

# Churches and Their Critics

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Today, I have a start of a probably a two-part message, maybe three-part, we'll see how it goes, something a little changing gears from our series on building a Christian mind. Last month, I taught our leadership class, and many people encouraged me to preach the material to the entire church. You know, our leadership class is a subset of those who attend with those who identify with our church, and several people impressed upon me said, "I think it's important for everyone to hear this," and consulted with Nathaniel, I think, with the other elders, but, you know, received similar encouragement from them as well, and so, in response to popular demand, here I am and I'm happy to accommodate the occasion.

I've titled today's message a little bit differently than I titled the leadership class to expand its applicability a bit, but if you're taking notes, you can title this message, "Churches and Their Critics." Churches and their critics, and I suppose that sometimes there's a temptation to just kind of, you know, ignore a topic like this and just hope that things get better. It's really not in my nature to do things like that. I like to confront things directly. I like to speak to matters that I know are on the hearts and minds of people and to address them to the ability that I have, to help and to encourage people and to help you help others as you walk with people over the course of time.

Now, I'm going to do something that you should not do routinely. One should not routinely quote himself in the pulpit. That might seem pompous and inappropriate, and probably in many occasions it is, but here I'm willing to make an exception to set the context for what to be in front of us here. When I returned from my sabbatical, for those of you that are new to our church over the past few months, I was away for an extended study leave last fall and into January, when I returned from my sabbatical and began to preach, I had a lot of things on my mind and on my heart regarding the very nature of truth and the condition of the church, broadly speaking, in America and in the world today, and I knew that I was going to embark on this very long series titled, "Building a Christian Mind," and I knew that it was not going to be popular in some circles, but I considered it important to speak and to go in that direction, even though I knew that there would be people who would not like it for many different reasons and would be opposed to it. I felt like duty, and the nature and the need of the hour called me to go the direction that I wanted to go, and so in my second message back on January 22, 2023, it was only five, not even five months ago, beloved, it's funny to me, I preached a message titled, "Our Duty in the Truth War," and I said this, I'm quoting directly, but omitting some

redundancy in it. I said this, it's very, very pertinent to the life of Truth Community Church here in June, 2023. Back in January, I said this, I said, "I'm going to be far too transparent in what I'm about to say in order to prepare you when this inevitably comes to pass. I know in advance as we go this direction that there will be some people who will not stay, and when that happens, it will grieve me. It always does when that happens. But beloved, we can't be motivated by the turnstiles in and out of Truth Community Church. We have to be soldiers manning the station. Attacks will come from expected and unexpected places that I'm sure will surprise even me. We may get weary in the battle, but we have a transcendent duty in the truth war. We cannot do anything else. We do not want to do anything else. It's not just a matter of duty. This is a matter of desire." End quote.

Now, for those of you that are involved at all in the life of our church, here we are some five months later, and we are seeing those consequences that we talked about back in January. I want to speak softly. I want to speak gently. I know that I'm speaking to a supportive audience here because you're here, and I speak to strengthen you, to give you perspective, and to give you a level of discernment to help you help those that are around you and to strengthen your own heart in questions that you might have. Let me say this, beloved: it is easy, it is very, very easy, having done it in my younger days so I speak from experience as well as on the other side of what I'm about to describe, it is very easy for those who have never had final responsibility for spiritual leadership in the church of Jesus Christ to criticize those who actually bear the weight of protecting the flock of Christ. It would be easy for me, in one sense, to criticize an orchestra performance of Handel's Messiah, but my criticism would be meaningless because I have no musical background or technical ability to rightly assess those things. I've never been responsible for a concert, for example, and if that's obvious on a human level, then how much more on a spiritual level? It's easy for those who have never had final responsibility for spiritual leadership to adopt a critical posture toward those who God has assigned to lead the church. And by the way, I'm speaking not just about Truth Community Church, I'm speaking broadly. One of the reasons I'm expanding this message is in the hopes that it might be a help to some of my brothers in ministry outside of Truth Community Church. It is easy, I'll say it one more time, because this is something that you should always keep in mind when people come to you with negative reports, negative assessments about the church that you love. It is easy for those who have never had final responsibility for spiritual leadership to criticize those who actually bear the weight of protecting the flock of Christ.

