



SCRIPTURE:

John 15:12-17

INTRODUCTION:

My last ministry was what many would call church revitalization work. Church revitalization is when a pastor takes a declining/unhealthy church and works to revitalize the church back to health and growth. In addition to pastoring a struggling church, I also studied church revitalization personally and academically. It's a field that interests me a great deal.

Eventually, I became certified as a church consultant because I not only wanted to help my church but other struggling churches as well. These consultations were interesting—to say the least. I would go into churches and do a full assessment and get tons of data. I would pull demographic and psychographic info in the church's community. I would also get 10 years of numbers—church membership, baptism, giving etc. I would conduct interviews with leaders and key members. Church health reports gauging theology and spiritual health. It was a wealth of information. I would then compile all that data and present to the church's leaders in a written report with suggested changes to make and then discuss it with them.

You would think that if a church hired a consultant, they'd be open minded and willing to hear suggestions for change, but that wasn't always the case. I remember the very first consultation I conducted. This was a church that had dwindled down to less than 30 people (all elderly) and needed a lot of help. When I met with the leaders to discuss the report, I felt like I was on trial. Instead of discussing the report constructively, they went through data and made excuses for the decline and misuse of money. They went line by line through my suggestions and refuted each one of them and said why it wouldn't work. Needless to say, we didn't make much progress.

I got into church consulting because I thought I could help other congregations. And don't get me wrong, I was able to help a lot of pastors and churches. But I would say, the majority of churches I encountered were resistant to change. Instead of embracing truth

and proven methods to reach people for Christ, I witnessed countless church leaders cling to tradition and positions of power.

If you asked me why so many churches are in decline with leaders like the ones I just described, I would tell you there are a lot of factors. But one of the greatest factors is, many of these churches, I believe, are filled with false Christians. They are filled with people who believe they are followers of Jesus, right with the Lord, and on their way to Heaven, but, in reality, they're as lost as an atheist. They think they're going to heaven, but they're actually going to Hell.

The truth is, it's not just declining churches that have this problem. I am convinced every church has its share of false Christians. There are probably some in this room right now. Which is why it would be wise for everyone who names the name of Christ to examine themselves. Because true followers of Jesus will have distinguishing marks of genuine discipleship.

If anyone was concerned about the realities of false believers, it was Jesus.

He even shows concern about this issue in John 15. Jesus' teaching in this chapter has been all about abiding in Him. The one who abides in Him will bear fruit. The one who abides has what he asks in prayer, they prove to be Jesus's disciples as they abide in His love. But if you don't abide, He will remove you and throw you into the fire. I don't know if you realize this, but the ones He's talking about throwing away are those who appeared to be abiding but fell away. These aren't the unbelievers of the world who never knew Christ. These are once professing believers who proved to be false Christians.

How do I know this? Because the one in His mind is Judas. Judas is the preeminent example of a false Christian. Judas walked with Christ for three years. He heard His teaching. He witnessed His miracles. Judas preached the gospel. He cast out demons and healed the sick. He professed Christ as Lord. Yet, in the end, Judas proved to be a false Christian. Jesus called him the son of destruction, the son of hell.

Here's my point: If Judas could be deceived, we need to examine ourselves to ensure that we're bearing the marks of a true believer. What are those marks?

Mark #1-True Christians love one another (V.12-13, 17)

VS12 - *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

This is the second time Jesus has given this commandment. Back in 13:34, He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” Obeying this command to love another is proof of genuine discipleship. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (VS35).

Love for one another is also evidence that we love God. Sincere love for God means we love the Son, and if we love the Son, that means we will obey the Son, and we hear that obedience to the Son means we love one another. This is why Paul can say, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

On the other hand, if we don't love one another, it shows we don't love God. 1 John 4:20-21, “If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot[a] love God whom he has not seen. Loving other Christians is inseparable from loving God. This is why it's foolish when people say, I love Jesus but I don't like the church. You can't follow Jesus apart from His church, and you can't follow Jesus according to His commands apart from loving His church.

Loving one another is how we abide in the love of Jesus. In verse 10, He said, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. What is His commandment? That we love one another. So, our abiding in Christ is in direct proportion to how we love each other.

