

Worship, Word, Witness: Romans 11:33-36

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

Sunday, July 10, 2016

This morning we conclude a 5-part sermon series on the church. And I'll tell you that the 2 sermons that excite me the most in this series are the first one and this last one. You remember we started this series with a sermon on Christ as the Chief Shepherd of the church, the Head, the cornerstone. He is the leader of the church. He is our Savior and our Lord. What a glorious thought that is, what a comforting thought, that Jesus Christ died for His bride, the church, and He is leading us.

And then we talked about the role of elders in the church to shepherd and oversee the flock. We talked about the deacons' role in serving the church in many very important ways. Last week we looked at the responsibilities we all have as members of the church and the privilege it is, and how important it is, for us to be closely connected with one another in a local church.

This morning we come to the purpose, the mission, of the church. And this excites me because this unifies us around a vision for what we're supposed to be about. Whatever differences we have in terms of our roles and specific functions within the church . . . whatever differences we have in terms of personalities and background and ethnicity, we are united by the fact that we're following the same Chief Shepherd and pursuing a common vision which God's Word reveals to us.

So, what is the mission of the church? What is the mission of this church? Years ago, back in 2006 and into 2007, I and the other elders gave a considerable amount of time and prayer and study and discussion to crafting a mission statement for our church. The result of that is what you see on the front of your worship folder.

"We exist to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world."

This mission statement does not say everything there is to say about our church. And it's not our statement of

faith, either. It doesn't summarize everything we believe. But it is a statement of our core values. It's a relatively short summary of what we understand from God's Word that we're called to do. And this has been very useful to us in various ways as we think about what to do as a church and how to go about doing those things. I hope it will be helpful to you personally. It's something that you may be able to remember when you're telling a friend or a family member about our church. If someone asks you, "What is your church like?" You could say, "Well, we seek to be God-centered, and we really focus on God's Word, and we have a desire to reach others with the Gospel." Or you could pull out your worship folder and say, "We exist to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world." And then you can begin to explain some of those things further, which could be a significant conversation about the Gospel. So this mission statement helps us let others know who we are and what our mission is.

This mission statement also helps us make all kinds of decisions about ministries and programs and Sunday School curriculum and worship songs and Bible study material and preaching style and giving to missions and the general direction of our church. Because when we come to any of these decisions we want to be thinking, "How does this line up with the mission of the church?" Is it God-centered? Is it focused on the Bible? Does it magnify the depth and fullness of the Gospel? And are we seeking to spread this passion? Are we asking God to ignite this passion for the Gospel in others, and to give us a greater influence throughout this city, and even in other parts of the world?

We've condensed this mission statement into 3 words as an even shorter way of summarizing what we're about as a church: Worship. Word. Witness. And that's what I want to unpack for us this morning. First a brief summary of all 3, and then we'll delve into each one a bit further.

And let me say one more thing here at the outset . . . If you're newer to Three Rivers Grace, we're really glad that you're here. If you're not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, we're really glad that you're here. You may hear some things in this sermon that are new to you, maybe confusing in ways.

Please ask us questions. You're welcome to ask me questions, and others here would be happy to talk to you as well. These are things we're very passionate about at Three Rivers Grace, and we'd love to be able to share that excitement with you more. So please give us that opportunity if there are things that don't make sense at first. Ask us questions and we'll talk further.

First of all, "we exist to delight in the beauty of God's greatness." There are many places in the Bible that show God's desire to glorify His own Name. God is God-centered. He does everything He does for His own glory. He created us for His glory. He delivered His people, the Israelites, from Egypt for His own glory (Psalm 106:7-8). He sent His Son into the world in order that we might glorify Him for His mercy (Romans 15:8-9). And Christ is coming back to receive glory (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). God is on a mission to make His greatness known. And therefore the purpose of your life and mine, and the purpose of this church, is to glorify God. We want to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, which is how we glorify God. By God's grace, we recognize how awesome He is, and we acknowledge that there is nothing better than God. There is nothing more satisfying than God. There is no one else worthy of our ultimate devotion other than God. And when we love Him like this, when we are amazed and awed by Him, then our lives will be like a spotlight shining on His greatness.