You know, we know what it's like to lay awake in bed at 2, 3 in the morning tossing and turning about issues of sin, issues that are going on in the church, threats to the church that others don't know about but that you do, and all of that. We know what that's like. Charles Spurgeon, in a quote I came across just within the past week or two, and it has not left my mind, and so I need to say this from the platform so my mind can move on to other things. Charles Spurgeon said this in response to constant criticism that he faced in his ministry, and I quote the Prince of Preachers. He says, "We are now in fine fighting condition, for we are hardened by former blows. A great boxer at Rome was so battered, his nose, eyes, and face were so disfigured that he was always ready to fight. His attitude

was, I cannot look worse than I do now. Personally," this is still Spurgeon speaking, so this is not me, this is what Charles Spurgeon says in response to his own illustration. He says, "Personally, I am in much the same plight. Men cannot say anything worse about me than they have already said. I have been distorted from head to foot and misrepresented to the last degree. My good looks are gone, and none can damage me much now." End quote. We think of Spurgeon, we think often of the humor that he had in the pulpit, and he was always ready with a quick wit. We think of Spurgeon and the unparalleled exaltation of Christ that marked his ministry, and the tender, compassionate calls that he made to the lost, and how he pleaded with the wandering sheep to come back to the fold of Christ. We think about Spurgeon in those terms. If you've read anything of him, those marks of love for Christ and deference to the authority of Scripture and, you know, the tender love that he had as he appealed to the lost, and yet here he is giving his own testimony about what the criticism that he endured in the midst of a ministry like that.

Now, I'm no Charles Spurgeon, I'm not even Charles Stanley or anybody else named Charles that you could think of, Charles Ingalls. None of that and so I don't classify myself with the Prince of Preachers in what I'm about to say. I really don't. I know that I'm not fit to carry his books, but I can identify with what he said there about being distorted, about being misrepresented. I can identify with that. And the more it happens, in keeping with the spirit of that quotation, the more that it happens, I think I can honestly say, the less it bothers me on a personal level. It comes with the territory. But here's the problem with that kind of criticism, that kind of spirit that sometimes comes within the church, sometimes from those agitating outside of the church, here's the problem, and here's why we're saying these things today. It has nothing to do with personal vindication. I know worse things about my own heart than what my worst critics have said about me in public on social media. That's not a problem. I'm not worthy of self-defense. But here's the issue, beloved: the problem with these agitating critics is this, is that they lead innocent people astray; they lead unsuspecting people away from a biblical ministry of truth that is strengthening and helping them, is equipping them for life, is shaping them in a biblical mind, and they lead people away by injecting discontent, injecting suspicion where none previously existed. And that's why you have to say things like this, it's for the sake of innocent people because, and I've seen this directly, I know about direct instances of this, of people that try to interfere with pastoral relationships and ministry. At that point, it's no longer personal. At that point, you put on your hat of a pastor, your hat of an elder, say, "I have a responsibility to protect the flock. They don't realize that they're being whistled out of a fold of safety into a place of danger by people who are chronically disgruntled and chronically unhappy with all of life, not simply the particular church ministry that they're involved in."

And so it's for the sake of protecting the flock that we go into these things this week and next week, and so in response to popular demand and to my own duty, and for the sake of those that gather under the umbrella of Truth Community Church, for the sake of truth and spiritual edification, I speak today and give you that justification for all of the things that we're about to say. What I want to do today is to just address two aspects of churches and their critics. First of all, I want to take some time to look at the reality of criticism to

show you that Scripture tells us to clearly anticipate this so that we are not caught off guard or dislocated when it comes; this comes with the territory of being a Christian in general, and in church ministry in particular, the reality of criticism. And then we need to separate out the true and the false motives that help us walk through and to flourish in the midst of such things. Today, we'll examine and refute some of the false motives for church ministry. Next time, we'll look at the true motives for church ministry that give you the strength and confidence to continue on and to view things with the kind of discernment that it really needs.

