

The First Church

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- [0 : 0 0] Welcome here for this Sunday, June 2nd, 2024. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy. I know I say that every week, but I mean it with all my heart.
- It is my joy to be the pastor here. One thing I'm going to say, maybe this is crazy, I haven't asked the elders for permission, but let's see how it goes.
- Hey, next Sunday is a church picnic, right? How do you dress for a picnic? Shorts? A little casual? I give that to you. Now, I don't know that I'll do it, because my legs will blind you with these lights on them.
- Highly, and the lights might even burn my skin. I don't know. So, but that is my, I encourage you to, rather than bring a change of clothes or whatever, dress for a picnic.
- Let's enjoy it. Little comments in the background. See, and now I'm fired, so there's that. No, I'm not. There's an elders meeting.
- [0 : 5 9] There's an elders meeting. Rats. Oh. Grace and forgiveness. Grace and forgiveness, gentlemen. So, that's my, I'm extending that offer to you, giving, planting that seed in your minds.
- So, our sermon this morning, we're continuing in Acts to all the world, this series. And through the series, we're exploring, continuing to explore the New Testament book of Acts.
- So, this morning, our sermon is titled, The First Church. And we're picking up immediately after the events that we considered last week. Peter preached that first gospel sermon.
- In Acts, we're going to be talking about the message. People were deeply impacted by the message. And they wanted to take action. Remember, they reacted. They were cut to the heart. They reacted and wanted to take action.
- People believed in Jesus. People repented of their sins. And 3,000 individuals were baptized that day. In Matthew 16, verse 18, we hear the words of Jesus, And I tell you that you are Peter.
- [2 : 1 0] And on this rock, I will build my church. And the gates of Hades will not overcome it. That church, friends, is this church.
- During his ministry, Jesus said he would build his church. And that started with the events of last week. So, we were seeing the beginning, the foundations being laid.
- So, our focus passage for this morning, go ahead and open your Bible or grab a Bible from in front of you. I will read it for you as well. Acts 2, verses 42 to 47.
- That's our passage for this morning. Where we read, They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.
- All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day, they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

[3 : 17] They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2, verses 42 to 47. So, we can recognize there that the first church of Jesus Christ was formed in Jerusalem.

But what was that church like? What were its qualities and characteristics? What were its priorities? So, this morning, we're going to continue, for people who like numbers and to get a sense of how long this is going to go, 10 different qualities.

Gasp! 10 different qualities and priorities that we can see in the early church. So, I hope you had no lunch plans. It won't be that long.

So, let's begin with the concept of devotion. It's a powerful, powerful concept. It suggests passion and commitment.

[4 : 22] Strong belief, dedication, engagement, and something in which or to which a person is all in. A person is committed to.

Something that is the focus of their life is the subject of their devotion. Someone should, we would argue, be devoted to their faith. To serving in God's name.

Devoted to their marriage. Devoted to their children following Jesus. Devoted to their job, their neighbors and friends. We may show our devotion or commitment to a particular cause or interest group.

Maybe you're devoted to bowling, and I will pray for you. We may be devoted to our hobbies, right? Or to other pursuits as well. These are the things that give us joy and reflect our priorities in our lives.

The things to which we are devoted are also likely evident to others. They tend to be where we spend or invest the majority of our time. Where we put our resources, where we focus our time and attention, are the things that reflect the passion and priorities in our lives.

[5 : 36] So I found it interesting that the first definition that Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives for devotion is, hear this, religious fervor.

An act of prayer or private worship. A religious exercise or practice other than the regular corporate worship of a congregation. Look at you, Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Interesting, right? In a largely secular culture, that's still the definition. They recognize devotion as being devoted primarily to the things of God.

Merriam-Webster also then defines devotion as the act of dedicating something to a cause, enterprise, or activity. The act of devoting.

Devotion is the act of devoting to something. The fact or state of being ardently dedicated and loyal. That's devotion. Devotion. So now that we have a fresh definition right in our minds right now of devotion being devoted, we're going to consider the devotion that was clearly evident in the first church.

[6 : 47] Ready for that? So let's look at the ways this devotion was evident. We're going to look at that. We're also going to reflect on whether the same devotion in the same areas is evident in the church, both capital C and small c, today.

And how we can reclaim it, potentially. Does that sound all right? First of ten. We learn the first church was devoted to the apostles' teaching.

They were devoted to doctrine. And that's a very good thing to which to be devoted. In John 13, verse 20, Jesus said, Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me.

And whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me. And then in the Great Commission in Matthew, Jesus instructed the apostles to teach others to obey what he had taught them.

Doctrine. Jesus expected people to listen to, to learn, and then obey his teaching. In John 16, 12 and 13, Jesus said, I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.

