

THE CHURCH

As you know in this series,
you're setting the topics.

I sent you a survey
and asked for your biggest complaints regarding
yourself, your marriage, your job, your life, retirement, your friendships the
culture and the church.

We're not going to look at your complaints about your job.
Because, believe it or not,
most of you are pretty happy with your work.

And we're not going to do retirement
because most of you who are retired are enjoying it.
Your main complaint
is what we talked about a couple of weeks ago:
finding a purpose and a passion to live for.

One of the remaining topics you responded to is:
What is your main complaint regarding the church –
either the church in general or The Woodlands United Methodist Church.

And you had plenty of complaints with both.

Not all of you.
Many of you wrote comments similar to these.

No complaints. The church has been a constant blessing to me and my family.
I love The Woodlands UMC.
I love the involvement the church has in the community and mission work.
I love the pastors and the many venues for different ways to worship.
None. I love this church!
I love TWUMC and our mission statement.

But others of you had some real complaints.
Some of your criticisms are what pastors hear
no matter what church they're at.
I'm not saying these complaints aren't valid;
I'm just saying I've heard these complaints at every church
I have ever served.

Some of you don't like the music.
Some of you believe the church spends too much money on buildings.
Some of you think there's an "in-crowd" –
primarily people who are wealthy and have some kind of social status.
Some of you feel that the church is more about entertainment
than discipleship.
Some of you wish we offered communion more often.

These complaints you hear at churches of all sizes.
But at a church like ours,
you also hear that it can be hard to find a place to plug in
because we're so large.

No church is perfect.
Ours isn't
and I'm glad to hear how people think we can improve.
So, thank you.

I'm going to get to your main complaint in just a minute,
but I want to talk about one that,
again you hear in many churches,
and that I want to spend a little time on.
I hope I don't come across defensively on this one,
but it's possible I will.

The criticism is this:
Why does the church spend so much money on people overseas
when there are needy people right here in the United States?

The first thing I'd say is:

We believe in local missions.

We staff for local missions and
we fund local missions.

I can brag on this because I have little to do with it.

We have three persons on staff dedicated to missions.

One focuses solely on local missions.

Another is our missions pastor John Hull
who works on both local and foreign missions.

We build Habitat for Humanity homes every year.

Our Special Blessings ministry
reaches 300 special needs individuals and their families,
and we pay several persons to work in that ministry.

We do incredible work for foster children,
the orphans of our day,
both financially and with the efforts of scores of our members
through Angel Reach and other ministries.

Over 200 of our folks are involved in prison ministry.

We house the homeless here in our church on a regular basis
and we feed them underneath the bridges on I-45.

We provide care for people suffering with dementia
so their caregivers can get a much needed break.

And there are a host of other things we do,
providing food, legal counsel, and other help to poor people.

Something like \$100,000 a year goes to people we have never met
who walk through our doors and ask for help with rent or a car repair.

Hurricane Harvey –

we gave away almost a million dollars to people in need
and nearly 2000 of our people
worked here at the onsite distribution center we created
or out in the field mucking homes.

Half of the missions money we designated in our last capital funds drive
went to local causes including Compassion United in Conroe and
Angel Reach for foster kids and families.

Second thing I'd say is that we spend so much money overseas because that's where the greatest need is.

In Africa where in many countries there is no social safety net, you can take a group of 60 orphans in a village, and in three years make them economically self-sufficient with a total investment of only \$25,000.

And in the process you can tell them about the God who loves them and wants the best for them.

Here's where I get snarky.

If you want to complain when you meet God that our church spent too much money on AIDS orphans in Africa, that we helped too many 10-year-olds eating two meals a week and trying to keep their two younger siblings alive – when you make that complaint to God, be sure and point to me when you do it, and say, “That one right there, he was one of the leaders of that church.”

Why do we spend as much as we do overseas?

Because we want people who have never heard the Gospel to have the opportunity to hear about Jesus.

And get this,

over 90% of all full-time Christian workers are employed in “Christian countries.”

Less than 10% live and work in countries where the majority have never heard the Gospel sufficiently to accept or reject Christ.

So, we do great work here in Montgomery County, and we are committed to reaching the world with the love and the truth of Jesus Christ.

And I am deeply grateful for and immensely proud of those who make this work happen.

Now, we're going to get to the complaints that most of you had.
And here's something I found intriguing.
Just about every issue someone complained about –
 someone else complained about that same issue
 but for the exact opposite reason.

