

# Loving the Messy Church

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[ 0 : 00 ] Again, let me say welcome to those of you who are joining us, who are here every week, those of you who are new, I especially want to welcome you. Some of you are in town for the wedding of Claire and Andy, which happened yesterday.

We're very thankful for that. We're celebrating that and still excited about it. And also this morning, we're having a shortened worship service. Some of you may say this is shorter, but yes, it's a shortened worship service, and that's because we have a members meeting immediately following this service.

And so this morning, as we look at God's Word, we're going to be orienting ourselves a little bit in the direction of our members meeting. We're going to be talking about the church. I think it's fair to say, and I think most of you would agree, that if we look at the church right now in the United States, it's a bit of a mess.

It's a bit of a mess. Some might even say that the church is in crisis. Things have become highly politicized, especially over the last several years.

Many churches have divided. They've split into two or three or more pieces over issues like Donald Trump or COVID or masks or vaccines or race or justice.

[ 1 : 15 ] And then because of the pandemic, many churches have been forced to close their doors permanently as we continue to grapple with fears over meeting and gathering together in person.

Many denominations are reporting declining numbers in attendance and membership. And then there are numerous scandals involving prominent church leaders and abuse cover-ups.

And so you sort of look at the landscape of the church in the U.S. and you say, yeah, things are kind of a mess right now. And for those of us who are Christians, we look at this and we say, well, how do we respond to all of this faithfully?

What does this mean for us? What hope do we have for the future of the church? That's a question that's on my mind a lot as I read the news and I look around at our society.

And then for those who are here who are not Christians, those who are looking on, I think it's a very legitimate question to ask, why should I consider the claims of Christ if His church is such a wreck?

[ 2 : 18 ] Is there anything there worth my time and attention? And because we're asking these questions, we've been in a series looking at 2 Corinthians. And I love what Jeff said earlier in this series, Pastor Jeff said, that when you read 2 Corinthians, it's kind of like taking a peek into a pastor's inbox, which I wouldn't recommend as a normal practice.

But this is a sort of glimpse into a very intimate and very complicated relationship that exists between the Corinthians and their founding pastor, the Apostle Paul. So we've been looking at this series in 2 Corinthians.

The church in Corinth was also a total mess. Even though this church existed 2,000 years ago, guess what? People are people. And so a lot of the issues that existed in Corinth actually continue to plague the church today.

So this morning, we're near the end. We're looking at chapter 12, verses 11 to 21. This is essentially Paul's final attempt to defend the legitimacy of his ministry and to try to win these people back.

This is his last attempt to try to win these people back, to kind of break through to the people who once loved him but who have since rejected him. So we're going to look at this and we're going to see three things.

[ 3 : 32 ] We're going to see first the state of the church in Corinth, and then we're going to look at the parallels that exist with the church today, including our church. And then finally, we're going to look at Paul's response and what we might be able to learn from it.

So let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word. And we thank You that every week as we gather, we can come with all kinds of distractions, priorities, agendas, fears, uncertainties, doubts, and that somehow through Your Spirit, you're able to take these written words and elevate them, empower them, enliven them.

They become flesh and bone and sinew. And somehow, Lord, every week you're able to use this written Word to enable us to come face to face with the living Word, Jesus Christ.

And that's what we really need, whether we know it or not. We need Him. We need to see Him and know Him and hear Him. We pray this in Your holy name.

Amen. So first of all, the state of the church in Corinth. As I said a moment ago, Paul had started the church in Corinth a few years earlier. They had shown great promise.

[ 4 : 40 ] They started out on the right foot. But then after Paul left, other teachers came in. And Paul sardonically refers to these other teachers as super apostles, hoopermen, as the Greek would say, super apostles.

And in verse 11, Paul references the fact that the Corinthians saw Paul as being inferior to the super apostles. You say, why would they think that? Well, there's a few reasons for this.

First of all, these super apostles had a superior style to Paul. They were simply more impressive in every way. They looked successful.

They acted successful. You can imagine them as being tall, good-looking, five o'clock shadow, slight tan, athletic build. They spoke like trained orators.

