

Identifying the Target (Part One): The Church's Mission

Read Ephesians 3:20-21 — “to him be glory in the church” — What does that look like?

This morning we are beginning a three week series called,

“Identifying the Target: Understanding the Church’s Mission, Manner, & Message”.

The series we are undertaking is going to be ***topical*** in nature.

That means, rather than considering *one specific passage* of Scripture, will be looking at *several passages* in each sermon.

That is not our normal pattern here at Covenant Grace. We typically preach verse by verse through whole books.

However, on occasion, it can be helpful to take a more ***“systematic”*** approach by considering how the Bible speaks to a particular topic as a whole.

I will approach this series with two assumptions:

1. I am going to assume that you already know the Lord Jesus Christ by genuine saving faith.
2. I am going to assume that you already long to follow Christ faithfully with your life.

Based on these assumptions, I will NOT be trying to *convince* you or *persuade* you to ***want*** to live for Christ.

If you have been born again by the Spirit, that desire already dwells in your heart.

Instead, I will be focusing on the question of *HOW*. That is, I am trying to answer the question:

- ***HOW do we actually faithfully follow Christ in all of life?***
- Or, to put it another way: ***What are we supposed to be aiming at as Christians?***

My overarching goal is to identify the target that Jesus Christ has set for his Church by looking at:

The Church’s Mission, the Church’s Manner, and the Church’s Message over the next three weeks.

That is, we are going to consider *what holy work the Church has been called to be pursue, in what manner she has been called to pursue that work*, and *with what specific tool she is to fulfill that work*.

We are going to address this question *broadly*. There is a lot more to be said about the particulars of the Christian life. But I want to provide an overall picture in order to give us clarity in our calling.

The plain fact is, many Christians don’t really know what they are supposed to be aiming at.

They have a very *vague* and *foggy* concept of what the Christian life is all about, and therefore, they don’t have clarity on how best to order their lives. My hope is to help us look into God’s Word in order to gain that clarity.

TODAY WE ARE GOING TO CONSIDER THE CHURCH'S MISSION.

That is, we are considering the specific work which our King has called us to pursue for his glory.

So let me ask you: What is the Church's Mission? How would you answer that question?

I believe that most people would rightly answer that the Church's mission is:

To proclaim Christ among all nations so that those whom God has chosen for himself will be saved.

Amen! This is certainly and undeniably true.

And yet, I want to challenge this answer.

I want to challenge this answer **NOT because it is a wrong answer**, but because it is an insufficient answer.

It is an answer which is lacking some very important additional details from the Bible.

The mission of the Church is actually best summarized under two headings, not one:

According to the Bible, the mission of the Church is to glorify God through:

1. **The ongoing perfection of the saints.**
(That is we are called to continually pursue sanctification or growth in holiness/Christlikeness)
2. **The ingathering of the elect from all nations.**
(That is we are called to be devoted to evangelism or proclaiming Christ among the nations)

What I want to show you from Holy Scripture this morning is that according to the Bible, the Church's mission is **NOT only EXTERNAL**, it is also **INTERNAL**.

Moreover, I want to help us all understand that without the Church's diligent focus on the INTERNAL MISSION of growing in holiness, in spiritual maturity, in obedience, in worship of God, and in Christlikeness, we will NOT be able to faithfully fulfill our EXTERNAL MISSION of being faithful witnesses for Christ among our neighbors and the nations.

I want to show you how our calling to be holy as God is holy is INSEPARABLE from our calling to be faithful witnesses for Jesus among the lost.

I want to do this by first showing you how the Bible talks about WHY you were saved and to when END you were saved.

Then I want to show you what the Bible tells us about **HOW God uses the ongoing perfection of the saints**—that is our continual growth in holiness—**to actually fulfill our call to evangelism**.

IF SOMEONE ASKED, “WHY DID GOD SAVE YOU? FOR WHAT PURPOSE OR TO WHAT END?”

How would you answer? More importantly: *How does the Bible answer that question?*

Let's look at a few passages to the see:

- **Ephesians 1:3-4** | *God saved us in order “that we should be holy and blameless before him.”*
- **Colossians 1:21-22** | *Why did Jesus die for us? “In order to present us holy and blameless before God.”*
- **I Thessalonians 4:1-3a** | *God's will for his people is there sanctification—their personal holiness.*
- **Titus 2:11-14** | *The gospel trains us to forsake ungodliness and live holy lives as we wait for Christ's return.*

According to God's Word, our chief objective as Christians is to live lives that glorify God.