But let's start with the reality of criticism, the reality of criticism, and I just want to be very, very direct and pastoral and candid in what we say. Some of the danger, some of the confusion, some of the fog of battle that comes, is that after you've had a relationship with someone for a while, then they start to become the source of criticism, it's a little bit disorienting. We have this relationship, I thought, and now these negative things are coming out. How am I supposed to sort my way through that? How am I supposed to discern that? And for tenderhearted people like so many of you that place a high premium on healthy relationships and wanting to be faithful and loyal in friendships, you know, I realize that that creates a particular kind of challenge. By nature, you're very trusting. It's almost unthinkable to you that a friend would actually be someone that would be an agent that is misleading you away and agitating you in discontent. It's hard to believe that and that's where it's so important for us to come to Scripture and to recognize these things for what they really are, and to judge things by the sense of Scripture, not by a sentimental sense in our hearts about a prior relationship or an existing relationship that we had or thought that we had.

So for today, first point here, we just want to look at the reality of criticism, the reality of criticism, you could say the reality of opposition. Now I speak beyond our church to a large degree. No man should go into ministry having a false sense that he's going to be wonderfully popular and also at the same time biblically faithful. Biblical fidelity will generate opposition, and that's true not only in ministry, but it's true in your personal Christian life. You would think, beloved, if you forget the reality of sin, you would think that being a humble person that loves Christ and desires righteousness and wants to have a peaceable spirit, you would think that something like that, if it's true in you, would not generate opposition. Why would anyone be at war with somebody who's on a mission of peace? It almost seems unthinkable but, beloved, let's give ourselves some clarity of mind here by looking directly to our Lord. Was there ever anyone who was more righteous than Christ himself? Was there ever anyone who was more entitled to the title Prince of Peace? Was there anyone who ever did more good for people while he walked on earth? Was there ever anyone who spoke more truly in what he said and was ever the defender of the flock of God than Jesus Christ himself? Was there ever anyone who exceeded him in all of those marvelous character traits, I ask you? The answer is no. He was the highest. He was the best of them all, and there was no one in second or third place on the platform with him. Beloved, think for just a moment, what did they do with Christ when they had him in their hands? What did they do with him? They rejected him. They crucified him. They wanted nothing to do with him. And understand that there was nothing in Christ that justified that kind of response against him. He was pure, innocent,

undefiled, holy, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. That's who he was, and that's how they responded. Beloved, living a righteous life in a world that is under the domination of Satan is not a guarantee of peace and tranquility and popularity and acceptance. The very nature of a humble life is a confrontation against the spirit of the age in which we live. And so we have to recognize that there is a reality of criticism and opposition that will take place in an individual Christian's life. Many of you have experienced that personally at the hands of people that you love, that have rejected you, have separated themselves from you, who don't want to listen to you, and you know in your heart, even if no one else would affirm it about you because people are so slow to support you, you know in your heart that you've just wanted to love them. You've just wanted to care for them and show and to give of yourself to them, and you're met with a stiff arm in response. You know that personally by experience. Well, beloved, just multiply it by a corporate dimension and realize that it's going to be the same way within the church as well.

Scripture tells us to expect such things. In 2 Timothy 3:12 and 13, we read this. 2 Timothy 3:12 and 13, we read, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors," impostors, someone who looks to be one thing but is actually someone else, "while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." That's 2 Timothy 3. All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. There will be opposition. There will be rejection. It comes with the territory, and it has to be that way. It has to be that way if we are really following Christ, and Christ was rejected and opposed, then how is it going to be any different for those of us that walk in his footsteps? The idea that a church could be faithful to Christ and also cater to sinners with a Seeker-Sensitive philosophy of ministry, the idea that there could be fidelity and also popularity in the world is mistaken. It is wrong. It is unbiblical. And those who factor in worldly popularity in their philosophy of ministry have baked into the certain outcome that they will ultimately be unfaithful in the end, because you cannot have it both ways. You can't follow a rejected Lord without expecting rejection of yourself.