They boasted about their mystical experiences of God. You can imagine them sitting near the gate of the city, holding court, just talking about their most recent ecstatic experience of being taken up into the third heaven as people gathered round to listen in awe, mouths agape.

[ 5 : 44 ] So first of all, they were stylistically impressive. Paul, by contrast, was poor. He was weak. He was unimpressive as a public speaker. He looked largely unsuccessful because he had suffered so much.

Second reason that they thought Paul was inferior is because these false apostles preached a more appealing message. They had refashioned the gospel into a more palatable, more appealing, more attractive message that really focused on victory and success and overcoming and health and wealth and prosperity.

And so then they heard Paul's gospel about following Christ in suffering and a willingness to be weak so that the power of Christ can be displayed in our lives. And they said, yeah, I would rather go to this other church.

I feel better at the end of those sermons. And so they began to reject Paul's teaching. And then in verse 12, we see that they rejected Paul's apostleship despite the fact that, as he says, the signs of a true apostle were performed among you.

Without most patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works, Paul had been able to cast out demons. He had been able to heal people. Read about some of that in the book of Acts. But the most impressive credential, the most impressive evidence of the legitimacy of Paul's ministry is the Corinthians themselves.

[ 7 : 01 ] Most of them had become Christians through Paul's preaching. And so what Paul's essentially saying here is this, listen, look at your own life. Look at all the ways that your life has changed as a result of coming to faith as you heard the gospel that I brought to you.

You should be commending me. You should be defending me. You should be speaking up when people revile me. And yet you're not. And you can see a note of personal pain here.

He says in verse 11, you should be standing up for me, vouching for me, but instead you've rejected me. I mean, don't ever think that pastoral ministry is not very personal. Right?

Paul is taking this very hard. He feels very personally rejected by them. So, Paul laments, number one, if we kind of, you know, what's he really lamenting here?

Number one, he's lamenting their total lack of discernment. There's a total lack of discernment. In other words, they can't tell the difference between the true gospel and a false rebranded gospel.

[ 8 : 01 ] They can't tell the difference between a true apostle and false apostles. There's a lack of discernment. And then number two, he's lamenting the fact that they clearly prefer style over substance.

They would rather be entertained than hear the truth. And then in verses 13 to 18, the majority of this passage, he addresses another issue that caused tension between him and the Corinthians.

Little context here. Normally, churches would support their pastors financially. That's something that Paul himself had written about in a number of places. So, that was the norm. But when Paul came to Corinth, he insisted on paying his own way.

He said, you don't need to support me. I'll support myself. And in fact, we see in chapter 11, verse 8, that Paul had actually relied on support from other churches to make sure that he didn't have to accept a penny from the Corinthians.

And commentators suggest that the reason that Paul did this is because he knew the Corinthians were fairly spiritually immature. And money can easily become a stumbling block for spiritually immature Christians.

[9:08] Paul says, listen, I don't want money to become an issue here, so I'm not even going to accept any support from them. I just want to go in and I want to minister to them. I want to love them. But let's not let money get in the way of our relationship.

He saw it as a minefield. Unfortunately, Paul underestimated how immature the Corinthians actually were. And so the whole plan backfired, right?

He went in saying, I'm not going to accept any support, and hopefully that'll just mean that we don't even talk about it, and it's one less thing that might become a problem. And in fact, that thing became the problem. In verse 16, Paul says, he's quoting them, I was crafty, you say, and I got the better of you by deceit.

He's quoting their accusations against him. In other words, they're saying, oh, Paul's whole thing about not accepting support, that's clearly a smokescreen to cover up the fact that Paul plans to defraud us.

And they had some crazy allegation going around the church through gossip and rumor that Paul was saying up front, oh, I don't need any support.

[10:09] I'm fine. I'm here to raise money to relieve the poverty in Jerusalem. And they said that Paul's plan was he's going to take all this money, he's going to say it's for the Jerusalem Christians, and then he's going to leave, and then he's going to keep some of it for himself.

So that's what they're accusing him of. They're accusing him of fraud. And commentators say, you say, well, where would they get this idea from? And a lot of commentators will say, well, what they're actually doing is, this is a classic example of projection.