It's no wonder why Christian's spiritual lives suffer when they forsake church. They aren't abiding in Christ's love nor are they obeying Christ's commandment.

We are to love one another, but what is this love supposed to look like?

Jesus tells us. We are to love one another as He has loved us. On its face, that's an impossible standard. How could we ever love one another as Jesus has loved us? We can't. Friends, this is why we need Jesus not only as our teacher but as our Savior. We fall short of His most important command. We need His grace and forgiveness daily.

But it is also true that we can obey the command of Jesus because He now lives through us. As we abide in Christ, we will have the capacity and ability to love each other as Jesus has loved us.

And Jesus has loved us in the greatest way. Verse 13, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” There is no greater act of love than for one to sacrifice Himself for others. Romans 5:8 - “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus took the place of His friends and died for our transgressions. He was crucified for us. This is how we’re to love one another—as Jesus loved us—sacrificially.

Love is not a mere sentiment or emotion. It means doing good for others, even if it is inconvenient for us; even if it means sacrificing our comforts and utilizing our precious resources such as time and money.

I’ve known believers who love theology. They can articulate the gospel and the deep truths of God, but they won’t go out of their way to pick up an elderly member for church. I am not sure what that person means when they say they’re a Christian. Christianity is not just about what you know. It’s about sacrificially loving others, and the true believer loves the church.

Mark #2-True Christians obey Jesus (VS14)

VS14 - You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Jesus sacrificed Himself for His friends. His friends are the ones He died to save. And who are His friends? The ones who obey His commands. This goes back to verse 12. True believers and friends of Jesus love one another. But this also encompasses all of Jesus’ commands. The friends of Jesus obey what their Master tells them.

Jesus did not say, if you obey me, I will be your friend. He also didn’t say, if you want me to love you, do what I say. He said, you are my friends if you do what I command you. Meaning, the proof that we are friends of Jesus is that we obey what He says.

Obedience is the key characteristic that you’re a true follower of Jesus Christ. A lot of people call themselves Christians. But it doesn’t matter what you say. It matters what you do. If you call yourself a Christian, but fail to obey Jesus, then you’re deceiving yourself. As one writer said, “A disciple who does not obey is not a disciple. He’s a fraud.”

I was discipling a man once who wanted to become a preacher. He showed much promise. We met every week, and he allowed me to pour into him. I taught him theology and the mechanics of preaching. He seemed engaged. But as we got to know one another, he said he was living with his girlfriend. I gave it some time for our relationship to develop, but eventually I had to confront him about this relationship. I asked if he had plans to get married. He didn't. "Do you plan on ending this relationship to honor the Lord?" I asked. He said no. "I am sorry, but you can't enter Christian ministry if you're living in sin." The man said, "I will just write about the word, then. I won't preach." "You don't understand. This isn't just about ministry. This is about obedience to Jesus." I never saw him again after that.

Friends, true followers of Jesus obey the Lord. In Luke 6:46, Jesus said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" Don't call me Lord if you're not going to obey me. Don't say you're my friend if you are living in disobedience.

True believers obey Jesus. Another true mark of a believer is:

Mark #3-True Christians know the Lord (VS15)

VS15 - 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.

The world translated servants in verse 15 is the Greek word Doulos and it means slave. Some estimate that there anywhere from 5-12 million slaves in the Roman empire of Jesus' day. Roman economy was built on slave labor.

Slavery during this time was not like the slavery we've known in our country's history. This wasn't about man-stealing. In most cases, people became slaves when they couldn't pay a debt and the best economical decision they could make was to become their debtor's slave and work off what they owed.

In most cases, slaves simply did the work they were commanded to do without getting to know their master's personally. But some slaves were elevated to the position of friend. If you proved yourself to be trustworthy and faithful, you would serve in a more intimate position. You could be directly with the master as his companion, where you would come to know the master's plans and motives. You could learn his heart, will and thinking.

This is what Jesus is saying to His disciples. They will no longer be merely His slaves. They are also His friends. They are friends who get to know the Master personally. They know Jesus' character, will and heart.