Now, our Lord made this point, a similar point, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, and I ask you to turn there with me. Matthew 5, and it is just very, very important to see the full context of all of this. I'm going to speak on the fullness of the Sermon on the Mount on Tuesday, take an overview, a look at it on Tuesday, and so we'll cover some of this ground on Tuesday as well, though it's not directly related to this message. But in the Sermon on the Mount, you know, a somewhat familiar text to the world and the place where the world gets its exclusive biblical theology from Matthew 7:1, judge not, nothing else in the Bible matters to them except that one verse, judge not, and they think they know the Bible because they know that from the Sermon on the Mount. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ is describing what a repentant life looks like. What does new life in Christ look like, what is the fruit of repentance, you could say? And he starts in what are known as the Beatitudes, the statements that say, "Blessed are those, blessed are those," Beatitudes, the blessing of it, Christ starts this Sermon on the Mount by pronouncing blessing on people of a particular kind of character. He emphasizes these heart attitudes that are the fruit of true repentance. He starts the Sermon on the Mount,

we'll talk about why that's important in weeks to come, he starts with character, not with prayer. He doesn't start with anxiety. He doesn't start with judgment. He doesn't start with any of those things. He starts with character in the heart.

What do we see him saying as he talks about this character in the heart? Look at Matthew 5:3. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." If you've followed my ministry for any amount of time, you know that I've said often that there's an exclusivity to this description of character that Jesus says. Each time when he says, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, for they shall be comforted, for they shall inherit the earth, for they shall be satisfied," it's a statement of exclusivity. It says it's these people and these people alone who will receive the blessing of the character traits of which I speak. And so when he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he's commending those who have rejected spiritual pride, who have rejected self-righteousness, who know that in the presence of a high, exalted, majestic God who is holy, that they have nothing to commend themselves to, they are spiritually bankrupt, as we will see in days to come. Jesus says the only people that are going to heaven are people like that. Not the proud, the boastful, the self-sufficient, not the outwardly righteous, not the self-righteous. It's those who have a broken spirit that are broken and mourn over sin. Those are the only people that will be found in heaven. And these are people that are naturally merciful, verse 7, they're pure in heart, they're peacemakers. They alone shall receive mercy. They alone shall see God, verse 8. They alone shall be called sons of God.

Now, look, I'm repeating myself here for the sake of emphasis. There is nothing in a character like that that should provoke hostility from those around them. A broken-hearted person is not someone that is agitating conflict against others and yet, look what Jesus says as you move into verse 10, 11, and 12, which is the point for this morning. He says in verse 10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs," and theirs alone, "is the kingdom of heaven." Notice, connect that with verse 3. He started with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom of heaven." Verse 10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom of heaven." Beloved, those things go together. They are joined at the hip. They are like conjoined twins. You cannot separate them without killing them both. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and only theirs, and then he goes on to say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom of heaven." Do you see the implications of this? The only people that are going to heaven are those that have been broken in their heart over their sin. The only people that are going to go to heaven are those that in some way have suffered for the sake of righteousness. Theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom of heaven. That is the reality of criticism and opposition, both individually in the Christian life and in the corporate nature of individual Christians coming together to go through life together in a common purpose with a common faith.

Now, Jesus goes on and says in verse 11, look at it there with me, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Beloved, look at it right there. This is so very critical to grasp and understand, that sincere believers like you, sincere churches trying to be faithful to Christ and to his word, are subject to this kind of treatment and response, being reviled, being criticized, being persecuted, being on the receiving end of all kinds of false reports and misrepresentations about who they are and what they do. In the very early church, the earliest church apologists, you can read about this, they had to respond to allegations from the Roman Empire that they were practicing cannibalism because they were taking the body and blood of Christ, so to speak, and that was distorted against them. And so the accusations were made that they were practicing cannibalism because they talked about the body and blood of Christ, and so the apologist had to respond to and to refute those false reports. For today, it's just enough to say that Jesus says, "You're going to be falsely spoken of. You're going to be misrepresented. And when you are, understand that you're in a position of blessing. Understand that you are the privileged recipient of divine favor when that happens." You say, "Well, how could that be? To have people misrepresent and lie and distort? To engage in character assassination against the people of God? How could that possibly be a good thing?"

