

Rediscovering Christian Courage

I want to share some thoughts with you this morning that have been on my heart for some time. I'm not sure what kind of sermon this is, but I felt in my spirit I was to deliver this word to the church.

We are living in extraordinary times. Some have called this a hinge period in history, noting that every five hundred years there is a transformation or a reconfiguration of the church. Roughly five hundred years ago was the Protestant Reformation and a great reconfiguration occurred. We are now undergoing dramatic changes in our churches, especially here in the Western world, and it remains to be seen what the church will look like as we emerge through the changes of the next few years.

One of the trends we have been seeing in recent years is a disillusionment with the church. Books are being written examining why some of the faithful are quitting church or trying to find new ways to do church. There seems to be a growing discontent and books have even been written about those who call themselves Christian and yet they no longer attend a worship service or church of any kind. Since the bible tells us the church is the body of Christ and that we are all connected to each other, and it tells us not to stop gathering together, I find it hard to justify that "lone ranger" approach to the faith. We need each other and all the more as the days grow more difficult and challenging. Nevertheless, change is here to stay.

What is producing the change? What facilitates the changing of the church. 500 years ago abuse and excess and straying from the integrity of the gospel of grace led to the Protestant Reformation. 500 years later I'm hopeful that once again the church and the Holy Spirit are making necessary corrections that move us toward a church of greater integrity and love, a church more concerned with mission and outreach than with its' own well-being. However, I am concerned that some of the changes are being brought about by our own desires for compromise, for a desire to have church without the cross, to have worship without obedience, sacrament without sacrifice. I'm concerned that the changes may be an attempt to find, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as "cheap grace." The blessings of God without the surrender of our heart and soul to Christ. It was Bonhoeffer who said "when Christ calls a man to himself, he bids him come and die." Changes are here and changes are coming, and we have a responsibility to be a faithful

part of the process.

Jesus said he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. The church has undergone untold changes over the past two thousand years and it continues to adapt and reconfigure and change. It remains to be seen what the church of tomorrow will look like if Jesus tarries. But there is something that Jesus said that really concerns me. Look at **Matthew 24**. Concerning the last days of time and the end of the age, Jesus said, "Watch out that no one deceives you..." (Read Matthew 24:4-9). Notice that Jesus has repeated warnings about deception and false prophets and many Christs coming at the end of the age. There are so many gospels being preached, so many truths being thrown about and I have to say, I am becoming less and less tolerant of those that I perceive to be less than the gospel of grace and those that deny the cross.

Jesus said, **"At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."** **Matthew 24:10-13**

I have been thinking about this passage of Scripture for some time now. Is this part of what is occurring in the church? Is some of the change that is occurring in the church due not to our desire to reach the unreached or to find new ways to effectively be the church but rather to our love for Christ and his church and word growing cold? What is it that is causing the love of so many to grow cold? Is it simply the changes that are occurring in our world and in our culture? Jesus said it had to do with the increase of wickedness. How can the fact that there is more sin in the world, more evil present cause my love for Jesus and his kingdom to grow cold? Let's look further at that.

King James translated the passage, "...because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold." A better, more literal translation reads, **"and because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold."** Due to the increase of lawlessness. I think there are a couple of ways of looking at this.

First of all, as wickedness and iniquity increase there is greater pressure exerted on the saints to compromise and to participate. When evil abounds, when iniquity is everywhere, it is presented as the norm and forces anyone who stands apart from it to appear abnormal.

Take for instance the increase in sexual sin. The bible defines sexual immorality as a sexual relationship between two people who are not married - that would include adultery which is sexual unfaithfulness by a husband or wife, and it includes any and all other sexual relationships, including homosexuality. Basically, the bible sets a boundary that only sex in a marriage relationship between a husband and a wife is lawful and holy and right. Anything else is sin.

Paul includes sexual immorality and impurity as acts of the sinful nature and says, **“I warn you that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** **Galatians 5:21.** Revelation includes the sexually immoral among those who are banished to the lake of fire.

That’s what the bible declares. But do you see how almost foreign that feels when I say that? It strikes at your modern sensibility doesn’t it? Living together is a sin? You’ll go to hell for that? Homosexuality is a sin and you’re saying those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God? Really?

Forty years ago we wouldn’t have even noticed but now, because it is so widespread, in every family, in every church, it feels extreme. Harsh, even. Because iniquity abounds, the level of our passion for Christ and for obedience to his word grows cold.

Consider that for centuries Western morality, born of a Judeo-Christian set of values, declared virginity to be just that - a virtue to be honored and desired by all unmarried men and women.