What distinguishes a slave from a friend? Knowledge. Jesus says in verse 15, *"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."*

The reason Jesus says the disciples are friends and not just slaves is because they have received knowledge. The knowledge Jesus received from God, He also gave to them.

Now, I just want to say, this knowledge must refer to the knowledge Jesus received during His incarnation. As the eternal Son of God, He has all knowledge. In His divinity, Jesus can learn nothing and there is nothing the Father knows that the Son doesn't also know. Jesus is referring to His humanity. In His humanity, Jesus set aside His divine abilities, one of those abilities being omniscience. Jesus learned and grew in His wisdom. He also received revelation from God—particularly about the plan of salvation. Jesus is saying that's the information I have revealed to you and that is what makes you friends.

This goes back to the slave/friend analogy. Slaves don't know their master's motives and plans. They just do what he says. But friends of the master understand his plans.

Imagine a King who rules over his kingdom. He orders the people in the kingdom to build a wall and towers. He doesn't tell them why, and they just do what he says. The king's friends, however, know his plans and thinking. The king told them that an ally betrayed them, and an invasion was coming. The king is building his defenses to protect his Kingdom. What distinguishes slaves from friends? Knowledge of the king's will.

This is what the friends of Jesus have—knowledge of their master's will. But we also have so much more than that. We know our master's character, His heart, Paul says we have the mind of Christ. This is what makes us friends—a deep personal relationship to the King.

True believers know the Lord and they know His will. That's what it means to be a Christian. We know the master because we have and know His word. This is the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. True believers know the Lord.

Mark #4-True Christians will bear fruit (VS16)

VS16 - 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.

In case Jesus' disciples were tempted to feel too elevated in their position, He makes it clear, you didn't choose me. I chose you. You didn't earn this position. You're only here because I chose you to be here. This should breed humility.

But it should also comfort them. Notice, Jesus didn't say, I didn't choose you. You chose me. That would be unsettling. If He said the opposite, they would have no ground for assurance. If Jesus didn't choose them, maybe He'd leave them. But we know He won't because He chose them.

What did He choose them for? He chose them and appointed them to go and bear fruit and that their fruit should abide (remain). He chose them to be sent.

Last week, we celebrated Pastor Brady Plunk and his family because they are being sent by Christ to the nations as missionaries. What an example of the sacrificial love we've been talking about. What an example of obedience to Jesus. What an example of godly people who took what Jesus revealed to them (the Great Commission) and responded in obedience. What an example of being sent to bear fruit.

That's why Jesus chose us—to bear fruit for God. If you have trusted Christ, you have been chosen to go and bear fruit. This is specifically focused on missions and evangelism. Look at the disciples. They went into all the world to preach the gospel and their fruit has lasted for 2000 years—the proof that their fruit remained is us. We're here 2000 years later halfway across the world believing the same message they proclaimed.

Christians, only what you do for Jesus will last. We can make great names for ourselves in this life, but only what you do in the name of Jesus and for the glory of God really matters. In the final analysis, it won't matter how much money you had, possessions you owned, or status you earned. All that matters is the work you've done to show Jesus as incomparably glorious.

And true Christians will bear fruit, because true abide in Christ, and as you abide in Christ, you will bear fruit for Christ.

Application

Question #1-Do you love the church?

I remember one time at my last church, we were having some kind of event outside and a lady from the neighborhood drove up on a golf cart. I didn't recognize her. She obviously lived nearby but had never been to the church. I simply asked her, "Have you come to a Sunday service?" She said, "I do all my praying at home." In other words, I don't need the church to have a relationship with God.

You hear this a lot today. I love Jesus but I don't like religion. What that usually means is I don't want anything to do with the church. There are a lot of people who believe it's possible to follow Jesus with no participation in the local church.

I hope it is absolutely clear in your minds that it is impossible to follow Jesus detached from the local church. Jesus commands us to love one another. How can we do that if we're not committed to the church. When he says love another, He doesn't mean people in general. He's talking about fellow believers.