Now Jesus goes on and explains it there in verse 12. He says, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus says when this happens to you in your personal life, when this happens to a church in its corporate life, understand that there's a history to this. Understand that the prophets of the Old Testament, you don't have to read the Old Testament in depth to see this over and over again. Think of Jeremiah being cast into a muddy cistern for speaking the truth, for example, Isaiah as church tradition says, being sawn in half, you read about that in Hebrews 11, even though it's not recorded in the Old Testament. Oh, the spokesmen for God, the servants for God, they suffered real rejection, real physical affliction at the hands of those who hated their message and wanted to silence them. Jesus says, "When it happens to you as you follow me, be glad. It's a mark of affirmation. It's a mark of the legitimacy of your confession of faith. It's a mark that you belong to me, that the marks and the blows that have come to my servants, the prophets before you, are now falling upon you. Rejoice and be glad."

My point here today, all that we're pointing this out for the sake of here today, is that this is the reality. This is the reality of Christian life. This is the reality of being a believer. That's why Paul said in 2 Timothy, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Jesus says, "Those who've been persecuted for righteousness, theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom of heaven. This comes with the territory." Now, beloved, here's a little practical point of implication as you think about churches and the critics who love them. I speak ironically there. I speak with a measure of sarcasm there. Understand that the mere fact that you are criticized does not mean the criticism is legitimate or true. Understand, in like manner, when your church is criticized, it doesn't mean that the accusations are necessarily true, doesn't necessarily mean that they are right, or that full information is being given to you, or that the motives of the critics are not being withheld from you. Most of you know this as a matter of gaining wisdom as you walk through life and just deal with people on a relational, individual basis going

through private life. Well, none of that stuff stops just because you enter into the walls of the church. In fact, it's magnified because of the stakes that are in place. And so, you read the life of Christ, you see that he was crucified. You read about Stephen speaking the truth in Acts 7, what did they do with him? What did they do? They stoned him. They got big rocks and rained them down on his head in order to silence him. You read about Paul and he was flogged many times. Riots were raised up against him. Was it because Paul was unrighteous? Was it because Paul and Silas were unrighteous that they were beaten and cast into a prison in Acts 16? At some point, you just have to realize, you have to step back from what's happening right in front of your face and say, "What is the pattern of Scripture in these things," and then judge righteously as you go forward.

Look at the gospel of John 15. John 15. Let's start in verse 12 and recognize the context as we lead into verses 18 and 20. The context, as we read in 1 Corinthians 13 earlier in this service, is love and Jesus, in chapter 15, verse 12, commands his disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another." And from that context of love and commanding love within the body of Christ, he goes on and speaks about the opposition that will come. "If the world hates you," wow, that's a sharp contrast, isn't it? We were just settling into the gauzy effects of love and feeling sentimentally warm about it and then there is this sharp contrast that rains down upon it in order to keep us and our perspective in line. Jesus says, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours."

And so, beloved, keeping in mind also, we won't turn to these passages, but keeping in mind also that Scripture repeatedly tells us, warns us, cautions us that there will be tares mixed in with the wheat, that there will be wolves in sheep's clothing that you need to beware and to watch out for, that not everything that has a soft, fuzzy exterior is guaranteed not to try to bite your leg off when the opportunity presents itself. Beloved, criticism, opposition, it's a reality in individual Christian life, in corporate Christian life. Criticism and misrepresentation come with the territory. Sometimes it's mild and it's passing and it's hardly worth a notice. Sometimes it's enduring and it's a real threat to the future. We shouldn't be surprised by that. We shouldn't be intimidated by that, because Christ is with us always, even to the end of the age, but just to recognize that this is what happens, this is what we are to expect. And so the question then becomes, how then does a church thrive in the face of the hostility of critics? How does a church prosper spiritually? How does a church not lose its focus? How does a church not retreat in fear? How do the sheep protect themselves from fleeing simply because one-sided criticism is barking in their ear week after week after week? How do you protect yourself from



misunderstanding the situation and responding in a way that brings long-term harm to you? How does a church flourish in the face of the hostility of critics?