[8 : 03] But when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. Jesus gave the apostles, and we've considered this already, the Holy Spirit to guide them in what these other things he wanted them to learn.

In 1 Corinthians 14, verse 37, Paul says, If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.

In 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, we read, And we also thank God continually, because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

The apostles' teaching, then, was intended to be received by people as the word of God himself. They were not saying, we have some nice things we want to share with you.

They were saying, we were taught this by Jesus Christ, and we are teaching you. So do we demonstrate that devotion to the apostles' teaching, to the word of God?

[9 : 21] It's a good question. Many churches today do not. We see lots of evidence of the trends and whims of society taking precedence and priority over God's word.

The gospel is at times softened to be more palatable. Good talks, many of you have heard me say this, good talks are replacing the often uncomfortable and convicting, but deeply hopeful and eternal truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I said, I think it was in one of our chosen discussion sessions a few weeks ago, I said, I can't stand up here and preach anything less than the full gospel. I can't do it.

It's dishonest. It's not caring for you and teaching you in the way God has called me to. And above all, I'll be honest with you, I don't want to have an uncomfortable conversation with Jesus where he says, I gave you this opportunity.

I asked you to teach this and you taught that. Can't do it, folks. But those softened messages are okay, right? It's all right. We're bringing people in.

[10 : 35] We're not making people feel too uncomfortable. It's important to fill the church, isn't it? That's the goal. Is it? We want to attract people.

We want to make them feel not too guilty. That's probably okay, right? That's ultimately, is it? Matthew 15, verses 8 and 9 says, These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules. 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 15 says, So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

We must listen to the words of the apostles on this. They are crystal clear. We must stick to the doctrine and the word of God.

Second, we learn from our passage this morning that the first church was devoted to fellowship. That's not just visiting and having coffee after and having meals together.

[11 : 49] Those things are critical. We're building and deepening relationship and friendships. But really what we're talking about here in this context is spiritual fellowship. Psalm 122, verse 1 says, I rejoice with those who said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord.

Are you rejoicing to be here this morning? 1 John 1, verse 3 says, We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. So we gather together to worship, to learn and to share, to celebrate and support each other on our discipleship journeys.

It's not a solo path, right? We are in this together. Gathering together is important for both our individual and collective spiritual growth and health.

Do we demonstrate that devotion to gathering together in spiritual fellowship? The internet is a great tool. If your spiritual growth, development, engagement with your faith are all online, you're missing this.

[13 : 11] And that is a critical gap in your journey then. Many Christians don't prioritize this, allowing almost anything to derail them from gathering in their faith community.

I've been there. I was a person in the pew not that long ago. Michelle challenged me on it once. I said, Well, maybe there were times that we, and she said, Do you not remember?

She said, One of us had to be ill to not be at church. We prioritized it. It was important. And it still is. But almost anything seems to be quite easy to derail us.

The thought of a hockey game. Maybe you're saving up your energy. But as Matthew 6, verse 33 reminds us, Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

And all these things, everything else will be added to you, given to you as well. Reflecting on the worries and distractions of his friend.

[14 : 16] In Luke 10, verses 41 and 42, Jesus says, I think there was a big sigh at the beginning. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. It's critical for us to get our priorities straight.

And spiritual fellowship is vital. You'll notice as I go on, I'm picking up speed, so don't panic. Third, we learn that the first church was devoted to breaking bread.

The context of this suggests that this refers to the Lord's Supper, to communion. And as we know, as the name suggests, the Lord's Supper was introduced, was instituted by Jesus himself.

And we celebrate it to be reminded that we're united by him under his lordship. So do we demonstrate this devotion to breaking bread, to celebrating and remembering the sacrifice of Jesus through communion?

[15 : 35] Maybe we should do that today. Sadly, sadly, some churches don't seem to be devoted to that. Maybe you have attended a church in the past.

Maybe they observe it monthly, or quarterly, or annually. I've seen that happen, or even not at all.

Maybe it's not a priority. So I feel blessed to be part, and I've been, you know, as I reflect on it right now in this moment, every tradition that I've been a part of growing up and now, it has been a priority.

The Baptist tradition prioritizes it. We value it. We celebrate it together at least every month. Fourth, we learn that the first church was devoted to prayer, and some translations say steadfast prayer, persistent, devoted prayer.

Luke 11, verses 1 to 4 says, one day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.

[16 : 49] He said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name. your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us, and lead us not into temptation. Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

He taught them to be persistent in prayer, and we've talked about that in the past. To not lose heart and keep on praying. I can give you a few examples, well, I won't give you detailed examples, but it's crazy.

Probably four or five different things happened to me or to other people during this past week that were clearly dramatically answered prayers.

So whether I connected with someone and they said, whoa, I was just praying that God would give me some clarity on something, and you phoned, or you texted, or whatever.