It may appear I am preaching to the choir. After all, you are all church folk. But even among a congregation like this, it's easy to have a consumer mindset. It's easy to believe that we come to church on Sunday, get our religious fill and go on. You come in when the service starts, and you leave before the last song is over so you can beat the traffic. Church for you is more about an experience than it is a community of faith and mutual encouragement.

"Pastor, being committed to the local church would take more of my time, energy, and resources." That's the point. Love is sacrificial. Love costs something. But there is also a great return on investment.

Question #2-Do you obey Jesus?

Jesus said He laid down His life for His friends, and His friends are those who obey Him. Do you obey Jesus? There are a lot of people who call themselves Christians. There are even fewer people who obey Jesus.

This is why James says, faith without works is dead. Friends, we are saved by faith alone but you must understand that the faith that saves is never alone. It's always accompanied by obedience and good works.

This is why Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Many people will stand before Jesus one day thinking they will get into heaven. They will have called Him Lord. They will have been baptized, gone to the church and believed the right facts about the gospel. But their lives were never characterized by obedience. Which means their lives were never full of love for Christ.

Question #3-Do you know God?

Here's why I ask this question. Jesus said in verse 15 the reason the apostles are His friends and not just slaves is because of the knowledge that HE received from God and gave them, and remember that's salvific knowledge and knowledge of God. It's a knowledge that leads one into an intimate relationship with God. And being in relationship with God is the essence of Christianity. Jesus said, this is eternal life. That they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Knowing God equals eternal life. That's what eternal is—knowing God.

Many people go to church their whole lives thinking that Christianity is about believing and behaving. Believe the right facts about the Bible and be moral. That's good and necessary but that's not the essence of our faith. The foundational truth about Christians is we know God.

Do you know God? Or do you just know about God?

Question #4-Do you bear fruit for God?

Jesus said the purpose of His choosing the disciples is for them to bear fruit and their fruit will remain. Ephesians 1 says something similar about all believers. "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (VS4). The purpose of God choosing His people is for us to be holy and blameless before Him.

I can't tell you how many times people have said to me, "What if I am not chosen?" My question to them is, "Do you trust in Christ and are you bearing fruit? Are you growing in

godliness and Christ-like character? Are you contributing to the Great Commission by sharing the gospel and discipling the lost?" That's the evidence that Christ has chosen you.

Turn to 2 Peter 1:10, it says, *"Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election (another word for choosing), for if you practice these qualities you will never fall."* What qualities is he referring to? He says in verse 5 - *for this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Peter says, do you want to know if you've been called and chosen by God? Then look at your life. Are you growing in these virtues? Are you growing in faith, knowing, self-control, faithfulness, godliness, brotherly affection and love? If you are bearing such fruit then you have been chosen by God.

QUESTIONS:

1. How is loving others the way Jesus commands different from the way the world portrays it? (Mark 10:45, Philippians 2:6-8, Romans 5:8)
2. What are some ways that you sacrificially love others in the church?
3. If you are in Christ then you have been chosen by him to bear fruit. How does knowing this help you feel secure? (Ephesians 1:4-5, Lamentations 3:22-23, 1 Corinthians 1:9, Jeremiah 29:11, Isaiah 41:10, John 10:28, Joshua 1:9, 1 Corinthians 3:16, Psalm 55:22, 1 Peter 5:7, Hebrews 13:6, 2 Thessalonians 3:3) What are some ways that you can bear fruit? (Attend the next Discipleship 101 class to learn how to do this)
4. What is your ultimate motive for coming to church? Is it for an experience or is it to love and fellowship with the body of Christ?
5. Does your level of actual obedience to Christ match your level of claiming to know him?
6. How does loving this way glorify God? (Isaiah 43:6-7, 1 John 4:10)

PRAYER TOPICS:

- TJC Elder: **Chris Townson**
- NAMB Church Planter: **Matt Kendrick** - Fort Worth, TX - *Redemption City Church*
- Unreached People Group (UPG): **Yakut** in Poland
 - Population: 483,000
 - Christian: 3.0%
 - Evangelical: 0.1%

- Primary Religion: Ehtnic Religions
- Primary Language: Yakut
- Status: **Unreached**