Some of you said we focus too much on denominational issues
 that are tearing the church apart.
Others complained that we don't keep you informed enough
 about things that are going on in the denomination.

Some said the church is too judgmental.
Others said the church doesn't speak enough about sin,
 that we're just trying to make everybody feel good about themselves.

One of you said,
 "The church bends over for the self-serving selfish Woodlands population
 instead of serving the needy."
The very next comment stated:
 "There is too much emphasis on caring for the broken and not a lot of focus
 on those of us who are not."

Another said, and many felt this way,
 "The blatant disregard of the truth found in the Bible."
But another wrote just the opposite:
 "Modern Western Christianity, TWUMC included, is too exclusive
 and rigid with its current biblical interpretations.
 Embracing diverse perspectives should produce a more authentic church."

A few said that we speak too often against LGBTQ persons,
 which as an aside I'll say I find interesting.
How many times have you heard Dr. Robb talk about that in church?
 Zero?
Mark Sorensen?
 Zero?
Brent Parker?
 Zero.

Me?

Never in church.

And only once in Quest as part of a series titled “You Asked for It,”
and only because one of the questions you wanted me to answer was,
“What should Christians think about homosexuality?”

But that was one complaint:

we talk too much and we are too condemning when it comes to LGBTQ
issues.

But many more of you said,

we don’t talk enough about LGBTQ issues
and other ways that the culture and some church leaders
are embracing practices that go against what the church has always taught.

So the criticism is

We’re too accepting.

And we’re too judgmental.

We’re too focused on wealthy Woodlands types.

And we’re too fixated on the broken and the needy.

We’re too condemning of LGBTQ persons.

And too afraid to speak out on social issues.

It reminds me of a time when I was the pastor of First Methodist Church
in Atlanta, TX.

Their men’s group is doing this study by video this semester.

So shout out to Mike Giesler and the boys.

Go Rabbits!

Back to FUMC, Atlanta.

I was walking out of my office to the 11:00 service

and one person stopped me and said,

“Brother Renfro, it’s too cold in the sanctuary.”

I went no more than ten steps

and someone else told me it was too warm in the sanctuary.

I started the service by saying,
 Before we begin,
 we're going to take a poll.
 How many of you are too warm?
 Half the hands went up.
 How many of you are too cold?
 The other half held up their hands.

I said, "I suggest you all change seats with each other
 because there's no way I can make you all happy at the same time."

That's something pastors learn pretty early:
 you can't make everyone happy.
 You need to listen,
 you need to be open to correction,
 you need to value what lay people tell you.
 But you'll never get everyone to think you're doing things just right.

When it comes to the issues we just mentioned –
 too accepting vs. too condemning;
 too tolerant vs. too judgmental –
 and in one way or another this was your major complaint –
 let me say, "It's hard to get it just right."

If you want to do ministry the way Jesus did ministry,
 it's not easy.

John 1.14: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen
 his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of
 grace and truth.

Jesus came with what?
 Grace and truth.

He came with genuine compassion for people AND
 with real passion for the truth.

Not one instead of the other.
 Not one more than the other.

But both together.
And that's hard to do.

If you think the Gospel is grace only,
and if by grace you mean accepting people and
making them feel good about themselves,
ministry will be easy for you.

No matter what someone does,
tell them how much God loves them,
never confront them with their sins, and
never challenge them to change their thinking or their behavior.

Quick question – anyone here think that describes the ministry of Jesus?
If you do, you might benefit from reading one of the four Gospels
that describe his life and his teaching.

Doesn't matter which one;
you choose.

Read any of the Gospels and
I think you'll find that
Jesus condemned sin,
told people to repent, and
even talked about hell.

But if you think that accepting people is all there is to doing God's work
in the world – ministry is going to be very easy for you.

No matter what anyone does, tell them
what they're doing is fine if it makes them feel good
because God loves them and wants them to be happy.

And the opposite is true.

If you think the Gospel is truth only,
and if by truth you mean telling people
where they're falling short,
how disappointed God is with them, and
why they are deserving of judgment,
ministry is going to be a breeze for you.

Take on an air of moral superiority,
 point out everyone's faults,
 love the rules more than you love people, and
 stand on a street corner with a sign that says, "Turn or burn."