[17 : 53] Or I've had someone reach out to me and say, hey, I was just thinking about you and I thought this. And I went, ooh, cool. Answered prayer, but persistence in prayer is what we need to do.

It needs to be a priority for us. So as we've considered, looking at Jesus' ascension a few weeks ago, Jesus now sits at the Father's side, not figuratively, not a neat idea, word picture, but literally, he is there making a way for us, interceding on our behalf with the Father in prayer.

Do we recognize that, and are we devoted to prayer in our lives? Sadly, many churches also wouldn't be recognized for their devotion to prayer.

If you looked at them and looked at their regular activities, their way of speaking, their way of demonstrating the things that are priorities to them, you would not see prayer as one of those priorities.

So if Jesus taught and encouraged his disciples to prioritize and be devoted to prayer, to pray with passion and persistence, that teaching and priority still needs to be reflected in his disciples today.

[19 : 14] and who are his disciples today? We're looking at them. You're looking at one up here, I hope. Fifth, halfway there, we learn that the first church was devoted to brotherly love and caring for each other.

So John 13, verses 34 and 35 says, a new command I give you, love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. It's a characteristic of being Jesus' disciples. So there are many examples of caring for each other in this passage that we're looking at this morning.

But we learn that they shared possessions and resources and no one was ever in need. This demonstration of community and selflessness is so powerful because it models their devotion to caring for each other.

I have been the recipient of a lot of care from people in our church and I've done my best to reciprocate. That's the culture that we should model and it shouldn't be something that we're, well, step one is do this.

[20 : 39] It should flow naturally and I believe in our church it does, big time. Do we demonstrate this devotion to brotherly love and caring for each other? Here I believe we absolutely do.

1 Peter 1.22 says, now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart.

Friends, we're called to love and care for one another deeply, not simply tolerate each other, right? We're all human, we all have rough edges, but we're called to love each other deeply.

1 John 3 verses 16 and 17 says, this is how we know what love is. Here's the model. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?

[21 : 54] Strong words, but true. Would we be willing to act in the ways the early disciples were? Willing to act for our brothers and sisters if it came to that?

We're talking about lives being given up for the safety and the sake of brothers and sisters in Christ. Would we be willing to do that if it came to it?

Sixth, we learn that the first church was devoted to daily service. We don't get the sense that they only served the Lord once a week.

That's not the vibe that we're getting from this passage. Their daily lives were marked by serving God and others. This was the character and devotion that we see.

Maybe it's this daily devotion to God that resulted in, as we heard this morning, people being added to their number daily. Will God bless us if we seek him first and prioritize the things that he loves?

[23 : 03] I believe the answer is yes. Do we demonstrate that devotion to daily service? Do we do that? I believe in our church we do.

I believe I see that modeled all the time. And it's not an effort either. It's a natural wiring. It's a natural sense of hospitality and care for others that is evident in this community.

Are there ways that we serve the Lord or others every day? Well, here's a perspective. Colossians 3 verses 23 and 24 says, you probably know it, whatever you do, whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for human masters.

Since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward, it is the Lord Christ you are serving. You ever worked in a terrible job that you hated, doing work that you hated, but you had no choice because you needed to feed your family?

Do you ever take the opportunity in that zone to say, not my will, but yours be done, Lord. I'm doing this, I'm going to do it with a smile on my face because I'm serving you.

[24 : 28] I'm modeling joy in perhaps a joyless environment. I've tried to have that perspective at times.

Boy, if anybody looks at anyone in the situation and sees me and knows I'm a person of faith, I want them to see joy and adversity. I want them to see devotion to what I claim to believe.

Seventh, we can learn, we can see that the first church was devoted to purposeful or intentional unity. Acts 4 verse 32 says, all the believers were one in heart and mind.

No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own and they shared everything that they had. So they demonstrated unity in their worship, in their commitment to following God's laws and the example of Jesus.

And this is exactly the kind of unity that Jesus himself prayed for in John 17, 20 to 23. Jesus said, my prayer is not for them alone.

[25 : 40] I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. Speaking of the apostles, that all of them may be one, Father, that's you and me, just as you are in me and I am in you.

May they also be in us so that the world may know that you have sent me. I've given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity.

then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you loved me. See the neat dynamic there?

We demonstrate, do we demonstrate, the kind of purposeful and intentional unity that Jesus prayed for? He prayed for us back then. Jesus knew that his church would continue to grow, would continue to flourish, would continue to have challenges, would continue to be grounded in some ways restricted by its humanity, its sinful nature.

So he was praying then for unity now. Do we as a body, do you and I seek to be unified with our brothers and sisters in mind and in purpose?

[27 : 04] Do we seek harmony and unity? Do we work and serve with a joyful and humble attitude like we've recognized this morning? Eighth, we learn that the people of the first church were characterized as having glad and sincere hearts.