Well, in my judgment, it helps to clarify the motives of why we do what we do. We have to understand why we do what we do and that brings us to our second point for this morning: considering false motives for church ministry. Considering false motives for church ministry and it's going to be a little bit awkward with the way I'm going to divide this up to address false motives and then leave till next week the true motives, but that's kind of the way the material falls out for us here today. False motives in church ministry. I'm just going to mention two that I'll state in different ways.

First of all, it is not a true motive in ministry, it is a false motive in ministry to simply want to maximize attendance. It is a false motive in ministry to want to do everything that is necessary to keep everybody inside and to bring as many people as possible within the walls. If that were the case, beloved, there would not be warnings in Scripture about those that you are to avoid. Let me take you to a few passages just to set the context here. Look at 2 Timothy 3. 2 Timothy 3, beginning in verse 1. This is the last letter that Paul wrote in his apostolic ministry; he's giving a final charge to Timothy and by extension to all of the church. 2 Timothy 3. The point here that we're about to make is that there are some people that are to be avoided, which means that they should not be kept within the walls of the church if they persist in their ungodly ways or their ungodly assertions, or the lies that they are starting to spew and continue to want to spew after being confronted about it. Some people are not entitled. They lose their privilege of being in the church and lose the privilege of Christian fellowship.

2 Timothy 3:1, "understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power." What are you supposed to do with those people? Avoid them, it says. "Avoid such people." Stay away from them. Do not associate with them. It says to avoid them. This is not a misguided effort of restricting relationships. This is simply a matter of biblical truth that there are some people that are to be avoided because of the nature of their character and people that are to be avoided should obviously not be inside the church. And so maximizing attendance and spreading our arms around absolutely everybody, no matter who they are or what they do or what they say, is a false motive in ministry. That's not right. That's not biblical.

Look over at Romans 16. Romans 16, written earlier in Paul's ministry by several years, Romans 16:17, Paul says at the end of this systematic discourse on the nature of true salvation that he's been giving for 16 chapters, opening with he's not ashamed of the gospel, the gospel is necessary because the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. The wrath is against Jews and Gentiles alike, but there's a wondrous way of salvation provided by justification by faith alone in Christ alone that has a sanctifying influence. Therefore, renew your minds. All of that. Paul wraps up all of that by saying in Romans 16:17, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out

for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught." What does he say to do? "Win them," is that what it says? "Be kind and gracious to them in case you might be able to change their minds. Maybe it's not so bad. Love everybody in the name of Christ and wrap your arms around sheep and wolf alike." That's not what it says, beloved, it says, "Be discerning, look at what's happening, and those who are causing division, avoid them." Avoid them. I didn't make this up. I'm just telling you what Scripture says. I'm just showing you in your own Bibles what it says. Avoid them. In other words, protect yourself just as you would turn off the pipes if you knew that poisonous water was coming through the tap, you would turn off the main, you would turn off the valve so that water wasn't coming into your house and infecting and poisoning the people that live within it. If you knew that you had bad water, you wouldn't start drinking it in the name of supporting your local sanitation district. That's ridiculous. "But those guys are so nice down at the plant." Yeah, but they're giving you poisonous water. Don't drink it.

Scripture says you look out for those that are causing division, especially doctrinal divisions, and you avoid them. This is not something that you vote on. This is something you do. Avoid them, it says. And then in Titus, in like manner, Titus 3, and, beloved, I'm just being really direct right now, this is a Scripture that a lot of people don't want to obey. This is a theme that Scripture is clear on, and repeatedly I have seen people who insist on rejecting the clear word of God on what to do. I've seen it repeatedly. Am I supposed to stand in silence as that happens? Not going to happen. We're going to look at Scripture and see what it says.

Titus 3:9, "avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless." Verse 10, "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." Avoid them. Avoid them. Have nothing to do with them. That's what Scripture says and I'm not going to apologize for the word of God. Because of that, beloved, there are implications. You realize that an absolute goal of trying to maximize attendance in disregard to the spiritual reality of the people that are involved is a false motive in church ministry. It's wrong. It's not the way that God says to do it. The purity of the body matters. The unity of the body matters. The protection of the body from liars and drunks and predators and false doctrine that compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is not to be tolerated in the name of love. It's a false love.