And a life that glorifies God is **A HOLY LIFE**—that is, a life of *faith-fueled obedience to God's law, of love-driven submission to God's will, and of worshipful-devotion to God's purposes in this world.*

In other words, the chief objective of the Christian is to grow in **Christlikeness**—for all of these things are simply descriptions of the Lord Jesus Christ and the life he lived in our place before his Father in heaven.

So if we are “*identifying the target*” for the Christian life, the Bible makes it clear that...
the perfection of the saints in holiness IS the God-ordained target that we are to aim at.

Christlikeness in the heart, home, and behavior is the BULLSEYE which the arrow of our life is to be directed toward each and every new day.

Hear the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in these verses: **II Cor. 7:1; Eph. 4:1; II Tim. 2:19b (& MORE)**

So what does this call to pursue holiness include?

God's renewing grace is meant to **RENOVATE every part of who we are** in order to make us more and more like the Savior who shed his blood for our redemption.

Speaking very broadly, this comprehensive pursuit of holiness includes:

- **Holiness of Mind** | *We are to continually grow in a right knowledge of God through the renewal of our minds.*
- **Holiness of Heart** | *We are to pursue purity of motive and desire toward God and man from the depths of our hearts.*
- **Holiness of Will** | *We are to learn to love what God loves and hate what God hates; for our wills to reflect God's holy will.*
- **Holiness of Plans** | *We are to order the entirety of our lives around Christ, his glory, and the advance of his kingdom.*
- **Holiness of Behavior** | *We are to pursue a lifestyle that honors God and aligns with the gospel in all its practices.*
- **Holiness of Relationships** | *We are to be in devoted relationships of love and sacrificial service toward our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we have been eternally united in the family of God.*

In other words, ***the perfection of the saints***—that is, our continual growth in holiness as defined by God’s Word—***is the will of God for his people, the Church.***

If we are asking: What is the mission of the Church? Or: To what holy work have we been called?

We have seen from Scripture that comprehensive holiness in heart and life is the TARGET we have been called to aim our lives toward for the glory of God.

NOW, SOMEONE WILL SURELY SAY:

“Wait just a minute. Won’t all this focus on holiness make us too inward focused? Won’t it make us too weird to the world around us? Won’t it make it harder for us to reach the lost with the gospel?”

Have you ever been told this by someone?

An entire generation of Christians have bought into this way of thinking.

And because of it, they abandoned the call to radical gospel-centered holiness, and instead invented the ***“seeker-friendly movement”*** and all other manner and degree of watered-down, shallow, man-centered Christianity.

Let me be clear: It is certainly a danger to become inwardly focused as Christians in a way that isolates us from actively evangelizing the world. We are ***NOT called to hide out*** from the world behind the walls of the Church.

However, it is **A SERIOUS MISTAKE to think that a biblically-defined focus on growing in true gospel-centered holiness is in the way of the church’s call to evangelism.**

That is ***NOT*** how the Bible ever speaks of the Church’s call to diligently pursue holiness to the glory of God.

The Church is absolutely and undeniably called to be ***distinct*** from the world—at times, even offensively distinct.

But while it is true that we are called to be ***separate*** and ***distinct***, we must also remember that ***‘the world’*** remains the very place in which Christ our King has called his Church to shine brightly for his glory.

We ARE called to be holy and live holy lives for the glory of God,

BUT we are called to do this IN THE VERY MIDST OF THE DARKNESS OF THIS WORLD

in order that Christ’s light might shine into that darkness and illumine the way of life for those whom God has chosen for himself.

According to the Bible, the holiness of the Church is *NOT*** in the way of evangelism at all.**

It is one of its primary pillars and chief things which God uses to make our evangelism effective.

I WANT TO PUT A QUESTION BEFORE YOU:

According to the Bible (not human opinion), how does GOD say he will USE the holiness of his people as the very means by which he actually accomplishes the work of evangelism?

- **John 13:34-35 | God Evangelizes the Lost By Our Holy Love For One Another**

According to the Bible, it is by our humble and sacrificial Christlike love for fellow members of the Church that many lost sinners in the world will see Christ's character in us and thereby come to believe.