But wickedness and iniquity abounds. Sexual immorality has been on the rise and with the coming of modern contraceptives and the sexual revolution of the 60's, virginity in many circles became something to be mocked. Sex was no longer something to be reserved for marriage but was just another bodily function to be experienced.

That’s the worldview of those without the Scripture. Unfortunately, a whole lot of folks who knew God’s word gave into the sin-pressured atmosphere of the world and decided to do what became the new normal - just live together - or just hook up with each other for casual sex.

As sin abounds, it becomes the new normal and it leaves the Christian’ passion for God, for purity, for holiness, appearing to be so abnormal. You’re some kind of freak if

you haven't had sex by the time you're in high school. Remaining chaste is something they did in the bible, but how could that be for today? Our love for God and our desire for pleasing God begins to grow colder and colder with compromise.

The phrase used in that passage, "will grow cold" is from one Greek word, used only here in the New Testament. It is taken to mean "the reduction of temperature by evaporation". It speaks to us of the process. You see, our love didn't just change over night. Our passion for Christ didn't go from hot to cold in a week. We weren't faithful to Christ and the Scripture one moment and then the next we said, "well, I just don't want to serve God any longer." It was a gradual thing. Our love grew colder and colder, like water evaporating over time. It is a subtle process over time. Little compromises over time move us farther and farther away from where we were when we first met Jesus as Savior and Lord. Suddenly one day we look up and think, "How did I get here? How did I get to this place? How did my heart get this cold?"

As lawlessness increases the love of the many grows cold. Jesus is talking about his concern that a majority will lose their passion and love for God and his kingdom. What happens? How does lawlessness cause us to grow cold. Well, consider this. Law less means just that, without law, without restraint. There is no law, no boundaries, no standard that says "this is wrong, this is sin, this is not acceptable". And because there are no boundaries, there are no laws to restrain, everyone becomes a law unto himself. Right and wrong are relative. What is right for me may not be right for you. What is wrong for me may not be wrong for you.

As a result, the love of many grows colder, it diminishes simply because there is nothing much left to love, nothing for which to be passionate about. It's all the same. I can take Jesus or I can leave him. Jesus, Muhammad, buddha, wiccan, harmonic convergence, yoga, self help- it's all about the same.

They say we are living in a post-modern era and part of post-modernism is that it's all about the story, the narrative. It's not about facts or absolutes because there are no absolutes. It's about story and one person's story is equal to another person's story. One is not superior to the other. One holy book is equal to another, one is not superior over another. With everything to love and serve there is nothing left to love and serve and the love of many grows colder. "It simply doesn't make any difference does it?"

Really? Just try to be a good person. I think that's what it's all about." And the love of many for Jesus, the one who died to save us from our sins, that love grows cold. It just slowly evaporates. The breath within us, the love within us just evaporates into nothingness. It just doesn't matter anymore.

Does it feel that way to you? "This whole Christian faith thing, it's just not as important as everyone tried to make it out to be when I first got saved. I mean, it's a good thing and I've chosen to kind of embrace the principles and the whole idea of Jesus and the faith, but it's really probably not as big a deal as everyone says." Be careful that you aren't deceived Jesus said, because the love of most will evaporate over time. You better check your temperature.

Finally, because lawlessness abounds the love of many will grow cold may speak to the cost involved in standing against wickedness and lawlessness as it increases. We would not be the first generation to decide that the cost is too great to stand up for God and his word. Remember the passage we read in Matthew 24 included this warning, **"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other."** **Matthew 24:9-10** I can see someone's love for Jesus and for his kingdom and his church and for his word growing a little colder when it means persecution and jail time, when it means being hated or being put to death. As that kind of wickedness increases, the cost, the price for serving Jesus may just get to high.

I can think of some scenarios in the not too distant future where some of us could be fired from our jobs or denied benefits or insurance because of our beliefs and our faith. If you had to choose between your faith and keeping your job and you've got a family and four kids and one child has a special illness that requires regular medical treatment and you know if you lose that job you lose insurance and you won't be able to get the needed treatments - what do you do?

Wickedness and lawlessness is increasing and Jesus said the love of the many - the majority will grow cold. The majority will be negatively and adversely affected by the increase of wickedness and the removal of boundaries and restraint. So what do we do?

1. Decide the source of truth. Here is where we start. You have to decide

the source of truth in your life. Is your source of truth going to be fox news or msnbc, tmz, or Oprah, or the collective truth of your friends and peers? Will it be your teachers and professors, your boss and supervisor, will it be whatever the government says or whatever Rush Limbaugh says? Or will your source of truth be God and his word?

You have to decide and somewhat like the message last Sunday, not deciding is deciding by default. Not deciding what your source of truth is allows everything to be a source of truth and that means you are regularly being deceived. Everything cannot be true.