They are accusing Paul of doing the very thing that they themselves had done and would do given half a chance, right? And so they're projecting their own corruption onto Paul.

So on top of their lack of discernment and their preference for style over substance, they have a deep mistrust of authority that stems from their own institutional corruption. So we have this church in Corinth full of people who think very highly of themselves.

They thought of themselves as enlightened, as sophisticated, spiritually mature and advanced, beyond most Christians they knew. And yet the reality is, they're profoundly immature.

[11:24] They're a total mess. And we see some of the underlying reasons here. Number one, they had a total lack of spiritual discernment. Number two, they preferred style over substance. And number three, they were institutionally corrupt.

So that's Corinth. Now let's fast forward a couple of thousand years to the state of the church today. As much as we probably hate to admit it, I think there are many parallels between the first century church in Corinth and the 21st century church in the modern West.

I think you might agree that as we look around, we see evidence of a lack of discernment in the church today. What that means is that many Christians are not regularly thinking biblically and theologically illiterate.

And what I've found is that most people tend to take a shortcut when it comes to thinking about life and the world that we live in.

And by that I mean most people take a shortcut of simply finding people out there who seem thoughtful whom we would like to emulate. We listen to podcasts or blogs or read blogs or follow people on Instagram, Instagram gurus, you know, politicians, Fox, CNN.

[12:53] Whatever it is, we find a trusted content provider or several trusted content providers, and we consume the content. And then we basically adopt those people's views and then parent those ideas to other people in conversation.

Especially in D.C. We sort of live in a sort of a bubble culture here in D.C. where there's a pressure to have thoughtful opinions about lots of things. Right? Because people are always talking about

major issues in a place like D.C.

And who can possibly keep up? And so it's easy to just adopt the opinions of people whom we respect and parent those in conversation to appear thoughtful.

And then we assume that by doing this we're going to be reliably placed on the correct side of the issues. But we've never actually done any real thinking or prayerful reflection about these things. And the problem is when we do that, we are setting ourselves up to be led astray in all kinds of ways. And we're giving other people tremendous power over us when we do that.

[ 13 : 58 ] So just to give an example that might be particularly relevant for our community, take someone like Jordan Peterson or Brene Brown. Right? These are two people that I guarantee a good swath of people in our congregation are familiar with, listen to, maybe even revere on some level.

Now, I've listened to or read a whole lot of Jordan Peterson and a whole lot of Brene Brown. And both have a lot of great things to say. Absolutely. And there's enough sprinkling of Christian ideas in their content that many Christians see them as being fully compatible.

But listen, if you're practicing any level of discernment, you'll immediately recognize that when it comes to anthropology, right, the human condition, when it comes to the Christian faith and the nature of the gospel or the nature of scriptures, the identity of God, these core ideas, both of them are way off base.

They are way off base. But the point I'm trying to make is I'm not saying don't listen to them. Great content. But listen with discernment. Discernment is like a muscle.

And the more you use it, the stronger it gets, the more effective you become in discerning truth from falsehood. But if you're not practicing it, then it atrophies.

[ 15 : 16 ] And you lose your ability to tell the difference. Discernment is extremely important. And I think the lack of discernment is one of the reasons the church is going off the rails.

The second thing we see that I think comes straight out of Corinth that we see in our modern church is a preference for style over substance. A preference for style over substance.

Right? We live in an entertainment culture. And many churches have realized that if we can entertain people, they will come. If you can entertain people, they will show up.

So, instead of gospel truth, which can sometimes be hard to hear, instead of preaching through Scripture, which can sometimes be hard to understand, a lot of churches preach and teach things that they know people are going to want to hear.

Some churches preach feel-good messages that are inspirational, but not necessarily biblical. Some promise health and wealth. Some echo the talking points of whatever political party they happen to favor.

[ 16 : 21 ] Right? I heard about one church in the Midwest that prior to Easter of 2020, they were just kind of a normal church, and then they decided to hold an in-person worship on Easter 2020 in defiance of the local emergency shutdown order.

And at the same time, the pastor decided to start using pulpit time to go off on political rants, and then begin to actually allow other local leaders, political leaders, to come in and use his pulpit to sort of advance their ideas.

