

September 20, 2009

Vision Series 2 – The Priority of Greatness

Alright – good morning. So glad to have you back or here for the first time this morning. We are in the midst of a special series that God is using to lay the foundation for the foreseeable future of Fairway. We spent several months going verse by verse in Titus letting God give us his blueprint for establishing his church – how he wants his church to be – so that we would realize that we are to be his – God cares about what we call church – has a plan for it. And the vision he gave us – the reason we exist, which is to be moving people to life in Christ one step at a time together, is not just a poster on the wall – it is a reflection of the heart of God and it ought to determine the what and why and how and when we do what we do as the corporate expression of the body of Christ.

And we saw the starting point last week – that **God has called His church** - not just our church – but every Bible believing – God honoring church - **to make DISCIPLES. Jesus himself defines being a Christian as being a disciple** – being a follower of Jesus – walking in his ways. Once we know and believe who Jesus is and have counted the cost of being saved by him from sin and hell, then a Christian, a disciple, is one who then **systematically and progressively rearrange the affairs of our lives to BE LIKE Him.** To do life in Christ. And if that is not our intent and if that is not what we are doing, then the odds are high that we have no business claiming to be Christians. Because there is no sliding scale. Christians and serious Christians. There are just followers of Jesus – different places in the process – but all with the heart of being like our Lord.

And while much of that process is personal and daily – much of it God designed into the function of the church – **there are parts of being and growing as a disciple in life that can only be accomplished in partnership with the local CHURCH** – the body of Christ – the family of God and **so that is what we must be about.** If we aren't making disciples, everything else is a waste of time. So that's what we're looking at – that's what God has in store for us.

Go ahead and open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2. Put your finger there and we'll get there in a minute, but again this week I need to lay some foundation first.

So I want to ask you a question this morning that maybe you have thought about – maybe you haven't – but we are going to spend a lot of time talking and thinking about it directly and indirectly in the next several weeks. And that question is **what makes a church great?**

What makes a church great? The kind of church where you go into it – you observe the people that make it up – you check it out – spend time there and say you know what – that's a great church. What makes that?

And I think that is a good question because I've never met anyone who says I really want to go to a mediocre church. I can't imagine any of you in here today would raise your hand and say yeah I prefer a lukewarm church – a church that makes no impact. No one says that so we need to ask the question what makes a church great – successful – what makes a church fit God's blueprint?

Unfortunately we as Americans especially, **we have a huge tendency to define what makes a church great based on how it meets my wants – my needs – my OPINIONS.** Right? I mean if you actually asked people what makes a church great what would actually come out of their mouths would be something more idealistic or less selfish at least than that but when you hear people just talking about what makes a church great to them what do they talk about?

The worship – or at least the music and songs that we mean when we say worship – the preaching, whether or not the preaching was good or bad - whether or not a certain church has some specific pet program that they want – how much time and energy and money a church puts into the specific ministry that they are passionate about. That's how we do it.

But that is so dangerous and I want us to understand one of the reasons that is so dangerous for us to define a great church on these peripheral things that the scripture never does - the Bible never defines the greatness of a church that way ever.

Jesus doesn't look at the 7 churches in Revelation and say listen – I checked out your church and you guys have an awesome preacher – you guys have an incredible children's ministry – and good singing – you guys are vibrant and healthy and great – praise God. Jesus never says that at all.

And so here's the deal with that today – **if we don't begin to define church success on GOD'S CRITERIA instead of ours, we run the risk of spending the rest of our lives Sunday after Sunday completely missing God's heart.**

When you really look at scripture – like we've been doing in Titus – or in the OT or in Acts 2 and Revelation and the teachings of Jesus – the heart of God for his church leaps off the pages and that's what we're doing in this series. We're going to see today the starting point for how scripture defines a great church – the cornerstone aspect of a church that makes disciples and the first part of what it means to be doing life in Christ together. So listen to this.

A church is great – a church is successful – a church is able to make disciples – a church is leading people to do life in Christ together – when in WORDS and in WORKS Jesus Christ is the first priority of the church.

Not just in words – because every church out there is going to say Jesus is our priority – but in words and works – in actions, in deeds, in what is done – when the person of Jesus Christ becomes the preeminent focus and reality of the church. And what makes that great is because God says his tangible manifest presence will show up where Jesus is exalted. **God's manifest PRESENCE shows up where Jesus is worshiped.**

What I mean by that is we all know that God is omnipresent right? You know what I mean by that – that God is everywhere all the time – but we also know from God's Word that God does not manifest his presence at all times in all places. The word manifest there as one of my friends explains means to take the lid off. God does not bless every church in America every Sunday with his manifest presence.

And you know that. Ever been to a church that is talking about God – that is singing about God – but you just get the sense that God is not there? That's real – in fact it's biblically explained.

Before we get to Revelation chapter 2, let's talk about a word here. The word revival. **What is 'revival'?** What do you think of when you hear me say revival? If you grew up in a small town church – or maybe just an old school Baptist church and you know what I'm talking about – raise your hand. You've been to a revival – your church advertised it – we're going to have a revival – you've got to come – you had it and you went to it.