Whatever you decide to be the source of truth, it will inform and affect everything you do, everything you believe, everything you decide. I have decided that the word of God is true. I believe what it says about me and my need for a Savior. I have made this book the source of truth, God's revelation to me and I believe it and will live according to this book. I know this book to be alive and able to change the lives of all who will believe it and receive its truth, for the truth of this book is not just words - it is the word, made flesh and revealed in Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord and giver of life. What's the source of truth? After you decide that, then you need to decide

2. Know what you believe and why Now you have a source of truth, read it and study it and find out how that source of truth defines and informs your life. Find out what that source of truth says and what it demands of you, for truth demands decision and action. It's not enough to say, "I believe the bible." Yeah, well what does it say? What does it teach? "I don't know, but I believe it." The truth will set you free but you have to know what that truth is. And when you know it, it will also require action on your part. Find out what you believe and why.

What about the major issues of our day? Abortion? Euthanasia (assisted suicide)? Same sex marriage? What about the morning after pill? What about issues of social justice? What about the world health crisis? What about poverty? What about health care and immigration? What does Jesus say about those things? Nothing? Are you certain? What did he mean by "when you've done it to the least of these you've done it unto me?" What did he mean in all those old testament scriptures about being careful how we treated the alien in our land because we too had been aliens? Know what you believe and why. Not just what someone told you to believe, but what

does the source of truth for your life have to say? Know what you believe and why.

3. Discern what is really at stake. I think this is the third thing we need to do. We've determined the source of truth, we have an idea of what we believe and why, now add to that an understanding of what is truly at stake. Not everything is as it seems to be. Take same sex marriage for instance. Is it all about civil rights or equal rights for gay and lesbian couples? I'm not convinced that it is. Is it about not discriminating against someone on the basis of their sexual preference? I'm not in favor of discrimination, I don't want to deny anyone access to their loved one in a hospital or a crisis. That's cruel and unChristian. But are there greater values at stake? Is there a higher price to pay for some of these issues?

Is it about civil rights, or is it about redefining the very nature of marriage in our culture?

What about stem cell research and abortion, what about end of life issues and what it says about human life and human dignity and the fact we are created by God and in his image. Is it about rights and discrimination or is it about marginalizing the role of faith in the public square? What is really at stake? Will it finally result in silencing the gospel and any prophetic voice in our public culture?

4. Decide what to do about the truth. I've shared this message today under the title Rediscovering Christian courage. The question is, do we have the courage to stand for God's truth? And how will we stand? Listen to what I'm saying this morning because when we start talking about standing up for truth and for Christ and his word, it is really easy for that to be captured by some pseudo-Christian political agenda. I'm not talking about standing up for the truth so we can "get prayer back in the schools and keep Christ in Christmas and stop Madilyn Murray Ohair from taking religious broadcasting off the air." That maybe fine and good luck with that, but that's not what I'm talking about.

I believe we can stand for the truth without spewing venom at people. I believe I can stand for the traditional definition of marriage between one man and one woman for a lifetime and still be kind and Christ-like to gay and lesbian people. I'm embarrassed to read some of the things so called Christians are writing about the President and Nancy Pelosi and Joe Biden. I don't think you are standing for Jesus and his truth when you spew hate and mock and belittle others.

We must decide what we are going to do about the truth. There are some of these ethical and moral issues that will require us taking a rather unpopular stand at times, but we must remain loyal to the Lord and his word. Before we are citizens of America, we are citizens of heaven and the kingdom of our Lord. We must remain obedient to God and his word.

We have to decide what to do about the truth revealed in God's word. **Ultimately I believe standing for the truth actually means laying down our life for Christ!** It's not about winning a political contest or even winning the so-called culture war, it's about being faithful. It's not about gaining or wielding power, it's about living and dying as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no doubt about the increase in lawlessness, wickedness and sin. It is everywhere and it is having it's effect. The love of many has grown colder. We will have decisions to make in the future. The church of Jesus Christ will have decisions to make to choose to stay on fire for Christ.

But today, each of us as individuals has a decision to make. The love of the many will grow cold, but Jesus says it doesn't have to be for everyone. **"He who stands firm to the end will be saved."** You can stand firm. You don't have to grow colder. You can anchor your life in Christ and in the truth of his word and you can stand strong and passionate to the end.

How is your spiritual temperature? Hot, cold, lukewarm? Is your love for Christ slowly evaporating? Has your commitment to Christ and your obedience to his word diminished or grown colder? Jesus said it was those who stand firm to the end who will be saved. Where do you stand today? And where are you going to be standing when the end comes?