibits the character of Christ in and through its members. It is seen both in their behavior as well as their verbal testimony. The mature church is a giving church, not out of obligation but out of a passion to invest in God's kingdom and work. And a healthy church delights in talking about the things of God and in sharing His gospel and truth. It is a church that not focused on earthly pursuits and treasures, but on heavenly ones.

A final way we found that we bring God glory is through our love for one another. This has already been touched upon in our time together this evening. We can only love wisely and well when we see ourselves, our brothers, and our God correctly... only then can we love as we ought. When we see through God's eyes, we see ourselves and those around us as He sees us... as uniquely created sons and daughters precious in His sight, needful of His presence, and worthy of our love.

Another mark of a healthy church is the quality and character of its leadership. A healthy church has mature, godly leaders with a calling and passion to shepherd and serve the church that they love. They are men who have the maturity and calling to exercise protection and have the ability to refute false teaching. They are men who care deeply for their people and work diligently and humbly to help them mature and become like Christ. They are men of wisdom who have a deep understanding of the mind and heart of God and men who incline their hearts in prayer, seeking His will. And they are men "above reproach" in the eyes of their church and their community, allowing them to lead and serve with clean hearts and in good conscience.

Beloved, I hope and trust that these studies have been of help to you in your understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. And I hope that they will continue to be of benefit as we move forward in our continuing commitment to honor God in our practice and profession. If some of these thoughts have been new or difficult to embrace or understand, I would encourage you to dig deeply and prayerfully into the texts we have studied to determine their meaning and importance. And I would welcome an opportunity to continue in conversation together around these concepts and truths. Thanks for sticking with me as we have opened the Word together. I am going to have to head back to California in the next several weeks to take care of some family matters, so we may have some breaks between future studies or some other folks may step in for a number of weeks. Keep us in your prayers as we navigate the normal ins and outs that life brings.

Let us pray.