God is God-centered. We, too, are to be God-centered. We don't want to waste our time being self-centered, man-centered. We don't want to give our attention to mere human accomplishments or worldly prestige. We don't want our lives to be so focused on our own wants or our own comforts. Our hope is to be God-centered, that we will see the beauty of God's greatness, and that we can view all of life through the lens of God's sovereignty over all things, and His goodness, and justice, and mercy.

David Wells, in his book *God in the Wasteland*, says, "In too many quarters today, evangelicals are inadvertently advertising the fact that God rests only lightly upon the church" (*God in the Wasteland*, 224). In other words there is a lack of God-centeredness or at least a minimizing of that truth. There is a rejection of the truth that God is completely sovereign. There is an absence of talk about sin and judgment and God's righteous wrath against sin. Jesus

Christ is not lifted up as the only way for hell-deserving sinners to be reconciled to a holy God. These are weighty realities, and not to be taken lightly. As Wells writes, there is commonly found among evangelicals “a spirituality that is light, bouncy, simple, fun, engaging, and uplifting.” And in contrast to that I’m not saying we should be depressed, mean, and condemning. But there should be a weightiness to our mission as a church. There should be a gravity to the happiness we have in God. We should recognize that our pursuit of joy in the beauty of God’s greatness is the most important and significant pursuit of our lives. To know God and love Him is ultimate. We want to be God-centered in our personal lives and in the life of our church.

This God-centered purpose must necessarily include a focus on God’s Word, the Bible. Because it’s in the Bible that God has revealed to us these weighty realities of His sovereignty and holiness, and our depravity (our sinfulness). It’s in the Bible that we read about Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect life in this world and then died a sacrificial death in order to forgive sinners, and then He rose again on the third day.

That’s why in this church our desire to increasingly delight in the beauty of God’s greatness goes hand-in-hand with our practice of focusing on the truth of God’s Word. God-centered. Bible-focused. If we are to know God, if we are to be a God-centered church and worship Him for who He is, we MUST be dedicated to God’s Word as our ultimate authority and guide.

As we delight in God’s glory (worship) and proclaim His Word, the inevitable overflow will be a joyful passion for the Gospel and a desire to draw others into that joy. That’s the remainder of the mission statement—“to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world.” Worship, Word, witness. Delighting in the beauty of God’s greatness is worship. Our worship is based on the truth of God’s Word. And then our Word-centered worship, if it is real worship, will spill over in witness to the world. This is what we’re about as a church—worship, Word, witness.

Worship

Now let’s spend a little more time on each of these three points, and we’ll go to 3 different passages to do so.

We'll start in **Romans 11:33-36** (page 947 in pew Bibles).

In Romans 9-11 Paul has been writing about God's plans in salvation history, specifically concerning the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. It's quite a breathtaking section of Scripture. And as Paul concludes this section he is praising God for His depth of riches and wisdom and knowledge.

Read Romans 11:33-36

Let's focus on verse 36 where we find a wonderful statement of God's glory. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." Notice the word "for" at the beginning of verse 36, or it could be translated "because." We could ask the question here, "Well, Paul, why is it that nobody can be God's counselor and nobody can give to God in order to be repaid?" And the answer in verse 36 is, BECAUSE God is supreme. All things are from him, through him, and to him. You can't add to the wealth of the One who owns the universe. And you can't add to the wisdom of an infinitely wise Being. And you can't add to the knowledge of Him who knows all things.

He created everything, and everything originates in him. All things are FROM him. God also upholds and sustains the existence of the universe. All things are THROUGH him. And all things are ultimately designed to bring God glory. All things are TO him. Because of God's riches and wisdom and knowledge, because of His independence, because of His supremacy in all things, He gets all the glory.

