



Central
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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

A Tale of Two Churches

Selected Scriptures

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I want to begin this morning with a tale—a story. It's not a true story but it is true to life. It's a tale of two churches. This tale was inspired by a book I've been reading called *A Hole in the Gospel*, by Richard Stearns.

Grace Church has been blessed by God, growing in just ten years from a small group to some 2,000 strong. They have a beautiful new facility with an auditorium that holds 700, a resource center for Sunday school classes, youth programs, library, and offices. The varied ministries of the church have grown quickly to keep up with the needs of the people. There are groups for children, seniors, singles, college students, young professionals, and young parents. They have 12 pastors to lead all the different ministries.

This church has impacted the community as well. It's drawn hundreds of professionals from law, medicine, and many of the booming corporations in the area. Quite a few CEOs populate the Sunday services. They have a huge Christmas Eve service where hundreds of nonbelievers hear the gospel each year.

Grace Church has been blessed financially. While there is the usual struggle each year to hit the budget, the year-end appeals always seem to put them in the black. They even paid off their building debt! And the church always gives 10% of the budget to missions.

Sunday after Sunday the parking lot fills for the two services. Songs are sung; the Scriptures are preached; offerings are collected. When it's all over people hop in their cars, grab something to eat, and rush off to a ball game or shopping center.

The second church is located in Africa. The Church of the Savior is a church of 50 that meets under a large shade tree. Its members live a life of subsistence as they work the land to provide the food they need to survive. They rely on God for every mouthful of food they eat, for every child born to them, and for the rain that waters their crops. There is pain and grief in this church. They've endured two decades of civil war. Every family has suffered some loss at the hands of rebels who have ravaged the land. Fathers have been killed, houses burned, women raped, children kidnapped, possessions stolen. Food is scarce; children often go to bed hungry. Clean water isn't available, and the two-hour treks to the waterhole may quench the thirst, but also sows seeds of disease. Sickness brings terror because there is no doctor to visit. Children often die from simple diarrhea; mothers often die in childbirth; many of the women are HIV positive. A school is

available, but few can attend. Children are needed to fetch water, work the fields, and tend the livestock. Most live on about \$1.00 a day; so even basic necessities are out of reach. No new farming tools, fertilizers, or better seeds are available. There is no vehicle for them to transport heavy crops to the market 20 miles away. Only what can be carried can be taken.

But Sunday after Sunday this small church comes together to worship and to celebrate the good news that God sent His Son to die for their sins and grant them eternal life! They often break into spontaneous singing as they think of the promises of God. The pastor cries out in prayer, "Lord, give us the strength to endure. Help us, Lord; please help us in our need." He preaches sermons of hope, reminding his people they must face hardships together, loving one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. When the service ends, the singing continues as families disperse and walk together back to their homes. Even on Sunday, there is work to be done.

These two different churches, so very far apart in miles and in circumstance, are accurate portrayals of typical churches in different parts of the world. Obviously, we're more like the first church than the second. And it's not just us; it's thousands of churches in North America like us. The second church represents not just a few African churches, but churches spread throughout the southern hemisphere of our world, where the Christian faith is growing far more rapidly than anywhere else.

That doesn't mean we're bad and they're good; it doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong with us. My intention this morning is not to create guilt. But I do want to ask the question, what might God say to us as a church?

God is not impressed with religious activity

One of the things God might say to us is that he isn't impressed with our religious activity. A few years ago World Vision did a survey of pastors, asking them about the priorities of their churches. 79% listed worship as among their highest priorities; 59% listed evangelism; 55% children's ministry; 47% discipleship programs; but only 18% said anything about helping the poor. That's startling when you consider what God said to the chosen people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah:

"Quit your worship charades.

I can't stand your trivial religious games:

Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—

meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more!

Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them!

You've worn me out!

I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion,
while you go right on sinning.

When you put on your next prayer-performance,
I'll be looking the other way.

No matter how long or loud or often you pray,
I'll not be listening.

And do you know why? Because you've been
tearing

people to pieces, and your hands are bloody.

Go home and wash up.

Clean up your act.

Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings
so I don't have to look at them any longer.

Say no to wrong.

Learn to do good.

Work for justice.

Help the down-and-out.

Stand up for the homeless.

Go to bat for the defenseless.

(Is. 1:13-17 *The Message*)

God wants the authenticity of our faith to be seen not in religious activity but how we live our lives, how we treat people; how we respond to the needy. The problem is, as a church we can become so preoccupied with our own programs and people that we fail to see the bigger picture of the church around the world in desperate need.

We have a responsibility

Another thing God would say is we have a responsibility. Jesus said, "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked*" (Lk. 12:48). Every single person here has been given a lot. None of us are worried about whether we'll have something to eat after church today. Most of us worry more about eating too much. None of us are worried about if we'll find clean water to drink or bathe our babies in tomorrow morning. But these are things constantly on the mind of some of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world.

Did you know that today 26,500 children in the world will die of preventable diseases related to poverty? And it will happen again tomorrow and the next day and the next day. That's like a hundred jetliners crashing every single day in our world. What would you do if you woke up tomorrow and read that a hundred jumbo jets filled with people had crashed today? Can you imagine the uproar? But something just as preventable happens every day and few even take notice.

We've been studying Galatians, learning all about our freedom in Christ. Last week in chapter 5 we saw how Paul started talking about what we **do** with this freedom. He said, "*Use your freedom to love one another.*" He even quoted the law, "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Gal. 5:14). The Gospel which sets us free from the law as a way to get right with God actually drives us right back to the law telling us to love our neighbor. Only now we obey not to get right with God but because we **are** right with God and so overflowing with God's love that we can't help but show to others. If it's real, God's grace produces change in our lives; it changes self-consumed people into loving people.

