

Series: Because of Christ

Date: 1.03.2021

Text: Hebrews 12.3-4 | **Title:** We keep the gospel at the center

CMO celebration

Hey I'm going to talk in a minute about the events we all watched unfold on wednesday. But there is something I want to celebrate with you first that I think connects beautifully to our message today. Our church is big on generosity here. We believe God was generous to us in Christ and continues to be generous to us. And so we look for ways to be generous together. And one of our favorite ways is our Christmas missions offering. 100% of this offering goes outside of the walls of mercy to support church planting around the world & to local outreach efforts here in our community. And I told you we weren't setting a goal because I wanted you to give out of the joy you have in Christ. Not only that, I know the financial impact of Covid is hitting some hard and I didn't think we needed the burden of a goal. We just wanted a gospel-motivated Christmas missions offering. Our record was right at \$70,000. Last year or year before. Honestly I didn't know what to expect but Mercy...you gave \$89,343.22!!! Most EVER! Mercy, your generosity is so contagious and I love your heart for seeing more people come to know Christ.

- Local – Ministries our members are active in - Congregations for Kids, Project 658, Charlotte Dream Center. Got a note from the head of the dream center just the other day thanking me for how mercy invests not just money but people into the ministry there.
- National – Image Church in Atlanta, Proclamation in TN, Park slope in Brooklyn.

- International – Catherine Mitchell in Kenya, church planters in Greece & several other areas we can't say. I will say if you didn't give or maybe have never given, you still can. Not to that offering but you can give to the ministry here. We've got big ministry hopes we are following God into and I believe generosity fuels that mission so come get in on it. But before you do, I want you to get to know us a little. I'd love to meet you. I'm hosting starting point right after this service. And would love to meet you. 20 minutes about who we are and what it looks like for someone to be a part of this church.

Moving ON to sermon intro

OK if you have your bible make your way over to the new testament book of Hebrews, chapter 12. We are in a sermon series called...Because of Christ. I told you this is a defining series for us. I've never really done a sermon series like this before. Where we take 6 sermons and open up scripture to talk about who God is calling us to be as a church. What makes Mercy...Mercy. And that's big. Kind of putting all our cards out there and saying we are going to look back in 5 years at this series and measure success as a church by what we set out in this series.

I had no idea how timely it would be for us as a local body of Christians in the historical moment we are in. Most of you by now have seen the video of the violent storming of our nation's capitol this week. Now if you know anything about me you know I believe the pulpit is NOT a political platform. So I will not be engaging in political analysis or speculation. What I will say is this: Probably like many of you, I couldn't

believe it. “How can this be?” Even if you were expecting ‘something’ like this could happen, it probably wasn’t that. And I imagine you aren’t happy. 5 people died after all. And as an American I was pretty mad & embarrassed for what the moment meant for our country.

But I will tell you what, I was grieved to see Jesus’ name being attached to the violence. Now I don’t know the heart of anyone. I barely know my own heart from day to day. So I certainly don’t know the heart of anyone carrying a Jesus flag into that riot. I also know I only get what the media gives me. Just like you. So whether that was a slander tactic by people who hate Jesus or it was a sincere sentiment from people who claim to follow Jesus...the actions we saw were not representative of Jesus or the gospel his church has the honor of proclaiming. The Jesus of scripture

- Is a king! But John 18.36 – His kingdom is not of this world
- He’s the God of justice and yet he told Peter in this world those who wield the sword will perish by it. Matt 26.51-53.
- He calls us to Pray for our leaders, honor & submit to them not threaten & overrun them. 1 Tim 2.2, Romans 13.1, 1 Peter 2.17

He is the king of peace & mercy and he’s the Son of God who commands angel armies and the only gates he storms are the gates of hell itself. One day HE himself is going to come back riding in on a cloud and trumpet will sound and on THAT DAY every knee will bow and every tongue confess he is lord.

Until then, we preach of a kingdom not of this world. I did a whole seminar on God & Politics in October that you can find on our website if you want to get more on that topic, but here’s the connection for today:

In God’s timing we are talking about who we are as a church. And I kid you not, months ago we decided the order of this set of sermons and everything. And today we are rolling out the first of 5 values that will guide us and I am just...well, I’m just thankful this one is today. Here it is:

- **Mercy Value: We keep the gospel at the center of all we do.** It’s about working from our salvation, and not for it. This matters because everything we feel & do flows from what we believe. Our feels & our actions are always belief-motivated.

Last week I shared our vision for the next five years - inspired by the first two verses of Hebrews 12. I won’t re-preach the whole thing but you remember verse 2?

2 keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith...

We fix our eyes on Jesus. That’s what we are called to do as individuals and as a church. Look to Jesus. And run the race set before us because of who he is and what he has done for us. So our theme both as individual Christians and as a church body is “Because of Christ.” That’s our sermon series because that’s our testimony. He’s the source of our faith and he’s the one changing us for the better. Remember I said you are not

who you once were, And you are not who you will be...because of Christ. And we, as a church, are going to be a more God-glorifying church than we are now...because of Christ at work in us. So we said our vision as a church is:

Because of Christ, Mercy Church will devote itself to becoming a maturing, multiplying, multicultural church.

That's our next 5 years right there. And over this series I'm going to be sharing the values, or operating principles, that will guide us as we work towards that vision. I'll also be sharing some very tangible steps we will take. So this is a great series if you are new to Christianity because you are hearing the heartbeat of our faith. And its great if you are new to this particular church because you are hearing what we are all about. The beliefs that motivate our actions. Now to get into this first and most critical value I want us again to look at verse 2 and then we'll add verses 3-4

2 keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. -- Hebrews 12:2

Ya'll are going to think today that I am a broken record because of how important I believe this is. The opening of Verse 2 – Keeping our eyes on Jesus. KEEPING. OUR. EYES. ON. Jesus. This is one of those where every single word matters.

Because you and I are always looking at something. And what we fix our eyes on...and eyes represent attention obviously.

What we fixate on. What we look at...becomes what we love. What we cherish and treasure. So let me give you a question to consider as we go through today: **What are you looking at?** What are the eyes of your heart looking at? I've mentioned a couple of times I think that we have a puppy. And sometimes I think...man that dog cannot pay attention to anything. But then Courtney cooks bacon. And ya'll...all of the sudden that little fur ball so full of energy will FREEZE and Fix her eyes on one thing. Bacon. We call her name, offer her food, toys, etc. Doesn't matter. Cause she's fixed her eyes on Bacon. Her heart wants bacon so her eyes can't stop looking at bacon.

What is that thing that commands your attention. Like that? What do you think about while you are at work or doing something else? Where does your mind go when you have idle time? What's your bacon? Some of you are like...my bacon is bacon! Maybe. Maybe you can't help but visualize the food that will ease your pain from a tough day.

- Are you looking at the things others have? Average american spends 2.5 hours a day on social media. We gorge our souls on envy.
- **Are you fixing the eyes of your heart on a relationship?** Checking your phone constantly. Why hasn't he texted back? What is coming after those 3 grey dots? Why did they appear and then he didn't send anything!?! DOES HE HATE ME? That's the eyes of your heart seeing a boy instead of Jesus as the one worthy of your love.
- A political agenda? – How often do you find yourself thinking “If that person gets elected...this is the end?” Do you find yourself more motivated to defend your

political position than celebrating your eternal position?

- Finances? Health? Family Schedule?

Bottom line is the language of this call from God to us is very active KEEPING OUR EYES ON Jesus. Bacon Vision. Wouldn't that be a great sermon title? I'm not calling it that but that would be awesome. Because its not like the dog is fighting competing temptations. Nothing else is registering. It's just BACON. We need Jesus Vision the way that dog has bacon vision. We need it individually because nothing else satisfies.

I want to talk about why that would be so good for us and how we get there. And we are going to bring in verses 3 & 4 to help us.

3 For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won't grow weary and give up.

Now the author is giving us a little about what it means to fix our eyes on Jesus. It's not just that we like think about a picture of Jesus. Short Middle Eastern guy with what I'm guessing was just a great beard. No, Jesus Vision is to keep our eyes on what he did and the reality that he did it FOR us. Which is amazing. He endured hostility from sinners...SUCH hostility. Ya'll...sinners not only ridiculed, mocked, beat, & arrested him, *they... murdered him*. And the reason he allowed all of this to happen is so that you and I won't grow weary and give up in our struggle against sin. THAT'S THE GOSPEL!

Take a second and consider that glorious mysterious love.

If you are new to church – The GOSPEL....

He allowed himself to be murdered because doing so was the only way to supply us *strength* to fight sin. You get how much God loves you!? Look at verse 4.

4 In struggling against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Now, it seems from this passage that the struggle he's talking about is against external forces that want to attack Christians for their belief. This is why he says you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood. In other words...Jesus DIED at the hands of sinners and he died so that you would have strength for the battle against sin! And he's saying...you haven't yet shed blood at the hands of sinners because of your belief in the gospel. Plenty who read this would one day follow their savior into death because of the gospel. That's clear from the last chapter. And he's saying you have not gone there yet. And those that did found STRENGTH to not give up from their savior. SO listen up.

For us though, that struggle is a lot more indirect than direct isn't it? Most of us are not being physically attacked for believing the gospel. But we are being increasingly marginalized in our broader society. We are not the majority. Choosing to believe what Jesus says about marriage and family, about gender, about race, about justice....In an increasingly un-civil world believing these will continue to create distance between you and the average non-christian. And that's a struggle...especially because Jesus says I don't want you to leave the world!

He sent you and I...the church... into the world!! But man when we try to live the Christian life in the non-christian world...it CAN BE A STRUGGLE! And I just want you to know God knows you struggle with living out your faith in the world. If you weren't made for this world but for eternity, you shouldn't feel fully at home here. Which means you will struggle. That's why he gave us ARMOR in Ephesians 6. It's why he talks about spiritual WAR. Because there is a struggle we go through to be the faithful people of God. And this war is fought on multiply fronts. 3 that I see common to our cultural moment and plenty more I know I need to see better. I want to talk about 3 battle fronts for a minute.

They are battle fronts that have been heightened the past few months but they are always there. Give me a few minutes for this little important explanation.

- **We compromise with the progressive agenda** – Honestly the world can scream so loud that we think...well maybe if we just concede this battle, we can make Jesus more acceptable to our present day and age. After all we see some things we like: care for the poor, a message of equality for all...and we then make the mistake of thinking...That's our home. After all the other agenda couldn't be my home so, I guess this is it. So easy example: we consider bending on things like the Christian sexual ethic because it doesn't match the ethic of the day. Of course, this is absurd even from a logic standpoint because culture will always change its values and the church cannot chase culture. Secondly, it is the gospel's very distinctiveness from culture that causes people to take notice.

Something is different about them and maybe they have something I need. If we look like the world...why would the world think we have something it needs? But if the church doesn't keep it's eyes on Jesus and runs hard enough that direction for long enough you'll end up praying something like "Amen & Awomen."

- **We compromise with the conservative agenda** – Because the progressive agenda is so loud and constant, we CAN look at the conservative agenda as a refuge. We see some things that resonate with us – Protection of the unborn, religious liberty, but we make the mistake of thinking...THAT'S OUR home. So we move in and before we know it we are saying what they say "You can't be a Christian and vote for...." Which is a rather egregious judgment call. And then its just one step - under the banner of political expediency – that we silently endorse character in a leader we would EVISCERATE if from someone who didn't serve our agenda. Listen to me - when you are only prophetic against one side, that's not prophetic. That's partisan. And we CANNOT endorse any political ideology to take up the banner of Jesus because it will ALWAYS USE Jesus for its own good. The atrocities that have happened in Jesus' name go back far. Nationalism is the enemy of the hour and the evangelical church is the trojan horse it rode in on.

But most importantly we don't compromise because God, not culture, is God. And there is no expiration date on his truth. Jesus is neither a modern day progressive NOR conservative.

Nor was he a member of the Whig party, the federalist party, the green party, the tea party nor is he a member of any other movement in any other political landscape in the world. He is KING, he reigns. His truth is always what is best for all people groups of all time. And he will never bless any attempt to leverage his name for political gain.

We withdraw from the world – I see this in a lot of Christians and honestly, in the struggle...I tend to go this way. I refuse to compromise so I'm like you know what...let's just do our own thing. Who needs em anyway? After all Jesus is better. I'll just build little walls that keep the non-Christians and their nasty ways OUT. But that doesn't work. First off – unless you are willing to be Amish – you can't wall yourself off from culture. But secondly and more importantly – Jesus was always IN the world! He was with sinners because he LOVED sinners! And then he prayed to God as he was leaving – God keep them (the church) IN the world. Don't take them out of the world. Why? Because he LOVED the world! He died for it. And in our fear of the world we would withdraw. But the problem is the further you get from something the harder it is to love it. Jesus wanted us in proximity so we would have his empathy.

So what struggle is Jesus supplying us strength for? It's to be a faithful presence in the world. To love people like he loved them. To contextualize the gospel without compromising it. And honestly, that's the ongoing struggle of the church. It's an ongoing struggle for every Christian. That's WHY it's a struggle for the church. I want to withdraw sometimes. I want to "not fight that battle" other times. In my short 5 years as your pastor I've been accused of leading our church into both of

these camps. too. Of ignoring the world sometimes and of compromising with the world other times. In fact I have been accused of both in the past couple of weeks. Helps me know I'm right where I'm called to be. Appreciate it.

- Life verse Joshua 1.9

So how do we remain a faithful presence in the world? How do each of us find strength to follow Jesus into this battle against sin? Remember that bacon? Jesus Vision. Fix our Eyes on Jesus.

Mercy Ministry Value

We keep the gospel at the center of all we do

We keep the gospel at the center. The gospel is the center of our focus. It's at the center of our ministry here because it's at the center of the heart of God. When you keep your eyes on Jesus...keep them there...you'll see the gospel ushers in a fundamentally different way of approaching God and then approaching the world. And in this different way...YOU WILL FIND STRENGTH. WE will find strength to be a faithful witness in the world. Because living FROM our salvation in Christ – and doing so together – is what God provides strength for! Listen I'm about to turn our attention off of the cultural moment which I normally don't spend as much time on and turn towards the personal.

We are going to be a gospel-centered church. That may be new for you if you are new to Mercy. But this is core stuff. In fact all our other values flow out of this one. So let me explain

what I mean by the gospel giving you a different way to approach God.

There are two primary approaches people take to God. The religion approach – I obey God and therefore I am accepted by God. If I follow the rules of my religion, I will EARN God’s acceptance & favor. Life will be good here and I will get into heaven.

The Gospel approach – I am accepted by God, therefore I obey. Obedience is a response to acceptance instead of a pursuit of acceptance.

These two approaches produce two different types of change:

Religion produces only a mechanical, outward change.

Illus. Say you are standing before a sand pile. How could you make it “grow”? You add more sand to it. This is mechanical change. That’s fundamentally different from how a tree... grows from within, organically.

The Gospel produces inward change: Growth from within.

Religion will change your life a lot... give you a lot of stuff to do (Bible studies to go to, prayers to pray, ways to behave). It is mechanical change. The gospel motivates you in an entirely different matter: organically. It is an inward, organic change. A change of heart and motivations.

Let me show you the difference...

Religious change only furthers our fear and pride (we feel proud if we meet the standard; and we are afraid that if we don’t obey we will be further rejected)

E.g. Racism: Racism arises out of insecurity in the heart that needs to look down on other people (or a race of people) to bolster your own self image. If you try to change someone by saying, “Racists are bad people. If you’re a racist, everyone will

think badly of you,” then you’re only furthering the problem that started the racism to begin with—fear and insecurity! Paul had to confront Peter about his racism when he refused to eat with Gentiles. When Paul confronted him, he didn’t say, “Peter, what’s your problem? You’re an Apostle, and we’re all losing respect for you. If you don’t straighten up we’re going to talk badly about you for 2000 years.” Rather, he said, (Galatians 2:14), “You need to think about the Gospel.” To coerce Peter’s behavior by threatening only furthers the problem. You have to deal with the insecurity that is causing the racism! So Paul said, “We have been loved abundantly though we didn’t deserve any of it. So we can love others like that.”

Religious change fails to address the “root” of our sin. It just applies fear and pressure. But

The Gospel changes us in a fundamentally different way.

It is a change that flows from security, not toward security.

1 John 4:10. “We love Him because He first loved us.” Love from Him produces love for Him and for others.

E.g. When I was first saved, I thought that to be a good Christian you had to memorize Scripture. So I memorized Scripture. Then I thought that to be a good Christian you had to share Christ. So I witnessed like a fool. Then I thought you had to go overseas. So I went on mission trips. Then I learned that to be a good Christian you had to be kind to the poor. So I got involved in community ministry. And on and on this went, with me wearing myself out trying to do enough to become a “good Christian.” How can you get off this train? By understanding that you can add nothing to what Christ has done for you. Now I do all those things, not because I “have to” to maintain my status as a good Christian, but because I

want to—in response to Jesus and out of the overflow of His love in me!

Romans 12:1- Therefore I appeal to you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship.

Paul appeals for radical change on the basis of the mercy God has shown in the Gospel. When we meditate on the Gospel, offering all parts of ourselves to Jesus will seem “reasonable” to us.

- His generosity makes us more generous:
- His relational love makes us more relationally loving:
- His forgiveness makes us more forgiving:
- His security forms our self-image. - The Gospel is that we are at the same time hopeless sinners and loved children. Religion beats us downward; Christ’s work in us calls us upward.
- Abiding in Jesus’ love makes us spiritually fruitful.

The point: The Gospel is not the ABC’s, but the A–Z of Christianity. The Gospel is the way we grow. Not the front door, but the whole house. We are not justified by faith in the Gospel and then sanctified by obedience to good Christian principles on marriage, child raising, money management, and etc. Galatians 3:1–3 says we are sanctified, made to live in a holy manner, by faith in the Gospel as well. The way we grow in Christ is the same as the way we began in Christ, and that is by putting faith in the Gospel. The seeds that survive in Jesus’

parable are those that drive the Gospel seed deep into the soil. Surface level penetration of the Gospel produces only superficial, fading changes.

Religion tells you to “go and change;” the Gospel changes you “on the spot.”

Example: Helium balloon. When you feel a balloon with your breath, the only way to keep it floating high in the air is to continually smack it with your hands. That’s how religion keeps you motivated: it hits you and threatens you on a continual basis. The other way to keep the balloon afloat is to fill it with helium. That will keep the balloon afloat automatically with no external coercion.

Depending on Gospel-change means 2 primary things: Changing not in order to be accepted by God, but by reflecting on His radical love and complete acceptance of us Depending on God’s power, not our own, to change us (Immediately saying after conviction, “God, I need your resurrection power to do that in me!”)

How do you teach yourself to live this way? Jesus Vision. Fix your eyes on Jesus TODAY. Meditate – Consider him! John 15 – Abide in him. Speak the gospel and its promises to one another.