- But this means that the opposite is true as well. *A **lack of holiness** in the Church will have the **opposite effect**.*
- If the world does **NOT** see relationships among Christians that are essentially any different from the world's own kind of relationships, then they will **NOT** see Christ in us **NOR** recognize that our message is true.
- Dear ones, it is the holiness of God displayed in our distinctly Christian love for one another in the body of Christ that God promises to use to evangelize the world and show them that our message is true!
- **According to the Bible, HOLINESS powerfully preaches Christ to the lost.**

- **John 17:20-21 | God Evangelizes the Lost By Our Holy Unity In the Church**

According to the Bible, when the watching world sees our **unity** with one another in the Church—*that is, our respectful love and support for one another even in the midst of differences, disagreements, and disappointments*—they will believe that Christ is the Savior sent by the Father for the redemption of the world.

- **According to the Bible, HOLINESS powerfully preaches Christ to the lost.**

- **Acts 2:42-27 | God Evangelizes the Lost By Our Holy Devotion To God**

According to the Bible, it was *when the Church was most devoted to God's Word, to the Sacraments, to prayer, to radically generous giving, to forsaking the pleasures of this world, and to fellowship with one another in their homes* that, **"the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."**

- We have all been told that if we take the Bible, the Church, holiness, and heavenly devotion to God *too seriously* we will *lose the world's ear*, we will be *laughed at and thought irrelevant by the world*.
- **But that counsel stands in direct CONTRADICTION to the Word of the living God, beloved.**
- **Let me use Paul's words from II Corinthians 2:15-16 to show you a precious truth.**
 - **Yes, to those who are perishing**—*that is, those who have not been elected to salvation by God's gracious eternal decree*—**we are "the aroma of death";** we **stink** to them.
 - But that is **NOT** because we have done something wrong by striving after holiness. No!
 - Nothing we could possibly do would make us not stink to such people.
 - Why? Because they do not love God or believe his word.
 - **The only way the Church can stop stinking in the eyes of the non-elect is to stop resembling Christ—that is, to be unholy, worldly, fleshly, trivial, and vain.**
 - And this is precisely what so many professing "*Christians*" have done—**thinking they are fulfilling the mission of the Church!** But they are deeply misguided in such thinking.

- **On the other hand, Paul says that to those who are being saved**—that is, *those whom God has elected unto salvation by his sovereign grace*—our holy lives and devotion to the things of God is ***“the aroma of life”***.
- Gospel-centered holiness is like ***the sweet smell of fresh bread from the oven*** to the soul whom God intends to draw to himself.
- ***When they see the holy character of Christ in us, there awakens within them a hunger and thirst to have Christ for themselves.***
- But, *if we **ABANDON** our calling to Christlikeness, if we forsake a life of holy devotion to God, his Word, his sacraments, and to one another in the body of Christ, **THEN** we are no longer the aroma of Christ to anyone.*
- It is **WHEN** God’s people live holy lives in which they love and treasure their Lord, the Bible, the sacraments, prayer, and fellowship with one another that they become ***the most spiritually-attractive community on earth.***
- **Matthew 5:14-16 | God Evangelizes the Lost By Our Holy Deeds**
According to Jesus, it is when the actions of our life are sincerely holy and God-honoring that other people will see the way Christ has transformed our life and, in turn, give glory to God themselves.
- ***According to the Bible, HOLINESS powerfully preaches Christ to the lost.***
- **I Peter 2:11-12 | God Evangelizes the Lost By Our Holy Lifestyle**
According to the Bible, when we live **a holy and Christ-centered lifestyle** in the midst of **public life** that is **distinctly unlike the unholy lifestyles** of this world, others will see that our faith is **NOT** something to be disdained but rather something to be admired and some of them will be drawn to Christ through our holiness.
- ***According to the Bible, HOLINESS powerfully preaches Christ to the lost.***
- **I Corinthians 14:24-25 | God Evangelizes the Lost By Our Holy Worship**
According to the Bible, even our corporate worship gatherings each and every Lord’s Day are inherently evangelistic when they are reverently focused on God and rightly ordered according to his Word.
- Our worship gatherings ***DO NOT BECOME*** evangelistic by making them more like the world or by watering down the message, but rather by striving to sincerely worship God in holy order and heavenly reverence.
- Paul says that if an ***“unbeliever”*** or ***“outsider”*** enters into a church where God is being worshiped in holy reverence and good order, he will be convicted of the truth of our faith, his own heart will be exposed by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and he himself will fall on his face in worship declaring that God really is among us.