Now what does that mean? What is God's glory? The first phrase in our mission statement is an attempt to unpack that at least a little bit. "To delight in the beauty of God's greatness." God's glory is the beauty of His greatness. God is great in so many ways. He is rich and all-wise and all-knowing. He doesn't need anything. All things are from Him, through Him, and to Him. And the attributes of God are not only great, they are beautiful. God's glory is the beauty of His greatness.

And the way we glorify God, the way we highlight the beauty of God's greatness, is by delighting in Him. When God gives us eyes to see how beautiful and awesome He is, then we have a desire for Him. We delight in the beauty of

His greatness. This is what Paul is doing in these verses at the end of Romans 11. He is not simply stating a fact. He is rejoicing! His heart is bursting with delight in God. He can't hold it back. There were probably tears of joy running down his face as he recorded these words. This is worship, and this is what our lives ought to be all about. We exist, individually and corporately as a church, "to delight in the beauty of God's greatness."

As an illustration, let me remind you of **King Nebuchadnezzar** in the Old Testament, who is the antithesis of what we're aiming at here. The attitude he had is the exact opposite of what Paul is doing in Romans 11. Remember King Nebuchadnezzar was the guy in the book of Daniel who built the huge image of gold for everybody to worship. Then, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow down to it he threw them into the fiery furnace. Needless to say, King Nebuchadnezzar was a very proud king. In Daniel 4:30 the king is looking out over his kingdom, and he says, **"Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"** Does that sound familiar? He's saying that the entire Babylonian Empire is from him, through him, and to him. Immediately after this God casts him into the wilderness for seven years in order to teach him who is really in control and who really gets all the glory. King Nebuchadnezzar learned a very important lesson in that, a lesson we all need to learn.

Rather than being so full of ourselves that we are constantly talking about or thinking about our own greatness or even the greatness of others, we should be full of thoughts about God's greatness. Our hearts should leap with joy as we meditate on God's infinite and wonderful attributes.

Word

Next, to reflect some more on the importance of God's Word, let's go to a passage that is familiar to many Christians . . . **2 Timothy 3:14-17**. (pg 996 in pew Bibles)

2 Timothy is the last letter the Apostle Paul wrote before his death. He was imprisoned in Rome a second time (in the mid-60s A.D.), and his execution was close at hand. And Paul wrote a second letter to his child in the faith, Timothy. Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus to lead the

church there, and this letter is meant to encourage Timothy and spur him on in his ministry. Here in chapter 3 Paul is lamenting the fact that in these last days there will be all kinds of godlessness. In verses 13-14 he contrasts the “evil people and imposters” with Timothy, whom he charges to “continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed.” Paul wants to give Timothy a great foundation for his faith and for his leadership in the church, and he reminds Timothy “how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

What’s interesting about this statement in verse 15 is that Paul is referring to the Old Testament here. When he reminds Timothy of the “sacred writings” that he was taught even from childhood, he’s talking about the Old Testament Scriptures. The New Testament had not yet been completed or compiled by this point in time. So when Paul mentions the sacred writings, Timothy would have immediately thought of the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul says the Old Testament writings “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” We may be prone to thinking that it’s only the New Testament that really teaches about salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. But the whole Bible is about Jesus, and therefore the whole Bible is beneficial for our faith.

The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, (the Scriptures, as a whole) are able to teach us about salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. The Scriptures tell us about our sin that has caused us to be separated from God, and also how God has made a way through His Son Jesus Christ to erase that separation and bring us into a peaceful and joyous relationship with Him.

Isn’t this a remarkable thought, that the God of the universe wrote a book for us, in order that we might know who He is and how to be reconciled to Him. God has revealed Himself to us so that we don’t have to be ignorant concerning sin and righteousness and faith and salvation.