We need to open our eyes to what's right in front of us

A third thing God might say to us is we need to open our eyes to what's right in front of us. One day Jesus told a story, "*Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores*" (Lk. 16:19-21).

The picture painted here is graphic. The rich man lives high on the hog, but right outside his gate is poor Lazarus, plastered with oozing sores and hungering for a few crumbs of bread. I have no doubt the rich man was well aware of Lazarus; he knew him by name; probably walked by him every day on the way to the office. Notice it says that Lazarus was "laid at his gate." You wonder if God placed him there intentionally to see how the rich man would respond.

You know the fate of each man. Lazarus died and he was carried to Abraham's side. The rich man died and went to hell. But do you see what's most important about this? The rich man didn't abuse Lazarus; he didn't beat him or mistreat him; he simply ignored him. He just passed him by, day after day, no doubt avoiding eye contact.

I do the same thing. Every day, sometimes several times, I drive through the intersection of El Camino Real and San Antonio Road. Every day the Lazarus-like beggars are stationed at each turn signal, looking for some help. And every day I drive by and say to myself, "I really should do something to help those people but I don't know what. I could drop a few dollars in their hat but what if they use it for the wrong thing?" So most of the time I do nothing.

I wonder if my sin is any different than the rich man's sin; a sin not of commission but of omission. Thinking back to the Tale of Two Churches, you see the same contrast between Lazarus and the rich man is evident between our wealthy churches and those of the poor. So I wonder if this is a parable for the North American church at a time when outside of our beautiful mega-

church buildings we have people in need; people we walk by or drive by or see on the nightly news.

This may explain why we're not so popular anymore

This may explain why we're not so popular anymore. This would be the final thing God might say to us. For most of the 20th century being a *Christian* was viewed as a good thing in our country. When I became a Christian and told my parents, one of the things they said was "Aren't we all Christians? I mean, we live in America, don't we?" For most of the 20th century, *Christian* was a synonym for good people and Americans are good people so everyone was a *Christian*.

But that's not true any more. According to Barna researchers, in 1996, 85% of those with no religious convictions felt favorable about Christianity's role in society. But just ten years later only 16% of them had a good impression of Christianity. What happened? In the last few decades the word *Christian* has become associated with the culture wars in our country. As Christians we've been preoccupied with the fight against abortion, irresponsible sex, gay marriage, the omission of God from our textbooks and classrooms and the breakdown of the family. So we've gone to war with the popular culture. We've become more involved in politics; elected a few presidents. But with that the name *Christian* has taken a beating. We're viewed more for what we're against than what we're for. We're viewed more hateful than loving. We're viewed more judgmental than tolerant or accepting.

How do we fix that? Jesus said, "*Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven*" (Matt. 5:16). Good works don't save us, but they do point people to the Savior. Someone has said, "Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence and learning." If we were more involved in helping the poorest of the poor and the neediest people of our communities and of our world, the image of Christians as hateful and judgmental and narrow would change.

Conclusion

Let me tell you the tale of another church. This one really exists in South Africa. In 1999, Pastor John Thomas, pastor of Fish Hoek Baptist Church, heard a shocking statistic: 44% of the population of a small shantytown slum community of black migrants, embedded near his tiny seaside town of Fish Hoek, were HIV-positive. This high percentage stunned Thomas, whose mostly white church of 315 members had little awareness of the impact of AIDS in their own backyard. Thomas thought, How can I one day face God realizing I've done nothing about a problem that lies on our doorstep?

He decided to share his heart with his church, and nothing has been the same since. That church is now known around town as "the church that cares." Today the AIDS ministry of the church, known as Living Hope, has a budget of \$1.2 million a year and a full-time staff of 147. By comparison, the church's annual budget is just \$300,000 with a staff of 10. A sister church has been established in the heart of the shantytown to provide a spiritual witness in the community. A 20 bed clinic for treating the gravest cases of AIDS has been built and staffed with health care workers. Alongside the center is the Living Way ministry, where HIV support groups can meet and people can receive training in job skills so they can support themselves after leaving the clinic. Across the street is a retail store that sells some of the crafts and jewelry made by the women from Living Hope. Down the road is a health clinic staffed by Living Hope volunteers and counselors who meet with folks about to be tested for HIV, as well as those getting their test results. They're literally Christ's hands and feet to individuals who are hearing for the first time that they're HIV-positive. They counsel and pray with them, connect them with treatments, and help them begin living with the disease. Pumla, who became a Christian through this ministry and became a lay counselor said, "Living Hope showed me, if you're Christian, you have to practice what you preach. The Word of God has changed my life."

Meanwhile, Fish Hoek Baptist, this one small church near the bottom of the globe, has garnered the attention of the world. John Thomas was invited to the White House to be commended for their work. USAID has granted his ministry its financial support, and the local state government has even asked them—a Christian church—to consider taking over the running of parts of the government health infrastructure! Why? Because this single congregation chose to not walk by "the beggar laid at their gate" but stopped, instead, to minister Christ's love to him.

Someone has said, "A church that lives within its four walls is no church at all." CPC, I want to challenge you to be that kind of church. I want to challenge you to become a church that is known more for what happen outside our walls than inside. I want to challenge each person, each family, to open your eyes and see the needs at your doorstep and become the hands and feet of Jesus.

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