It's a false tolerance that acts and speaks differently, and so maximizing attendance by trying to keep everybody under the same big umbrella, that's not legitimate. That's not biblical. If the goal is to simply have the largest crowd possible, you cater to the lowest common denominator, you're careful not to offend critical or controlling people and you stay silent on controversial points of biblical doctrine. That's what you do if you want a really big church as measured alone by attendance but, beloved, drawing a crowd is not the goal of church ministry. It is not the goal of genuine biblical leadership, and it is not the goal of Truth Community Church. It's not, and it never will be as long as I'm here. And you can see that clearly in John 6, in an account of our Lord, John 6, that I want to read at some length here, John 6.

Jude, as you're turning to John, I'll just allude to Jude for a moment. The little epistle of Jude says, "Contend earnestly for the faith, for certain people have crept in unnoticed, ungodly persons who deny our Master and Lord and turn grace into licentiousness." It says you've got to be on guard and you have to contend. There's an element of striving and fighting that goes on, fighting against the demonic forces that would undermine the work of Christ, Ephesians 6. It's a spiritual battle. We can't ignore that for the sake of human relationships that are premised on falsehood. This shouldn't be a point that I have to emphasize. But I do.

John 6:53, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.'" By the way, context, as Jesus is saying this, he had just fed 5,000 men, maybe upwards of 20,000 people overall. There was a crowd around him and it quickly changed because men are fickle. Men pursue spiritual things for carnal reasons and Jesus will have none of it.

Verse 54, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." Verse 57, "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." Now look at verse 60. This great crowd that saw his miracle wanted nothing to do with his teaching. "When many of his disciples heard it," these are disciples not in the sense of true converts but those that were simply following him, hearing his teaching, and benefiting from his miracles from time to time. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.'" (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." Jesus would never have said that if the goal of ministry was to maximize attendance and keep as many people following as possible. You know why we know that? It's because he knew the result of his words, and we see the result in verse 66. "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him."

Twenty thousand people, and note this, beloved, eye contact, please: when Jesus made a point of spiritual accountability and loyalty to his person and to his truth, that's when people left. That's when they walked away. When he called attention to discipleship, they booked. They wanted nothing to do with it, showing that what they wanted was food for their stomach, not Christ for their souls. Beloved, I make this point because I've seen people say this in situations where a few people walked away from the fellowship of a church, and the statement made is that, "It must be because of leadership. That's the common denominator. Look at the leadership. It's got to be the leadership. Why else would people leave," they say. And to undiscerning ears, there's a certain pleasant thing to that that lets you cast aspersions on those with authority, that lets you cast doubt on

those that would hold you accountable. Listen, this passage is a direct contradiction of that argument. That should never be said. Yes, sometimes leaders are at fault. Yes, sometimes leaders are bad. Yes, sometimes there are legitimate reasons for someone to leave a church. I'm talking in general principles here, not about our own local assembly right now. The point here for this, the occasion for making this point now is this: nearly 20,000 people walked away from Christ. You know what the common element was by the reasoning of those critics that I just quoted? The common element there is Christ himself. Are you going to say that Christ was the problem? Maybe, beloved, the problem was in the hearts of the 20,000 that left. Maybe the sin was not in Christ. I speak as a fool. Maybe the sin was not in Christ. Maybe the sin was in the hearts of those who refused his lordship. Beloved, Jesus had not suddenly failed in spiritual leadership. His teaching had exposed false disciples in the midst. Scripture says, "Don't judge according to appearance, judge with righteous judgment."

Beloved, church success is not measured by counting the noses of fickle people, stated differently, criticism is the price we pay to maintain accountability within the body of Christ. Responsible churches cannot allow themselves to be manipulated by threats. If people leave, they leave. If they agitate and criticize when they do, so be it. It happened to Christ himself. Listen, beloved, I say this for your protection and for your upbuilding. We all know people both inside and outside of the body of Christ, we all know people who are always disgruntled about something. They're complaining about something whenever they see you, complaining about their parents, complaining about this or that, feel sorry for me about how badly I've been treated. Look, beloved, I'm just being really direct and candid about the ministry philosophy of Truth Community Church at this point. It is a fool's errand to chase after the fleeting approval of people like that. There is no satisfying them. The worst thing a church could do is to cater to those who are chronically dissatisfied and grumbling about everything that's around them. That's a horrible mistake. It's also very unbiblical. Philippians 2:14, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." Philippians 4:2, Paul speaks to two disgruntled women in the Philippian church, says, "I urge you, Euodia, and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord." This is not to be accepted. This is not to be catered to. This is not to be baked into the fabric. This is a subject of repentance.