Quick question – anyone here think that describes the ministry of Jesus?
 If so, let me suggest that you read any one of the four Gospels
 and see how much Jesus loved and extended grace and kindness
 to those that others looked down upon and referred to as sinners.

All grace – that's easy.
 All truth – that's easy.

But try to do ministry the way Jesus did ministry –
 combining grace AND truth –
 caring more about righteousness than anyone else
 AND
 caring more about people than anyone else –
 not either-or, but both-and,
 that ain't easy.

And if you're not Jesus,
 you're not going to get it right,
 not all the time,
 maybe not even most of the time.

And even if you do get it right,
 you'll still get criticized.
 Some will think you too accepting;
 others will find you too judgmental.
 Some will condemn you for being too cowardly to speak out against sin
 and others will condemn you for being too mean-spirited to love people
 as they are.

But decide you are going to be a person of grace and truth;
 decide that you're going to be a church that
 accepts and welcomes people as they are
 and at the same time
 speaks out against the things the Bible condemns,
 it will not be easy.

And people will be critical of you.
 Maybe you'll deserve it.
 Maybe you won't.
 But you'll be criticized
 by both sides for different reasons.

Combining grace and truth.
 I've spoken on that topic many times.
 In fact, that's what my first book,
 The Trouble with the Truth,
 was about.

The easiest thing for me to do is to rehash what I wrote there
 and restate what I've told you before.
 But I have decided to come at this a little differently.

The first is this.

1. Who Are You To Judge?

One of you wrote,
 "Judgement is reserved for the Almighty and I find the church to be very
 judgmental."

I think we can all agree that God is the judge,
 not us.

Luke 6.37: Do not judge and you will not be judged.

So we can all agree that we shouldn't judge,
 but we may not all agree on what it means to judge.

That's because word judge both in English and in Greek
 can have several different meanings.

It can mean make a distinction.
 It can mean discern.
 It can mean despise.
 It can mean condemn.

So we need to figure out which of those meanings
Jesus had in mind when he said judge not.

Let's look at the entire verse.

Luke 6.37: Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

That helps, doesn't it?

Jesus helps us understand what he means by not judging
with the addition of the following, parallel phrase:
Do not condemn and you will not be condemned.

Jesus is not saying that we shouldn't say that what someone does is wrong,
but that we can't condemn him or write him off or refuse to forgive.
We should always be prepared to give grace.

In the same passage he says that we are to forgive.
Do I need to forgive you if you haven't done wrong?
Do I need to forgive you if you haven't sinned against me?
No, that's the only time I do need to forgive you.

So, when Jesus tells us to forgive,
he is telling us that there are times when people will have sinned
against us,
and we need to recognize it
and be willing to name it.

Is it judgmental to say,
Racial prejudice is wrong, even sinful?
Is it judgmental to call out a fellow believer who promotes prejudice and racism
and say, "Brother, that's not right, that doesn't honor our Lord Jesus
when you use that kind of language about someone he loved enough to die
for"?

Racism is sinful.
 Who am I to judge?
 I am someone who follows the teachings of Jesus,
 that's who I am.
 I don't have to condemn the person who said something racist,
 but I do condemn the language and the damage it does
 to people made in the image of God.

Greed is wrong.
 Who am I to make that judgment?
 I am someone who believes that what Jesus taught is right,
 and he condemned greed.
 It doesn't make me more loving or more like Jesus
 not to say that greed is wrong.

Adultery is sinful.
 Lying is wrong.
 Using people and loving things is an abomination.
 Ignoring the poor is evil.
 Sex outside of marriage displeases God.

Who am I to say that?
 Someone who has studied what God has revealed in the teachings of Jesus.
 I don't condemn people who have done those things.
 We don't write them off or
 tell them there's no hope for them.
 We love them and try to help them,
 just like we want people to love and help us when we are guilty of sin.
 But what we can't do
 is refuse to say that wrong is wrong and that sin is sin.

Look at

Galatians 6.1-2: Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

What does this passage tell us about being judgmental?

We must not be afraid to see sin when it's there in someone's life.

We must be gentle with that person.

The goal is restoration not condemnation.

We must humble ourselves and admit our own vulnerability to sin.

And we must come along side our brother
and help carry his burden as he struggles to get right.

Bottom line:

It's not judgmental to say, "This practice is contrary to how God wants us to live."

It is judgmental to say, "You're condemned, you're evil and we want nothing to do with you."

I had an interesting visit on a plane with a man who described himself as
Mennonite Amish.