Thus, the Bible teaches us that in the fulfillment of the Church’s mission, it is **NOT *world-likeness* or *culture-likeness* that God uses to evangelize the lost, but rather **Christlikeness.****

It is **NOT** a **shallow** and **watered down** gospel that compels sinners to believe.

But rather a **robust, coherent** gospel that **actually makes intellectual sense** and is accompanied by **hearts, minds, and lives that are actually being transformed and renewed by grace.**

ONE OF THE MAIN POINTS I HOPE TO HELP US SEE THIS MORNING IS THIS:

The pursuit of holiness is ***NOT*** a ***negotiable*** or ***peripheral*** aspect of the Christian life or of the Church's Mission.

The pursuit of holiness is ***central*** to the Christian life and ***central*** to the Church's Mission.

WHY?

1. Because according to the Scriptures, our progress in holiness as Christians IS ITS OWN EVANGELISTIC WITNESS TO THE WORLD.

- The holiness of God's true people shows the world that:
 - ***our faith is REAL,***
 - that ***our message is TRUE,***
 - and that ***Christ's ministry actually comes with TRANSFORMING POWER that not only forgives and cleanses us from sin, but actually delivers us from sin's reign.***
- And for all these reasons, holiness is what God uses to give our message **CREDIBILITY** in the eyes of the lost.
- **Secondly**, the pursuit of holiness is ***central*** to the Christian life and ***central*** to the Church's Mission because...

2. According to the Scriptures, our own continual growth in holiness and Christlikeness IS WHAT GOD USES TO PREPARE US TO BE EFFECTIVE WITNESSES FOR CHRIST.

- This is because the pursuit of holiness and Christlikeness is the path to growing in **spiritual maturity.**
- Without personal growth in holiness, we will not have a mature understanding of the truth in order to effectively share the truth with others.
- **We ourselves must each strive to continually grow up in the faith so the we know the Christ we long to proclaim to others.**
- **We must actually know God ourselves—his character, his attributes, his will, his law, his plan—in order to properly make God known to others.**
- **We must know God's Word faithfully in order to faithfully share that Word with others.**

CONCLUSION:

This pattern of continually growing in holiness and Christlikeness in order to be made effective witnesses for the gospel is NOT something men made up out of their own ideas of preferences.

It is the pattern that has been given to us by Jesus Christ himself.

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, this is what we read in Mark 3:14:

“And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach...”

As these disciples were ***“with Jesus,”*** ***they learned FROM Jesus*** and ***became MORE LIKE Jesus***, so that when he sent them out to preach, ***both their LIVES*** and ***their LIPS*** would give the world ***a faithful witness to the truth of the gospel***.

Jesus did NOT give the Great Commission to his disciples at the moment that he called them to be his followers. He said, “I WILL MAKE YOU fishers of men.”

Jesus first called his disciples to personally know him, love him, trust him, and become like him, and THEN he sent them into the world as holy vessels to shine the light of Christ among the lost.

This is the same pattern to which we have been called as the Church.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS MESSAGE I ASKED A QUESTION: WHAT IS THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH?

It is absolutely true that our mission is to reach the elect among all nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is **undoubtedly** **PART** of the mission of the Church.

But what I hope you have seen from God’s Word this morning is that it is ALSO true that we have been called to earnestly pursue holiness/Christlikeness in heart and life to the glory of God.

Moreover, I hope that you have seen that:

it is actually **THROUGH the Church’s continual growth in holiness** by the power and grace of God,

that we will be EQUIPPED to reach the nations with the gospel,

and that **the nations will SEE BY OUR HOLY LIVES**

that the message about Jesus that we proclaim is actually CREDIBLE and actually TRUE.

Next week we will consider THE CHURCH’S MANNER.

That is, we will look into the Scriptures to see with what kind of ATTITUDES and ACTIONS we are called to pursue this holy mission of **the perfection of the saints** and **the ingathering of the elect unto Christ**.