Now, another important thing to notice here is that all Scripture is breathed out by God. We speak of this as divine inspiration. God inspired every word in the Scriptures. There were men who put the words down on paper, and their personalities and circumstances are seen in what they wrote, but it’s also the case that what they wrote is exactly what

God wanted to be written. God inspired their writing. The words they recorded were breathed out by God. This is one of those beautiful mysteries of the Christian faith; that this Book, in one sense, was written by a wide variety of human authors. But at the same time, every word of it was written by God Himself. The words of this book are breathed out by God.

Based on this truth that all Scripture is inspired by God, it necessarily follows that all Scripture is infallible and inerrant. That is, there are no errors in the Bible. It is without mistakes, or lies. It is entirely true.

God is truth, and all Scripture is breathed out by God. Therefore, all Scripture is truth. And therefore we can rely on the words of Scripture as the bedrock for our lives. This is a wonderful comfort to us, and it ought to give us great hope. Because as we navigate our way through the complexities of this world, we can constantly look to the Bible as our compass. The Bible tells us the difference between right and wrong. The Bible teaches us about the value of every human life as created in the image of God. The Bible teaches us about the purpose and design of marriage. The Bible tells us about the origin of the universe, and where all of history is leading. The Bible tells us about the devastating effects of sin, and also the glorious story of redemption.

This life can be confusing. And it can be depressing. We think of the things going on in our nation right now and wonder how these problems could ever be fixed. There is injustice. There is violence. There is immorality. And, of course, the problems aren't just out there—the things we see on the news. There are plenty of problems within our own lives. We face trials. We go through times of suffering, heartache, sickness, conflict. But we have a guidebook that is written by the Creator of the universe, and it is entirely true.

Are you feeling hopeless this morning? This Book offers amazing hope. Are you struggling with some kind of difficult decision in front of you? This Book offers wisdom. Are you facing a moral dilemma at work or in your family? This Book instructs us clearly how we should conduct ourselves. Are you longing to know God better and to delight in the beauty of His greatness? This Book reveals the awesome plans of God, from creation to Christ's second coming, and the eternal realities of heaven and hell. This Book shows us the character of God, and the actions of God

throughout history. And day after day we can read of His great power and goodness and mercy.

One of the things we can pray in the midst of the turmoil in our nation is that our friends and family and neighbors will have an openness to hearing from God's Word. So many things in our society are like shifting sand, and maybe through some of these awful things that are happening more people will realize that. Government isn't going to fix these problems, although there is an important place for government. But no government official, no government program, can melt the anger inside of people, the prejudice and hatred and lust for violence. And no mere human can steer us in the right direction as we encounter the depth of human sin. We need a word from God, and we have that right here in front of us. Thank God for His Word. And don't take it for granted. Read it. Meditate upon it. Pray over it. Commit portions of it to memory. Make it a centerpiece in the life of your family. And look for ways to speak of the truths of God's Word to others.

Witness

The last phrase of the mission statement is so important because we want to be all these things: God-centered, Bible-focused, Gospel-loving. But if those things don't produce in us a great desire to draw others into our enjoyment of God, and of His Word, and of the Gospel, then what are they? They're empty and meaningless. God has blessed us in order that we might be a blessing to others. *And* our delight in the beauty of God's greatness, and in His Word, and in the Gospel, will increase as we're able to see others come to enjoy these same things. We exist to be so filled with joy in God that our joy overflows in love for this city and region and for the nations of the world.

The last text we'll go to this morning is **Psalm 67** (pg 481 in pew Bibles). This Psalm communicates this overflow of joy that I'm talking about. This is the kind of attitude I want us to have. This is the kind of prayer I want us to be praying.

Read

The beginning of this prayer is modeled after the priestly prayer of Numbers 6. You may recognize this prayer. God instructed Moses to tell Aaron and his sons to bless the

people with this blessing, **“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”** (Numbers 6:24-27).