He looked like you might think.

Plain clothes,
suspenders,
beard without a mustache.

Kind of like this guy.

Picture

You may be wondering how he could be on an airplane,
and I could explain it to you because I learned a lot about the differences
between the Amish and the Mennonites and the different gradations of
Mennonite.

Anyway, he found out I was a pastor, and
we had a great theological discussion.

I was impressed.

He seemed very focused on the big doctrines of the Christian faith.

The things that make them different,
the clothes,
the living in close-knit communities,
using less technology,
he said, those things were just options they had adopted,
but not really necessary for being a faithful Christian.

I was tracking with him until he told me this story.
 He said he had hired a man to work on his farm.
 The man had had a hard life
 and had some disabilities.
 But he had accepted Christ and been baptized.

One of the things the man struggled with is that he had been
 sexually abused by his father for a lengthy period when he was young.
 And he and my Mennonite friend started talking,
 and the man said he hadn't forgiven his father.
 The Mennonite man told him he had to forgive
 because Jesus commanded us to forgive.
 The man said he wouldn't forgive his father;
 he didn't want to forgive his father.

At this point, I'm thinking how hard forgiveness would be for this man
 and how I would try to help him get to a place where he could let go
 of his anger and bitterness,
 and be set free from the pain he had suffered
 and was still living with.

But the man I was talking to said,
 "I told him, well, you can't be my brother in Christ then.
 If you don't do what Jesus said,
 it means you're not following him, and
 that means you're not a real believer
 and you're my brother in Christ."

I really liked the Mennonite man I was talking to,
 but this tore me up.
 Yes, unforgiveness is a sin.

But where was the compassion for the other man and all he had suffered?
 Where was the being gentle and trying to restore and carrying the other man's
 burden?

Yes, we need to man up and be willing to call sin sin.
 And when a brother is doing wrong,
 it may be that we are the person God wants to use to correct him.

But, we don't write people off,
 we don't tell them they're not Christians or
 that they're not our brothers.
 We counsel them and pray for them and walk with them.

That's true of nonbelievers and believers.
 We can believe what they are doing is wrong,
 without condemning them and pushing them out of our lives.

2. We Denounce False Teaching and False Teachers, not the People they Mislead.

Remember what we said last week:
 We are for people.
 People who are doing everything right
 and people who are doing everything wrong – we are for them.

Last week I told you we are on a mission field.
 So we shouldn't become angry when people see things and do things
 differently than we are instructed in the Bible.
 We should love them
 and try to create relationships with them
 and help them find their way to Christ and his kingdom.

This week, I'm going to give you another way to see things.
 We are on a battlefield.
 There is a spiritual war going on.
 And the people we encounter who believe what the enemy has told them
 about what's right and how to live and where they will find happiness,
 they are prisoners of war.
 They are captives and they have been brainwashed.

We're not fighting them,
 we're fighting for them.

Ephesians 6.10: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

We're not fighting flesh and blood –
 we're not fighting against people.
 We're fighting a spiritual battle for people
 so they will come out of the darkness
 and escape the schemes of the devil.

So we fight the lies of the enemy.
 We fight the lies that tells people
 that they are worthless and unwanted,
 that there's no hope for them,
 that they will find life by giving into their sensual desires,
 that the values and the way of life taught in the Bible
 are out of date, overly restrictive and judgmental.

We fight false teaching –
 either promoted by the culture or by those within the church
 who are teaching contrary to the truth that is revealed in the Scriptures.
 And there may be times when we have to take on these false teachers directly.

But it's always for a redemptive purpose –
 so the captives can be set free and
 the prodigals can come home to the Father who loves them.

2 Corinthians 10.3-4: For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

When we fight for people,
 our weapons are not the weapons of the world.
 We don't fight with intimidation or lies or false promises.
 We fight with prayer and compassion and truth.

That's how we overcome the strongholds in the lives and in the thinking of people
 who are lost from God and captive to the lies of the world.

So, yes, we must denounce false ideas
 and we must condemn false teaching.
 Again we will be most successful when we do this
 gently.
 Firmly, unashamedly but gently.

And in a culture that says every view is valid if someone holds it –
 no belief is truer than any other
 and you are narrow-minded and judgmental if you act like yours are –
 we'll likely be painted in a bad light
 when we say this is how God revealed we should live.

But we are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 And Lord is spelled with a capital L.
 He is not just my Lord or your Lord or the Christian Lord.
 He is the Lord of all.