And that's how they did it and it was good and mainly it was good because of the potluck dinners right? But it also meant that we had to go to church every night of the week which wasn't so cool as a little kid back then. But many of us think of revival like that. Even though we've matured as a church right – nobody really thinks like that anymore – nobody really does revivals anymore.

So the other way we think of revival is when lots and lots of people get saved – you know mass conversions – that's revival. But listen historically neither of those is the purest or best definition of revival. Historically the best definition of revival has been **the overwhelming – that's key – the OVERWHELMING sense of God's presence on a people.**

Doesn't that sound fun – the overwhelming sense of God's presence on a people.

And when God's presence falls like rain on his people in a manifest way then the absolute inevitable response is people getting right with God – people getting saved – people going yeah – I'm getting saved – God's presence – I want Him – that's revival.

Jesus talked in Revelation chapter 2 about how we will never experience that if He is not first in our church. It is so easy for a church to not place Jesus first and he says you will never experience revival if I'm not your priority – look at Revelation chapter 2.

Start in verse 1: Jesus is talking and he says: *"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write"* – the word there is "messenger" so it is either the preacher or an angel, we don't know but then Jesus describes himself for a moment. He says: *"These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."*

He "walks among" – the word there means in the middle of – Jesus walks among – in the middle of the seven golden lampstands. What is that about? He's talking about the seven churches that were real places - and that he walks among them – and he remind them here that He is the one who walks there.

And then in the next couple of verses he tells them some of the things they are doing that are great – good job – those are good things to do – but then in **verse 4** he says: *"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."*

Do you see that? Jesus says church in Ephesus there are some great things you are doing for me but there is a problem. The problem is that I'm not the most important thing any more. They were doing great stuff, Jesus just wasn't first anymore.

And then Jesus tells them what is going to happen if they don't change in **verse 5**. *"Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."*

Do you catch what he's saying there? Without having to go into huge details, **Jesus told the church at Ephesus** that if I am not your priority - me – the person of Jesus Christ – if I'm not your first love – not all that you are doing – **if I'm not the MOST important thing in your church's life, I am going to REMOVE my presence from your church** – I'm going to quit walking among your lampstand.

What a sobering statement. People there are lots of churches doing lots of good things and Jesus is not a part of it. And the last thing that I or the staff or the deacons or the leaders of this church ever want to do is to pastor a church where Jesus is not at.

What makes a church great is the PRESENCE of God and we can never forget that. And that is why worshipping Jesus is so crucial. **Worshipping Jesus is how we MAINTAIN Jesus as the priority.** However you currently think of worshipping – giving worth, valuing, surrendering to, pursuing, focusing on, acting in relation toward – we'll nail down what worship is before we go today – but a church that is great – **a church that fits God's blueprint – a church that is able to make disciples WORSHIPS JESUS.**

And does so not only because Jesus says that is what he expects here – not just because that is what God designed the church to do – but because we are hardwired to do so. At the core of our nature as humans made by God and in the image of God we are hardwired to give value to what is great. To pursue transcendence – to want to see and touch and feel and be part of that which is beyond us – that which is awesome – that which is by nature great. To take value and worth and go after that which is great. **We worship Jesus primarily because there is none GREATER than him.**

Now some of you might hear that and if you are thinking say wait a minute I think I disagree with that – because I worship Jesus mainly for what he has done for me.

And that's true – you should worship Jesus for what he has done for you – but that must always be secondary. We must always worship God – we must worship Jesus in light of his greatness.

Why? Because we do not worship that which is not great even when they've done great things for us. That's not in your notes, so let me say it again. We do not worship that which is not great even when they've done great things for us.

A pastor friend of mine in Austin used a cheesy illustration to make this point – but it really drives this home so bear with the cheesiness here. I want you to imagine that you have a dog.

You've got a dog and that dog is named Lassie. You remember Lassie growing up? If you weren't born in the 70s you may not know about Lassie and little Timmy but Lassie was this dog that was always saving little Timmy. Timmy would fall down a well and Lassie would grab the rope and pull up the bucket and little Timmy would survive and be just fine.

So imagine that everyone of us has a dog – and we'll make it a collie like Lassie – even more importantly like the Texas A&M mascot Reveille – but you have this dog and you love this dog.

You wake up one morning like 2:00 in the morning and this dog is licking your face and barking. You wake up and you realize while this dog is licking and barking at you that there is a fire in the house and you sit up in bed though you aren't supposed to sit up in bed when you know there is a fire – but you sit up in bed and the smoke overcomes you. And the last thing you think about as you are passing out is 'I'm going to die.'

You come to and you are outside – you come to and your house is burning down and you are in your front yard and your dog Lassie is sitting next to you and you realize – Lassie saved my life. My dog saved my life. Lassie grabbed my shirt with her mouth and dragged me out of the room and outside and Lassie saved my life.