Their lives and their attitudes seem to reflect a kind of joyful simplicity. Are you able to have joyful simplicity? Sometimes it's not easy, right?

The idea of simplicity here seems to suggest as one commentator I read said, humility associated with simplicity of life. It's an interesting combination, right?

Humble in our circumstances, humble recognizing what we have, and then a simplicity of life, looking to be grateful for what we have and not striving.

It's a very interesting dynamic. 1 Timothy 6, verses 6 to 10 says, Godliness with contentment is great gain.

[28 : 09] For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap that into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Maybe you've recognized this in your own life at times. I think there's a great deal of anxiety that comes with striving. But then a great deal of peace can come with being satisfied, being content with what we have.

Do we demonstrate this devotion to being satisfied with what we have, resulting in glad and sincere hearts? Paul modeled such an amazing sense of contentment for us in Philippians 4 verses 1 to 12 when he says, I'm not saying this because I'm in need for I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. Oh Lord, give us that.

[29 : 40] Whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. We're able to have such an amazing sense of peace and contentment when we're able to hold loosely to what has been given and to trust that God will provide for our needs.

Ninth, we learn that the people of the first church were devoted to praising God. Should be an obvious devotion quality and focus, right?

Despite their challenges and their difficulties, they still lived their lives with God as their focus and praising Him as their priority. When we keep our eyes and our focus on God and His will for our lives, we should often recognize that our worries and anxieties begin to fade.

In a time of stress or worry or anxiety over unknown circumstances, if you ever stop to say, God, you're good. God, you're still in control.

God, I'm going to stop worrying about this because I know you've got it whether I believe it or not. When we keep our eyes and our focus on God and His will for our lives, we should often recognize that worries begin to fade.

[31 : 04] Do we demonstrate this devotion to praising God? And that's not just singing worship songs. Do we delight in the opportunities that we have to praise Him through other things besides worship?

Singing? Do we praise Him in prayer? Do we thank Him for all He is and all we are as a result of that?

Who we are in His eyes, not in our own? Do we thank Him for all He has done for us? Do we thank Him for Jesus and His sacrifice to pay the price for our sin?

Hebrews 13 verse 15 gives us a powerful reminder. It says, through Jesus therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess His name.

Tenth and finally, are we devoted to pleasing people? Do you hear that for what the world, how the world defines it?

[32 : 20] I'm a people pleaser. I've just exposed the vulnerability to you there. But the words from our passage today are enjoying the favor of all people.

The New Living Translation says, enjoying the goodwill of all people. Does that clarify that for you a little bit? It's not about people pleasing, it's about enjoying the favor of people.

And sadly, I believe that Christians have lost the favor of many people in our world these days. And that's partly due to the shift away from God that we recognize all around us.

But how much of that is also that Christians are no longer seen as people, and maybe haven't been for far too long, seen as people who care for and accept others with grace and love?

have we become the people, I believe the answer is yes, unfortunately, the people who seem to be the most likely to judge or even condemn other people without truly getting to know them?

[33 : 27] Do we demonstrate this devotion to pleasing people in the way we've recognized it here? With Jesus' example and teaching as our guide, we should be the people, this is the longing of my heart, we should be the people to whom the world can turn first for care and compassion.

We should be the people who are seeking to restore the good will that people have for the church and God's people. I think I've told you this story before. I had a friend in university who knew I was a Christian because I didn't hide it, and he and I got to be very, very good friends, and he said to me at one point, he said, I don't believe what you believe, but he said, what you say you believe and how you behave and act are completely integrated.

So he said, I just want to reflect that back to you. And I said, oh, that's God, because I said I stink sometimes as a person.

And he said, well, he said, your belief in God, your faith in God, your trust in God, he said, it's there, dude. So that's the question.

Can we be the people again? Who are the people to whom the world turns? The people to whom the world trusts again?

[34 : 55] Because we serve a living and loving God, not our own self interests. with the first church, God has given us example of what a true church of Christ should be like, should be devoted to.

Devoted to the apostles' teaching and doctrine, spiritual fellowship, breaking bread, steadfast prayer, brotherly love, daily service, purposeful unity, joyful simplicity, praising God and serving others.

Too often, churches today are more like those described in the following poem that is called Facts 1971 and 72 by a writer named Myron Augsburger.

Every individual, each with his own opinions, competing for his own possessions, looking out for his own, assuming there are no needs, and once a week, going to their private church with an annual communion.

Each return to his castle, fellowshiping with family over good native cooking, after a short, silent grace, and glad to be away from everybody.

[36 : 19] Occasionally, there are new faces at church, and last year, someone was saved. My brothers and sisters, may this never be true of us.

Amen.