

Lesson 8: Core Values – Be the church in our community

Opening:

My grandfather was the smartest man that I have ever known. He believed that God's word, good exercise for the mind and body, jalapeno peppers, and loving others more than yourself really were the keys to a good life. On one trip to visit with him at his home we had a conversation about church. The church he had gone to for 50 plus years was closing its doors. (Where the church once sat is now part of a parking lot for a local high school. The church had been quite large at one time but had seen its' numbers dwindle in recent years. He was lamenting the fact that it was closing, and I asked him why a once vibrant church was closing its' doors. He gave his answer in very simple words "the community around us changed and we didn't."

Recent research by LifeWay (the Baptist publishing arm of the SBC: January 2018) suggests that between 100-200 churches close their doors every week in America. Ed Stetzer's research (2015) showed that at the same time large numbers of churches are closing, new church starts are growing at a rapid pace. Stetzer notes that the main reason for success in these new church starts has been an outward focus rather than an inward focus by the church. David Platt argues in his book *Radical Together* that we can become too comfortable doing good things in our churches and fail to see that our community has changed. He suggests that to reach our community, we must be willing to examine our communities and exam our methods and see if they match.

If we summarize all this information we can boil it down to a simple question: "Are we busy doing good things, but not busy making disciples among our neighbors and friends?" This is a question that we must ask as individuals and in small groups. If we are not actively engaging our neighbors and friends to make disciples who walk with Christ and make disciples of others, then we are not fulfilling our purpose as a church. Aubrey Malphurs proposes another way to ask the question: "Is our church's impact on our community such that if it suddenly disappeared, it would leave a serious hole in the community?" The lesson this week is on being the local church in the community.

Central Truths:

- Being the church in our community means that we must understand who we are.
- The church must seek to understand and meet the challenges that face the community in which they live.

Core Values: Be the church in our community

The core value that we want to examine this week is: We are called to be the local church in our community. What does it mean to be the local church in the community? In simple terms it means two things: 1) a church must understand itself; 2) a church must understand the context of the community in which it has been placed. If we were to make this more personal, we could say that: 1) a Christian must understand themselves (both who they are in Christ and their gifts); 2) a Christian must understand the needs and challenges facing the community in which they live.

The first part of being a church in our community means that we must understand who we are. In general, many churches have suffered from an identity crisis because they have confused the methodologies with the message. The church as three fundamental components that make it unique from the world.

- 1) The church must base their decisions and actions on biblical truth. We must know what we believe, and it must be based on scripture. (See Ephesians 4:11-14)
- 2) The church must build continual fellowship with one another. The Greek word *koinonia* does not have a direct English translation. The word describes a deep sense of fellowship where people genuinely care for, pray for, encourage, and love one another. (See Acts 2:42-47 for an example of this type of care).
- 3) The church must encourage behaviors that serve the good of others. The church should seek to meet the needs of members and those that we encounter daily. (See James 2:14-18)

This last thought above leads to the second part of being a church in our community. The church must seek to understand and meet the challenges that face the community in which they live. That means we learn to ask questions like:

- 1) “What sort of people do I interact with regularly?” “Do I know anyone who does not know Christ?” If so, “What do they care about or need?” “What avenues do I have to begin to share Christ with them?”
- 2) “Do I live near a school, police or fire station, hospital, or any place where I could volunteer my time?” “Could I walk through my neighborhood praying for God to do a work there?” “Do I pray for God to give me opportunities to share the love of Christ with others?”
- 3) “Who should I be inviting to attend our small group?” “Who is struggling and needs me to visit them for prayer?”
- 4) “How has the community around me changed?” “What are the challenges to meeting the needs of the people in my community right now?” “How could God use me to meet those needs?”

Look at 1 Peter 2:9-11. What does this text tell us being the church in our community?

Examining the Text:

Colossians 4:2-6

²Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. ⁵Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Jesus had a strategy for drawing people closer to God. The way He led others to the kingdom of God was repeated by the disciples (See John 20:21-22), and continued on through the church. Paul articulates to the Colossian church how they are to engage the community in the same way that Jesus did.

Look at VV. 2-3a ²*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.* ³*At the same time, pray also for us,*

The first step to be the church in our community is prayer. Notice that the church is to be a praying people. We are to pray and in our prayers be “watchful.” The word “watchful” indicates both attentiveness and expectation. That is, we ought to pray and be ready to hear from God. The word

“thanksgiving” is to shape our prayers. Gratitude for what God has done keeps our prayers oriented toward seeking God’s direction and vision for us, rather than our own. Paul encourages the church to pray for him and those with him as well.

Look at VV. 3b-4 *that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*

The second step to be the church in our community is communication, which requires us to invest in others (See Romans 12:13 – to “show hospitality” requires developing a relationship). Notice what Paul asks the church to pray for: “that God may open to us a door for the word.” Paul is in prison at the time of this writing and his prayer is not removal from the situation, but instead, “God, where I am today is where you knew I would be. Please open a door for me to communicate with someone about you, and make who you are be made clear to them.”

Look at V. 5 *Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.*

The third step to be the church in our community is to build connections. This verse reminds us that our behavior should be shaped by remembering who is watching. We must ask ourselves how they see us, and what they are watching for. As culture changes, people view the church differently. How do they view our church? How might we build relationships with them? Are we inviting them to attend our small groups and worship services? If they say “no” why might they be saying no? What might lead them to return to the church?

Look at V. 6 *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*

The fourth step that Paul mentions to be the church in our community is ministry. Ministering to others means meeting their needs and answering their questions so that they might come to know Christ, to walk with Him, grow in Him, and make disciples of others. When Paul notes that the speech of the church should communicate grace and be “seasoned with salt” he is asking the church to be aware and speak in a way that is not flat or dull, but alive with expectation. What things can lead to our speech becoming dull or even negative? How might this impact our ministry to others? If we are excited about and expect God to work in the church, how might that shape our ministry to others?

Applying the Text:

What might it look like to be the local church in the community if we focused on engaging our community the way Jesus did?

(Read the following and think of some practical ways to apply these in your small group. Then make a commitment and pray to get to know your community and ask the Holy Spirit to show you how you can best love those around you.)

- Older members would get a fresh sense of their calling to disciple and encourage younger members of the church (Invite them to lunch/dinner?)
- Younger members of the church would love being around older members and appreciate being encouraged by them
- More of the prayers we pray in church would center around reaching our friends and neighbors, and God giving us mission opportunities outside the church
- More spontaneous ministries would develop in neighborhoods and workplaces as an extension of the church
- Increased use of spiritual gifts by church members
- More of our members sharing their faith and building relationships with those who do not know Christ
- More people would be invited to small groups and worship services
- More people would participate in ministry of the church
- More stories would be shared of how God is working as we intentionally engage our community