And you say, well, gosh, you know, wag your finger at that pastor. Now, the real point of that story is what happened to that church. For about 10 years prior, that church had had a steady attendance of about 100 people.

When the church made that shift, their attendance exploded to over 1,500 people every week.

Right? So the real issue, the real question that begs is, why are all of those people responding to that?

Right? It's because people want to go where they're going to hear what they want to hear. And that's happened on both sides of the political lines. It's happened on both sides of the political lines. And so people have a preference for style over substance.

[ 17 : 30 ] And then the third thing that we see, and this is probably the hardest to talk about for me personally, is the ongoing reality of institutional corruption. Institutional corruption. You know, people tend to assume the worst about the institutional church and about church leaders, and as a church leader, that's pretty hard, I have to say.

You sort of feel like sometimes you're guilty until proven innocent. And that's hard. But there are good reasons why people feel the way they do.

You know, this weekend we're celebrating Juneteenth and the emancipation of slaves, yet the church does continue to wrestle with the legacy of slavery in our society. And simply having that conversation is tearing the church apart.

Because you can't mention it or have it without it becoming political in one way or another.

Moreover, one after another, prominent church leaders, and some of these people are people that I've followed and respected and loved for years, are going down because of scandals.

And many denominations are dealing with issues of abuse and mishandling of abuse within their own ranks. Right?

[ 18 : 42 ] So we have this ongoing reality of institutional corruption that we cannot deny. And so you may be hearing all this, and you may be saying, well, what kind of sermon is this? Why are we talking about this?

I'm so depressed now. And there's a reason why we're talking about this. What I want to encourage us to do is to look back at the church over the last few years in particular and to recognize we need to be able to put things in perspective.

The church right now in our society is a mess. Absolutely. But this kind of crisis is nothing new. The church has struggled with issues like these ever since its inception.

And we see evidence of that in Corinth. And here's the point for us. If we struggle with the same issues that Corinth did, then Paul's response to Corinth continues to be relevant for us today.

So let's look at Paul's response. The last part of this message this morning, we see really the key to understanding Paul's ministry in Corinth comes in verse 19.

[ 19 : 44 ] And I think actually if you've been following along 2 Corinthians, verse 19 sort of helps us pull together all that Paul is attempting to do. He says this in chapter 12, verse 19.

Have you been thinking all along that we've been defending ourselves to you? You know, is Paul an egotist? How dare you reject my apostolic authority?

Don't you know who I am? No, he's not. Is Paul a moralist? Get yourselves together. How dare you? Look at all I've done for you. No, that's not what he says.

He says this isn't about me defending myself. It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ. And all for your upbuilding, beloved.

People who hate him, reject him, mock him, revile him. All for your upbuilding, beloved. And in this one statement, we see the foundation and the aim of Paul's ministry.

[ 20 : 41 ] And I say this as someone who firmly believes that this is what we need today in the church. First, the foundation of Paul's ministry is this. The entire foundation for Paul's ministry comes from this little phrase, in Christ.

In Christ. The thing that makes the church the church, the thing that sets the church apart from other institutions and non-profits in the world is the fact that the church was not only established by Christ, but it is held together in Christ.

The church is a spiritual body of men and women who have been joined to one another and to Christ in an unbreakable bond. The church is a spiritual reality that is eternal in nature.

And so the difference is this. Other religions have a founder who started the movement, they started the group, and then they die, and then others take over. But when Jesus commissioned his first apostles to go and to make disciples of all the nations, giving birth to the Christian movement, he made a promise.

He didn't say, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them all that I've commanded you. Remember everything I taught you, good luck.

[ 22 : 03 ] He said, behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. That's a very different statement. The source of their confidence was never meant to be themselves.

It's the promise that Jesus will be with them always. He will always be with his church. And this is why Jesus says to Peter, and I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

He does not say, Peter, go build my church. He says, I'm going to build my church. I'm going to build my church. And this phrase, the gates of hell, is wonderful.

You know, it refers to the fact that in the ancient world, all of the best and brightest, most highly educated, most gifted, most impressive, most formidable people would hang out around the gate of the city.