In Psalm 67 the psalmist is praying for this very thing to happen. He is praying for God’s grace and God’s blessing. He is praying that God’s face will shine upon us. This kind of blessing is far greater and far more significant than asking God for stuff. That’s not the kind of blessing that is intended primarily in the priestly prayer of Numbers 6 or in this Psalm. The blessing that’s implied is the blessing of seeing God and knowing Him personally and intimately. That’s what it means for God’s face to shine upon us. Oh God, we want to see Your face. We want to know You. We want Your favor to be on us. We want your grace and your blessing to be upon us. What a wonderful way to pray for our own souls, and what a wonderful way to pray for our church.

But the prayer doesn’t stop with a request for personal blessing. In fact, the main point of the prayer comes in verse 2. The psalmist asks for blessing in verse 1, why? Verse 2, **“THAT your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.”** The purpose of the blessing is that the blessing will extend to all nations.

Charles Spurgeon wrote about these verses. He said, **“As showers which first fall upon the hills afterwards run down in streams into the valleys, so the blessing of the Most High comes upon the world through the church. We are blessed for the sake of others as well as ourselves. God deals in a way of mercy with his saints, and then they make that way known far and wide, and the Lord’s name is made famous in the world.”**

God has blessed us so richly by calling us to Himself and washing away our sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and imputing to us a perfect righteousness from Jesus Christ. He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And these blessings must extend far beyond us. The river of blessing must flow through us to others.

This is sometimes illustrated by noticing the difference between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea – these two very different bodies of water in Israel. The Sea of

Galilee contains fresh, clean water, and it's teeming with life. Water flows into it, but water also flows out of it, down the Jordan River toward the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea, on the other hand, is so dense with minerals that nothing can live in it. Hence the name. It's a completely dead body of water. Water flows into it, but no water flows out of it. I've had the interesting experience of swimming in both of those bodies of water, and I'll tell you that the Sea of Galilee is much more pleasant. It's a nice lake. The Dead Sea, on the other hand, is pretty nasty. It is fascinating because the density of the water makes everyone float. People can lie there in the water and read the paper without any floatation device holding them up. But that water is nasty. You can't drink it. Nothing can live in it. And it's because there's no outlet.

We need to make sure that the channel of blessing that is coming to us always has an outlet to flow on to others. God blesses us in order to bless others. And this is the prayer of the psalmist. Bless us, O God, in order that others may be blessed.

This prayer for the nations continues throughout the rest of the Psalm. "Let the peoples praise you, O God." "Let the nations be glad and sing for you." "Let all the ends of the earth fear him!" This is a missionary Psalm, and the psalmist can hardly contain his excitement. He desperately wants all the world to know and delight in God.

The requests of this prayer are grounded in the promise that God made to Abraham back in Genesis 12. This should be a lesson to us. We ought to pray the promises of the Bible. That's what this psalmist is doing. In Genesis 12 God told Abram (whose name was later changed to Abraham), **"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"** (Gen 12:1-3). What an amazing promise! God blessed Abraham in order to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham.

This is accomplished through the life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was slain, and with his blood he ransomed for God people from every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9). But those

whom He ransomed have not yet all been converted. And this is part of God's mission for His church. There are still peoples that have not heard the Gospel. There are ethnic groups who have not been reached with the News of Christ. It WILL happen. Jesus says in Matthew 24:14, **"And this gospel of the kingdom *will be* proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."** It's going to happen. But the mission is not yet complete, and we get to be part of God's work in bringing these promises to fulfillment.

So let's pray like this psalmist prays, and let's live with a passion for God's blessings to spread throughout the world. We want to be involved in what God is doing around us. God is drawing people to Himself. He is transforming hard hearts into hearts that praise Him. And that's the psalmist's prayer, and that's our prayer: "Let all the peoples praise you, O God." We want to see all the people of Pittsburgh and Western PA praising God. We want the people in all the different neighborhoods of this region to worship God. And we want opportunities to go to other parts of this country and other countries in the world to preach and teach and minister to needs in Jesus' Name. This is our desire and our purpose and our mission: to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world.

Let's be a church united by our common bond in Christ Jesus, following Him as our Chief Shepherd, and pursuing these glorious things that He has called us to: Worship, Word, and Witness.