So his truth is truth for everyone.
 And everyone needs to hear that truth
 so they can step into the abundant and eternal life he has for them.

So, we must speak the truth
 and we must speak against the lies of our culture and of false teachers.
 But we do so because we are for people
 and we want them to know the God who loves them.

3. We must live the faith we say we believe.

I think it's a valid criticism that the church in the US
 is lukewarm.
 Some of you said that.
 We seem to love our comforts and our middle-class lives
 as much as we love the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And if we are to be the church Christ died for us to be
 and the world needs us to be,
 we must become fully committed to living the faith we claim to believe.

I shared a longer version of this with you some years ago.
 But I think this is a good way to end this lecture.

When Christianity was born,
 the Roman Empire ruled the world.
 It was an empire that worshipped power
 and celebrated violence.

Its people were cynical about religion,
 morality had decayed and
 life was cheap.

People were entertained by men fighting to the death in the arena,
 slavery was common, and
 unwanted babies were discarded by their families
 and no one felt that such a thing was wrong.

The early Christian movement.
 known as The Way,
 began as a small, despised sect.

It had no political power.

It appealed at first primarily to the poor and the uneducated,
 who were scorned by the Romans
 who saw Christianity as a religion for losers.

To make matters worst,
 believers worshipped a crucified Messiah –
 in other words,
 a man who would have been seen by the Romans
 as having been executed as an insurrectionist.

And they were persecuted severely
 for believing in false gods.

You have to wonder, don't you,
 how did that lowly band of losers,
 despised, ridiculed and persecuted –

how did they change the hearts and minds and eventually the culture
 of people who were
 cynical,
 proud,
 promiscuous and
 powerful?

How did those who had nothing
 transform those who had everything?

And they did.

Three centuries after it began as a Jewish sect in faraway Palestine,
the Roman Emperor Constantine announced his own conversion.

And before the year 400,
Christianity had become the official religion of the Empire,
embraced, some estimates state, by nearly half of its inhabitants.

How did this happen?
How did those early Christians change the world?

Simply put,
they lived the way Jesus lived,
they loved the way Jesus loved,
they served the way Jesus served,
and when persecuted,
they died the way Jesus died,
praying for the forgiveness and the salvation of those who had ordered
their deaths.

And over time the Romans
came to see that the way of life of the early Christians was simply – better.
Looking at how those early Christians loved and served,
they saw something that looked like life,
like real life.
And they came to believe that the most outlandish thing was true –
God was in Christ,
reconciling the world to himself,
offering life to all who would repent and believe.

How did the early Christians love and serve?

Babies left by the Romans in the woods and in trash dumps to die
because they were deformed and unwanted –
female babies unwanted and discarded because of their gender
so much so that there were three boys for every two girls in Roman families,
Christians would go into the woods at night
and find those abandoned children
and raise them as their own.

In times of plague,
the Romans commonly abandoned their relatives at the first sign of
illness,
even pushing them into the streets before they died,
in hopes of escaping the disease.

Not so the Christians,
who not only cared for their own
but also took in unbelieving neighbors and strangers,
caring for them,
many themselves as a result contracting the disease and dying.

They provided food and assistance to the poor
regardless of their faith,
and to both sexes,
though Roman welfare was given only to males.

And in the midst of the decadence and the cynicism and the hedonism of Rome,
and the emptiness and the loneliness it leaves within the human heart,
the Christian way,
the way of compassion and purity and service
looked like life,
real life.

And what was once despised
became treasured.
And the foolish One crucified in weakness and shame on a cross,
became adored as Lord of all, God in the flesh.
And a culture was changed.

I think you can argue that it is the most fantastic cultural event
that has occurred in human history.

Where are we as a culture today?
People are looking for life in the same kinds of hedonism
that the Romans worshipped.

People are cynical about religion.
People are clamoring for power
for their cause and for their kind.
Life is cheap if unwanted
and our sports and our entertainment are violent.

Where are we today?
Not that much different from where
the early Christians found themselves.

What does history tell us?
We are in a place of great opportunity.
This is a moment of great possibility for the Gospel
and for bringing life, real life,
to people who are lost.

The lesson to learn is: we're not going to change the culture
through politics or
through gimmicky church services or
even by preaching the truth in our sanctuaries.

We must get into the world.
Not to condemn or to castigate or to correct.
But to love and to serve.