And so, trying to keep everybody happy isn't going to work and so we might as well just try to keep the Lord happy by being faithful to his word and trusting him for the consequences that follow. However imperfectly we live that out here at Truth Community Church, that's our desire. We're not trying to please men. We're trying to please the Lord.

Now, just briefly, along with that, I've kind of covered this, maximizing attendance is a false motive for ministry, love for popularity is a false motive in ministry. Love for popularity. You can't serve Christ with a supreme desire to be applauded by men. You can't live faithfully as a Christian like that, and a church cannot be faithful like that either. Israel rejected the prophets and went into exile as a result of it. The Jews rejected Christ. The Gentiles rejected Paul, many of them. In Acts 28:22, Scripture says it was reported to Paul, with regard to this sect, "We know that everywhere it is spoken against." And Paul did not change his teaching so as to make the critics happy. He willingly endured the

chains that he was in in Rome there in Acts 28. He willingly wore those chains for the sake of the hope of Israel, for the sake of the gospel. Despite opposition from religious and secular authorities, despite the suffering that it brought him, he held the line. By the grace of God, he held the line.

Now in Mark 8, I'll close with this as time has gotten away from us. Mark 8:34. Love for popularity, a desire for ease, a desire to avoid conflict cannot be the controlling affections of a heart of a Christian or of a church, because that's not the discipleship that Christ called us to. Mark 8:34, "calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?' Look at it here in verse 38, beloved, and count the cost in your own life, and as a church we again count the cost of fidelity to the word of God in ministry. Jesus says, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Beloved, I know many of you share the desire of my heart as I stand here today. The one thing that I don't want to happen in life, let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, let everything that we've worked for be lost but God in heaven, please, don't let our steps walk in a path where Christ is ashamed of us when he comes in his glory. God, let us walk in a path where no matter what men think, no matter who comes and goes, let us live, let us minister, let us preach, let us witness, let us work, let us raise our families, let us conduct our relationships in such a way that the only thing in life that matters comes to pass for you and me, and the only thing that matters, the only thing that matters is that when we see Christ face to face, we see approval in his countenance and he says, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master."

That's what we live for, beloved. Everything else is secondary. Loyalty to Christ is the only ambition that matters. Now, how a church flourishes, how we cultivate the affections of heart that enable us to stay on that path despite resistance, that's for next time. For now, bow with me in prayer.

*O Christ, yours is the church, for you purchased it with your own blood. It's your word, it's your flock, you're the Good Shepherd. You're the one who laid down your life for the sheep. You're the one who sent the Spirit to assist and aid us as we seek to serve you individually and corporately. And so we ask you, dear Lord, by the love that you have for us, by the mercy that you've already shown to us, that individually and corporately you would mercifully guide our steps to the fulfillment of the things that we've said here today. Oh, that we would be people who are poor in spirit and who mourn over sin, even if it brings persecution for your name's sake. Oh, that we would be people who fear God more than we fear man. Oh, that we would be people that love God more than we love men. God, do that in us. Oh Christ, for the sake of your own glory, for the sake of your people, for the sake of a generation of believers yet to come, for the sake of a generation yet to be born, O God, O Christ, O Holy Spirit, establish our steps in that fidelity that you can bless and grant that each one under the sound of my voice would be born into your*

*kingdom and would live life in a way where your arms are open wide and your countenance is pleased and you say, "Enter into the joy of your Master. Well done, good and faithful servant." Father, give us that and the world can go away. Give us your approval and all is well. Help us, each one, to that end, we pray in Jesus' blessed name. Amen.*

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