So to send the gates of your city against something was to send your best and your brightest. And so what he's saying here is hell can send its best and brightest.

[ 23 : 09 ] Hell can throw everything it has at the church, and guess what? It's never going to succeed. It's never going to win because Jesus will not allow it. So we need to hold on to this hope right now, those of us who feel like the church is a total mess.

As the church is being torn about by politics and scandal, what this shows us is no matter how bad things get, no matter what crises we face in the church today, ultimately we have nothing to fear, and we have nothing to hide.

So when it comes to admitting our weaknesses, when it comes to being honest about and transparent about and confronting our weaknesses, our failures, our institutional corruption, we don't have to cover anything over to protect the image of the church.

We can be honest. Because our righteousness comes from Jesus, so we don't have to maintain the appearance of righteousness. All right, we can be honest and open and transparent about the failures of the church, about the failures of our own denomination, which we're having to do, we're having to acknowledge right now, ways that our own denomination, right, the ACNA, is mishandling allegations of abuse.

This is something that we're having to wrestle with right now, and it's extremely painful for me to talk about it because this involves people that I dearly love and know and have served alongside for over a decade. But as messy as all of this is, it is necessary.

[ 24 : 44 ] Because before we can hope to be part of any kind of revival in this country, the Bible's clear, we have to get our own house in order. There could be no true revival without true repentance.

So this is the foundation of Paul's ministry. We are in Christ. He built the church. He continues to build the church. Church will always be because Christ will always be with her.

The aim of Paul's ministry comes out of this foundation. He says, everything we've done has been for your upbuilding, beloved. True Christian ministry is about building others up in love.

That's why he says in verses 14 and 15, I seek not what is yours but you. I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. What an appropriate image for Father's Day, though it could easily apply to mothers as well.

[ 25 : 52 ] Being a parent, especially if you're a parent of young children, is not about what we get from our kids. Right? Sometimes we get rewarding experiences, but sometimes it can be a very thankless job.

And if you go into parenting expecting all kinds of immediate return and reward, you're kind of setting yourself up for a bit of a disappointment. Right?

It's about spending yourself until you are spent for the sake of building up your children. That's what parenting is. And so Christian ministry is not building your own brand.

It's not about becoming an influencer. Christian ministry is a willingness to spend and be spent for the sake of others. It's ultimately about giving yourself away.

And of course, where did we learn this? Where did Paul learn this? Where did this come from? It came straight from God. Right? God who in Jesus Christ was willing to spend and be spent for us.

[ 26 : 56 ] So for those of us who lament the state of the church, who are tempted to sort of lapse into despair or cynicism, or maybe even give up on it altogether, there is a wide road and there is a narrow road.

There is an easy road and there is a hard road. The wide road is to complain and to criticize all of those other Christians for getting it wrong.

To distance ourselves from all of those Trump supporters or all of those Marxists. And to pretend like they never truly belonged to my church, to my body.

The narrow road, the road that Paul took, the road that Jesus pioneered, is to give ourselves away to loving and to serving and to building up the body of Christ.

And to do that on the foundation of the truth that this is His church and His bride. And no matter what, we are able to say, I will never give up on the church.

[ 28 : 05 ] Because that's exactly what Jesus has said about us. The church is His bride and He has promised Himself to her. And He will be with her to love her and to cleanse her and to restore her.

Until the day when He comes again and we all feast together at that great wedding supper of the Lamb. So until then, be of good courage and trust the Lord.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You that these issues are above all of our pay grade. Lord, there is no human church leader or church body or denomination that can fully handle or address all of the things that need to be addressed in the church.

So, Lord, we gladly hand this over to You. We gladly acknowledge that You are the great shepherd of Your sheep. You are the bridegroom. Lord, You are the one who established us and You are the one who will complete the work that You began in us so long ago.

Lord, we pray that we would have Paul's heart, which is Jesus' heart, to continue to love this church and everyone in it. Lord, that You would guard us and protect us against cynicism or hopelessness or despair.

[ 29 : 28 ] That You would give us courage and humility to continue serving, to continue spending ourselves until we're spent, to see our brothers and sisters built up until You come again.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen.