

Matthew 16:13-18 "A Christ-Centered Community"

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- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Love that song. I just can't stop thinking about what we got to celebrate together this morning. We get to have steps full of kids who love running up to the steps.
- And then we get to talk and pray about people who coming all the way up here to these steps is the furthest thing from their mind. Many of them can't even come and be with us and long and miss being here with us.
- And we're a part of a community together. That's a special thing, y'all. What a great gift that we get to have a community where I can learn from people who are trusting Jesus like a little child because they are.
- And people who are, again, have learned for 80 plus years what it looks like to trust Jesus and are walking with him like a little child at 80 something years old.
- [1 : 04] I'm so thankful for that. It's such a neat part of being a church family together. And that's a lot of what we're going to talk about for these next few weeks as we're starting a new school year.
- We're going to be here to consider what God has called us to be as a church. What are we to be about? How are we different from any other gathering of people? What does God's Word tell us about the kind of community we're to be as His people together?
- We're going to do that through the lens of our core commitments as a church. Five things that we as a church have committed to as we've searched God's Word on what He's called His church to be and to do and how that looks uniquely at Southwood, this particular community.
- While we worship and disciple and fellowship and reach out, how do we do everything we do? What shapes how we are in everything that we're doing?
- Those are core commitments. Fundamental things that we're shaped by, hopefully increasingly characterized by, no matter how big or small we are, no matter what else might change, these things remain the same.
- [2 : 29] I've had the chance to do some study in the past few months on revival. On what happens when God, by His Spirit, works in powerful ways to bring renewal to a community, to a city, even a country.
- And all the way back to the biblical record, as you read through the Scriptures, and then through the last couple thousand years of church history, there are distinct markers of revival.
- Things that happen repeatedly during seasons when God's hand is visibly active and at work. It's been really encouraging as I've studied to see that many of those markers line up remarkably well with our core commitments as a church.
- That churches God has used in bringing revival are marked by these things. And maybe that shouldn't surprise us too much because they came from, indeed, God's Word that He will use and work in these ways.

But it's exciting, isn't it? Because that's what we long for. Don't we long for that? To be a part of revival? I don't mean just a silly, unusual event that happens once upon a time, but to be a part of God transforming a city, a community, a country, of seeing the good news of Jesus change us and others.

[3 : 56] Drove of people coming to know Him. Our lives and many others reoriented around the glory of our Savior instead of being lived for much less.

We've talked about it in recent weeks and months in terms of wanting to storm the gates of hell, right? To storm the gates of hell with and for King Jesus.

Seeing destructive sin patterns and cultures of death and lies of Satan defeated in our hearts and in our community. Revival.

That's what revival is, right? If that's going to happen, history tells us that it likely will be accompanied by the kind of community we're going to be talking about in the next few weeks with these core commitments.

To be clear, I'm not talking about manipulating God to force Him to send revival. But rather to have our hearts turned toward God's heart for His people, which He has often used in bringing revival and transforming people and communities.

[5 : 09] Don't you want to be a part of something like that? This morning, we're going to focus on the first of our core commitments. We've got several weeks to talk about this together.

This first core commitment also happens to be the primary foundational marker of revival. We're committed to being Christ-centered.

There are a lot of passages we could read to talk about a Christ-centered community. But I want us to start in Matthew chapter 16. It's a profound interaction that Jesus has with His disciples as He tells them what's fundamentally important in a church that will storm the gates of hell.

Matthew 16 at verse 13. This is God's holy word. Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

And they said, Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, But who do you say that I am?

[6 : 20] Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

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. This is God's word.

Let's pray and ask for His help. Father, that promise is exciting. You're going to build something and hell and nothing will stand against it.

We want that. We long for that. We don't always feel that. But we pray, Father, that this morning you would show us our Savior, our King, so clearly.

We would love Him more, follow Him more. That you would make us individually and corporately different. We know you can do that. Delight to do that.

[7 : 22] We ask you for it. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The religious and moral state of the country was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it.

Morality was thoroughly trampled underfoot in the streets. Darkness prevailed and could be felt. The country seemed barren of all that is really good. Dueling, adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, Sabbath-breaking, and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all.

They were fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society. And no one was thought the worse for indulging in them. Except for the dueling, perhaps.

You might have thought I was reading about modern America. But these are actually words of famed Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle writing about England in the early 1700s.

What's worse, as he keeps writing, is that that same darkness that you could feel that he describes was not only in the culture but also in the churches of England.

[8 : 34] He says, They existed, but they could hardly be said to have lived. They did nothing. They were sound asleep. Most of the pastors were men of the world, unfit for their position.

They seemed determined to know everything except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. In fact, he says, One observer went to every church in London and said it was impossible for him to discover whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Muhammad, or of Christ.

When they did preach, their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad that it is comforting to reflect they were generally preached to empty benches. That hurts.

The spirit of slumber was over the land. In a religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep. Yikes.

That's rough. But Ryle is actually writing in the 1800s, looking back at a vast change for the better that he says has come over England that no well-informed person would ever attempt to deny.

[9 : 44] It would later come to be known as the evangelical revival in England. How did God bring that revival, that change throughout an entire country that everyone could feel the difference?

Well, Ryle writes, God touched the hearts of common men about the same time in various parts of the country so that they taught one set of truths with fire, reality, and earnestness.

They sought sinners passionately, speaking from the heart to the heart, proclaiming words of faith with faith, and the story of life with life. That set of truths that they taught from the Holy Scripture featured Jesus and His death upon the cross.

He writes, They loved Christ's person. They rejoiced in Christ's promises. They urged men to walk after Christ's example.

But the one subject above all others concerning Christ, which they delighted to dwell on, was the atoning blood which Christ shed for us on the cross. This, in fact, was the cardinal point in almost all their sermons.

[10 : 51] And a nation was transformed. It's the same thing He's writing about that Jesus says here in Matthew 16.

The foundation on which He will build His church, that the gates of hell will not prevail against, is His identity. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

You're the utterly unique God, man, promised Savior, and King. Jesus says in John 15 that He's divine and we are the branches, so we either stay apart from Him and can do nothing, or we abide in Him and bear much fruit.

He's the key. He's the one who makes all the difference. Christ we proclaim. Colossians 1. I resolve to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2. The church must remain focused on the person of Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it this way in his book on Christian community, Life Together.

[12 : 07] Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. That's still true for us.

Community through Jesus and in Jesus. Now maybe you think, wow, that's so profound. I mean, come on, Will. It's a church.

Isn't that part of the definition? Christ-centered? I mean, of course, He's talking about Jesus. Tell me something I don't know. Can't we take that for granted at church? I wish we could.

But think about it in terms of a marriage. Okay? The church is the bride of Christ in this intimate relationship with Him. But that doesn't mean we always remain focused on our bridegroom, does it?

I bet you can imagine a marriage when you lose focus on your spouse. When your time, your priority, your love for them seems to wane.

[13 : 15] Have you seen or experienced a marriage where work begins to take the focus? Where the kids become the only connection that a couple has left? Where a spouse, perhaps in response to hurt or frustration from the other one, begins to care a lot more about his own success or comfort or appearance than that of his spouse?

And the relationship, perhaps even while remaining technically married, becomes much less than it was intended for, right?

And a vital, intimate union. We all can imagine that. That happens with Christians and churches and Jesus, too.

We don't leave Jesus entirely, perhaps. I mean, his name's on the sign and out there on the door, but we can get focused on ourselves, our own comfort, our preferences, perhaps our glowing morality that we're so wonderful.

We can get focused on issues, political platforms, social transformation, even theological hobby horses. We get focused on numbers.

[14 : 32] How's the budget? How many people feel good being here? Did we create the right attractive experience that everybody enjoys? And many of these are good things.

But when they displace Jesus at the center of the relationship, of the marriage, that relationship loses its vitality, doesn't it? The community loses its purpose.

The church loses its way. So it's important for us to ask, what does it mean to remain Christ-centered?

In some ways, we're going to be talking about this for the next few weeks, about what it looks like to be a Christ-centered community. In some ways, we'll continue talking about it forever. But fundamentally, this morning, where we start, three brief things that it looks like for a church to remain focused on the person of Jesus.

Things we never lose sight of, but instead shape our lives around. And the first is His cross. We see this priority here in our passage this morning, where as we keep reading, Jesus, as we've seen Him do in the Gospel of Luke over and over, He sets His face toward Jerusalem to go to the cross, right?

[15 : 52] And He tells His disciples that He must, that He must what? Suffer. That He must die. Peter doesn't like that too much, does he?

Peter, who has just made this great confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, now shows us perhaps the most convincing evidence in addition to the literary argument that the rock on which Jesus will build His church is not Peter Himself, but rather His confession of who Jesus is.

That's the rock on which Jesus is building His church. In verse 22, when Jesus says, I must go to the cross, Peter rebukes Him. He says, far be it from you, Lord, this shall never happen to you.

Don't rebuke Jesus. Good, good practical takeaway, don't rebuke Jesus. Jesus, who has just called Peter the rock and given him that name, turns and says to him in this moment, not rock, get behind me, Satan.

Right, next conversation. You are a hindrance to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. Again, don't dare try to distract Jesus from the cross.

[17 : 13] If you keep reading, in fact, the cross is so vital that any who would follow Jesus must live self-sacrificing, cross-centered lives themselves. If anyone would come after me, Jesus says, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

Whoever would save his life will lose it. This is what it means. This is what it means, Jesus says, to follow me. Being Christ-centered means that we anchor ourselves in the death of Jesus in our place.

Proclaiming the essential nature, the utter sufficiency of his substitutionary atonement that he died for sins in our place.

Because the primary problem that we face personally and corporately is that we are great sinners in need of a great Savior.

Savior. Not merely an example. Not merely a good teacher, but a Savior. We never escape our need of a Savior.

[18 : 15] Never get past Jesus. Our core commitment puts it this way. It's at the bottom of your bulletin if you want to see the whole thing. It says, giving glory to Jesus, proclaiming the good news of his finished work, is the goal of our corporate worship, all of our ministries, and our life in community together.

Since every page of the Bible points to Jesus, every sermon, Sunday school lesson, and conversation should point us back to Jesus so that we live each day in his strength rather than our own, and for his glory rather than our own.

Paul would say, we resolve to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. The foolish message of the cross is the only one we preach.

And I don't mean merely from this pulpit. I mean in friendly conversation with each other and others. What are we pointing people to? I sat down for lunch this week with a friend and we're talking about life.

Talking about a new season of challenge and struggle and his marriage, just normal everyday life, right? And the conversation turned quickly to Jesus. Jesus. And how he has loved us and laid down his life for us in particularly similar difficult situations.

[19 : 38] And that my friend was seeing new ways that he was called to that. And that he was empowered to that by the love of Jesus. To love as he had been loved.

Jesus is always, in every situation, all that we need. Why is that all we talk about? Because it's all we have.

We talk about Jesus because we need Jesus. Actively, still, today, need Jesus. Right? He by his cross not only rescues us from sin and adopts us into his family once upon a time, but he also assures us of his ongoing presence.

He empowers us to love others. There's never a new solution. We never stop needing him. We're not the coolest or most successful people in town who've gotten life together and then gathered together to celebrate it.

We are needy, messy people with a glorious Savior who is rescuing and renovating us. Amen? That's who we are. We speak of sin when it's not popular and grace when it's counter-cultural because sin is the root of our problem and grace is the source of our hope.

[21 : 04] Clinging tightly to the cross of Jesus allows us to be honest about our sin. That we really do. We're broken and the world around us is because of sin.

And we can be honest about that and come because so are you. So is everybody I run into struggling, hurting, in that same world, fighting similar battles, and we can come together and remind each other of hope, not in each other merely, but in our Savior.

The cross of Jesus is essential to being a Christ-centered church. It calls us time and time again to sacrifice our comforts and preferences for the good of others.

It roots our identity firmly in our Savior so we can offer Him to others. It's the message that exploded in the early church in the New Testament. And it's the foolish, glorious message that has brought revival time and again through church history.

We must never lose sight of the cross. But secondly, being Christ-centered means we must also shape our lives around His Word.

[22 : 19] Lots of books say good things. Lots of preachers claim to give wise advice. Only the Bible unfaithfully points to Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

See, it's the story of all of Scripture. So every time you open it, that's the story that you're reading. It's why when we preach for a summer from Old Testament stories, you actually end up hearing over and over all the time about Jesus, His life, death, and resurrection every Sunday in the Old Testament.

Because the Bible tells us this story of a great God who is on a rescue mission to redeem people. People He created for relationship with Himself who ran away from Him.

And the strategy of that rescue mission that you begin reading about on the very first pages is the perfect Son of God and His sacrificial death. The Bible tells that story.

So the resurrected Jesus tells two men in Luke 24, didn't you know from reading the Old Testament that the Christ had to go to the cross? Didn't you know that was going to happen?

[23 : 36] And they said, no, we missed that. And so what Jesus did, Luke 24, 27, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself.

In context, meaning the things that showed how He was the one who was promised to come and how that one had to die for them. Jesus says it's the story that you get everywhere.

All the Bible pointing us to our only hope. Jesus sets our agenda for His church in His Word. We don't pick that. It's why clinging to the authority and supremacy of God's Word marks revival time and again because we see and share Jesus there.

It's not just in sermons you should expect us to open the Word of God. When you show up in a Connect community, when those begin here in a few weeks, it should be no surprise to you that you will find the discussion there centered around the Word of God.

Not merely theoretically just learning information, but stuff that's life-giving, practically transforming and shaping our lives. Your small group isn't a community of pooled ignorance giving you life advice.

[24 : 53] It may have felt that way that one night, but that's not what it is. You can get that at a self-help section of your local bookstore. Your small group is fellow strugglers who empathize with your weakness and who find wisdom and hope together in the Scripture that shows us our Savior.

We look outside of ourselves for our help and our hope. And we do that together. Finally, being Christ-centered means we shape our lives around His body, the church.

I feel this morning like I'm stating a lot of very obvious things. But a Christ-centered community is committed to the church.

If we want to be about storming the gates of hell, raiding Satan's fortress, pushing back the darkness, what one thing in all the world do we need to be a part of?

Jesus says, 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.

[26 : 04] My church, My gathering of those I have called out for My name to be in relationship with Me, I will build that.

Hell will not stand against that. It's fairly simple. I know. Jesus is the head of the church, which is His body. We read that together earlier.

He is the chief cornerstone of the church, so nowhere else does His power reside as it does here. Nowhere else should the focus on Him be as clear as it is here.

The church is a community that is unlike most others. Most other groups gather out of mutual admiration.

They like something about each other, right? So they get together in a group. The church, this group, gathers out of shared admiration.

[27 : 01] We like and love and need and depend on Jesus. That may not always be the way you experience the church, because we are broken people.

But you need to know this. It is absolutely what Jesus is making His church, as His beautiful bride. So hang in there with the church, because the future is glorious.

It's conquering the gates of hell by the power of His Spirit within us and living together with Him forever. That's the future, and He promises it will happen. Pastor Ray Ortlund says, God is building a new kind of community in His church.

One that can't be ignored. It's so different and distinctive. That the power of the good news of the gospel, Jesus Christ and Him crucified, is creating churches that in the words of John Piper, are God-exalting, Christ-admiring, Spirit-filled, Bible-enjoying, grace-preaching, convenience-defying, cross-embracing, risk-taking, selfishness-crucifying, gossip-silencing, prayer-saturated, future-thinking, outward-reaching, and beautifully human congregations where the undeserving can thrive.

I love that. That's the kind of community God promises He's making Southwood. A multi-generational, praise the Lord, multi-ethnic, may it be, multi-class, ever more so community where many very different people have only Jesus in common.

[28 : 53] A place you're valued, not for what you offer, but who you're created to be. A family that eagerly welcomes, especially those who are not welcomed elsewhere.

That's what we're going to unpack in the next few weeks. The unique and remarkable things that begin to characterize a community when it's truly Christ-centered, not just in name only.

But for today, remember, it all starts with that uncommon, dogged commitment to being Christ-centered.

The simple, foolish, glorious message of the cross. After describing that simple message of the cross, Bishop Ryle concludes his account of the revival in England this way.

These were the principal doctrines that they were always proclaiming. The doctrines by which they turned England upside down, made plowmen and colliers weep till their dirty faces were seamed with tears, arrested the attention of peers and philosophers, stormed the strongholds of Satan, plucked thousands like brands from the burning, and altered the character of the age.

[30 : 13] Call them simple and elementary doctrines, if you will. Say, if you please, that you see nothing grand, striking, new, peculiar about this list of truths.

But the fact is undeniable that God blessed these truths to the Reformation of England. What God has blessed, it ill becomes man to despise.

I read that this week. I thought to myself, what if someone, a hundred years from now, wrote about revival here, sparked by Christ-centered lives and life together.

Something like this. These were the principal doctrines they were always proclaiming, the doctrines by which they turned Huntsville upside down, made engineers and soccer moms weep, arrested the attention of rocket scientists and college students, stormed the strongholds of Satan, plucked thousands like brands from the burning, and altered the character of the city.

Oh God, would you, would you make us a Christ-centered community like that? transform us in this place and in these relationships and this particular family and use us, Father, as you do that to transform Huntsville and to keep moving wherever your spirit would go beyond here.

[31 : 52] We confess to you that revival like that seems foreign to us. too big to imagine seems silly even, but we serve a really big God who loves rescuing people, whose heart is fixed on that when ours is distracted by so many other things.

Father, keep us centered on our Savior and show yourself strong and glorious in our lives, in our community. We ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.