Now what are you going to do in that moment? Your dog just saved you from the flames man, what are you going to do? You might do several things. You might grab that dog and hug her. You might say to her – Lassie thank you for saving my life – you might shed a tear or two – you might let the dog sleep in your bed – you might do a lot of things – I don't know what you're going to do but I'll tell you what you are not going to do. You are not going to worship the dog.

Right? You're not going to write songs to the dog. Can you just imagine that – you wake up and the dog is sitting there and you just start singing – "How great is my dog. Sing with me. How great is my dog. And all will sing how great. How great is my dog."

You're not going to do that are you? Why didn't you sing with me just then – I said sing with me. You didn't sing with me because it's ridiculous. It is ridiculous to worship that which is not great even when that thing or person has done great things for you.

See – we worship God – **we worship Jesus PRIMARILY because He is great and only secondly for what He has done for us.**

I want you to turn to **Psalm 95** and see this with me.

*"Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.
For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods."*

We worship the Lord – we worship God – we worship Jesus – why? For the Lord is a great God. Why are we – why must we worship Jesus? Because the Lord is a great God.

And folks that greatness never changes. You know what that means – you know why that is the foundation for our worship (and we'll see later why it is the foundation for everything else we do) but the reason why that is the foundation of our worship is because it means it doesn't matter what kind of day you had today – you can still come in and greatly worship Jesus because he is great.

It means you could have absolutely blown it in sin on Friday night and admit it and come in and worship him greatly because he is great.

You can not like the style of music – you can not like the worship leader – you can not like me – and still come in here and worship greatly because great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.

Are you seeing how crucial – how real this is today? **Because the greatness of Jesus Christ never changes, no matter what is going on in our lives:**

- whether things in our opinion are smooth & easy or bumpy and difficult
- whether you feel like God is doing what you want or not
- whether you can see all the details and understand all the whys and trace all the next steps or not

we CAN and we must still worship Him. There is still no other name under heaven or on earth by which we are saved than Jesus – and there will still be no one else that all creation and every human being bows before other than Jesus Christ. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.

And remember from last week, the life of a Christian – of a disciple – begins with a response to the call of Jesus which involves seeing Jesus for who He says He is and believing it – and when we see Jesus and believe Him, we cannot not worship Him.

Let me put this together. The principle in scripture of “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21) is not just about money – it has huge implications.

We cannot be saved without believing Christ is who he says he is.

And we can't believe he is who he says he is without following Him. **But we can't FOLLOW what we are not focused on; which is why we are hardwired to focus and pursue that which is GREAT: because there is none greater than our God!**

So worship, when you boil it down, is not the songs we sing or the music of a church service though those things are part of it. **Worship that marks the life of a disciple – worship that defines a great church is worship that is our RESPONSE to who God is and to what He has done expressed in and by the words we say and the way we live.**

Jesus must be the priority in a church and that reality is expressed and maintained primarily in how the members of that church worship Jesus. And that is what Psalm 95 calls us to do together. Look at it one more time. (Ps 95:1-7 – emphasizing the us & our)

We come together to respond to who Jesus is. That is the primary legitimate reason to be here – not to serve, but to worship, not to learn, but to worship, not out of habit or duty, but to worship, not to bring our kids, but to worship Jesus ourselves.

That's what life in Christ is all about. It is about you and me in our daily lives worshipping Jesus – it is about you and me corporately coming together and getting to know his greatness and worshipping Jesus and when we do it changes our lives. And we're going to see next week why this must be the first step – why **EVERYTHING ELSE in the process of life in Christ – in the process of discipleship hinges on this first step of worshipping Jesus.**

But today we have to ask some tough questions. You go back to Psalm 95 and the last half of verse 7 – after extolling the greatness of God – after calling the people of God to respond to that greatness by kneeling and worshipping that God – the psalmist says *“and as you do – if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart.”*

So listen this morning and don't harden your heart to the challenging voice of God.

Could the letter to the church in Ephesus be addressed to you? Could Jesus be saying to you that you do a lot of good things and I'm glad for that – but you have forsaken your first love – **Could Jesus be saying to you today, "I'm not the PRIORITY in your life anymore"?**

Was there a time in your life when Jesus meant more to you than he does now and your life showed it and your life shows it?

We can't follow what we aren't focused on. So what are you worshipping? **Where have you substituted something LESS THAN GREAT as the object of your worship?**

And if worship is our response to Jesus – our response to who He is – our response to what He has done – question – **how does your attitude – how does your level of PARTICIPATION vs observation – how do your thoughts – your words – your actions in the CORPORATE gatherings of this church show your response to Jesus?**

Is that what you want to communicate as the level of value and greatness and worth you put on the God of the universe and the Savior whose name you claim?

In order to do life in Christ, we must worship Jesus –
In order for this church to make disciples – we must WORSHIP JESUS together –

As you leave today and think about the words you say and the way you live – what are they saying about how great is your God?