



Series: Because of Christ

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Text: Hebrews 12.1-2 | **Title:** Because of Christ

Happy New Year Mercy Church!! I know we can't expect everything to change just because the new year happened, but I'm coming into this year hopeful and I hope you are too. What we celebrated at Christmas is still true as we start the new year. God Loves You, God wants you, and God has come to rescue and redeem messed up broken people just like you and me.

The idea of starting fresh in a new year always reminds me I am a new creation in Christ. The power for change is in him and that gets me hype. And here at the start of the year I have some fresh stuff from God's word to share with you.

For most of last fall I was praying, both on my own and then with the elders of our church, about what God has next for

Mercy Church. Let me explain – We've been around for 5 years. We aren't the new kids on the block anymore. As awesome as that band was. OG boy band. Donnie Wahlberg...Some of you had their posters on your walls. And now you drive a minivan.

Anyway, that's not us anymore. God has built and grown a gospel-ministry here that I am proud to be a part of, honored to pastor, and eager to move forward with. We are a growing church filled with members who believe God has something he wants to do through this ministry here..

So today we begin a series of sermons that will lay out our vision for the NEXT 5 years of Mercy Church. I'm going to share with you our vision which is a way to say...I'm going to tell you where we think God is taking us. I'm going to unveil a couple of big moves Mercy intends to make that will affect what our ministry looks like for years to come. I'm also going to share with you our ministry values. These are the guiding principles that define who we are. They explain why we do what we do. It's taken 5 years to really get a handle on who we are as a local church. What makes us Mercy Church. And now we are putting language to the culture God is building here and man, I'm excited.

And as you will hear throughout this series – it is a very, very important time for us to rally together around a God-glorifying culture engaging vision of church. Listen mercy, as a church we have the joy of sharing the Good News of the gospel with the people in our community. And to do that well, we have to know our community. Over the past 30 years the church in the

west has lost some ground. Before 2020, 2/3 of American churches were in decline. We really don't know what the state of churches will be post pandemic. Early Estimates are 20-25% will not survive at all. Now listen – the gospel is just as true today as it was 30 years ago. God hasn't changed and people's need for Jesus hasn't changed. But a big reason the church has lost ground is because we haven't acknowledged the impact culture shifts have had on people and we haven't figured out how to build churches that present the gospel as a compelling alternative to the worldviews of the day.

As our resident Brett Bouldin said in his sermon last Sunday...Christ really is Better. And in this series we are going to talk about what kind of Christians, and what kind of church, God is calling us to be so we can give our lives to helping our children, our friends, our community see that Christ is better. Helping YOU see how Christ is better.

So I'm telling you, if you are new...you could not have picked a better time to check out this church. Vision & Values. Let's go.

In sharing our vision I first want to take you to the passage of scripture God has laid on my heart for Mercy Church. It's Hebrews chapter 12. Specifically verses 1-2. The heartbeat that I believe has come to capture who Mercy Church is...I see in these verses. So let me walk through them and show you a couple of things we need to consider personally and then a couple of things we need to consider collectively. That's how this sermon series will go by the way. How do each of us individually need to respond to God's word...And man I'm

hoping for big steps of faith for you. And then what does it mean for us as a church.

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us,

Therefore. Whenever you see the word 'therefore' u need to know what its 'therefore.' And this is referring to chapter 11 where for 40 verses Paul catalogues the history of the faith of God's people trusting him against overwhelming odds. And he opens this chapter where he's calling us to endurance & bold steps...by reminding us we are not alone in our faith. We haven't gone first. There is a cloud of witnesses. Who believed God's way was better than the way of the world. And it was a costly, counter cultural belief. Every time.

- By faith Noah built an ark. Nobody praised him. They mocked him for his obedience to God.
- By faith Abraham left everything to obey God. You don't leave everything at the stage in life where you are finally established. But he saw God's promise of blessing as better than culture's promise of blessing. Nobody applauded him for it.
- By faith Moses stepped down from power and then challenged that power under threat of death. Because he believed God's power was stronger than power he could attain on earth. He believed God.
- Others were tortured, not accepting their release, so they might gain a better resurrection. In other words when culture drew a line in the sand they chose to believe Christ and die rather than recant and live.

This is the cloud of witnesses. Real human beings who believed God had something better for them than anyone or anything on earth. That's the true historical church. That's our heritage as Christians. God's people living faithfully, as best they could, in their day.

And God is saying this is a LARGE cloud. The kind of cloud that you can't see the ends of. The cloud that comes down and engulfs you. Therefore, **LET US**.

We haven't gone first, but it is our turn. It's our time. It's our time Mercy. Listen even though we are only 5 years old...we have a history here. And I want to say to you who are with us now – some have gone before us. 2015-2017 they poured blood sweat and tears into launching this church. Because following God into a church plant was an act of obedience so that more could know Jesus. And God honored it. A couple of them are now with the Lord. And others God called away to other works. So listen to me – you who are with us now – Now is YOUR turn to pick up this ministry. Not to spectate. Not to be a consumer.

Our mission is not to make consumers who love self, love convenience, and love our comforts. Its to make disciples of Jesus who love God, love others, and love our world.

And when you read LET US you need to read yourself in that pronoun. It's time for you to pick up and own this ministry. To honor the faith of the first generation of Mercy members by practicing that same kind of faith. The number one enemy of church impact in it's community is it's own people spectating instead of participating.

You'll know you've done that when your pronouns change.

When you go from referring to Mercy as They to referring to Mercy as WE. From "that church" to "my church."

And listen whatever your past, whatever your present...God has a ministry planned for you. You get that right? You are not too young. Middle Schoolers – you need to realize God has a ministry for you RIGHT NOW that he has already prepared you for! You are a part of US. Maybe you feel you aren't ready...The only qualifier for ministry is belief in the grace he has supplied. No matter your past, he can restore and redeem you through that grace. He plans to use you to help others find hope in him. I don't know who needs to hear that today but no matter who you are, God has a work to do in and through you.

And I hope for many of you, your action step is going to be to make Mercy Church your church. And to pick up the ministry here to reach today's world with the gospel.

let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us,

This little word picture is so, so good. The Christian life is a race...but it is a marathon not a sprint. And I don't know if you run, I try but usually fail. But listen, you run a marathon differently than a sprint. A sprint needs speed. A marathon needs endurance. And too many young Christians try to sprint with speed and they get exhausted. They flame out a year after college because they didn't have a faith that was ready to endure the hardships of life. That was ready to be tested against competing worldviews. He doesn't say don't run hard.

RUN HARD. If you are under 30 years old...we are counting on you, in fact, to set the pace for our church. Older people settle too easily. BUT, You gotta have the endurance for that run.

How do you run the marathon? You lay aside the things that will ensnare you. OH. MY. GOODNESS. This verse is the one we want to skip over in the Christian life. You understand what he's saying right? Anything that is a threat to slowing you down, or sidelining you...lay it aside! Get rid of it. And its gonna take some work. Because these things SO EASILY ensnare us.

You ever noticed how easy it is to get distracted from following God? For everything to be going right for a while and then somehow you find yourself in a dark place. That propensity to LIKE IT when you are ensnared by sin...That's called your sin nature. We all have it. The human heart is like a steering wheel out of alignment. Left to itself it will veer off the path.

And the reason I find so many Christians miss out on the JOY of running the Christian life is that they are trying to run while carrying a lot of extra weight. And this isn't talking about suffering. Suffering in scripture is actually a catalyst for faith. This is talking about sin. The things in your life that act like weights around your legs keeping you from running with God. These are the snares that pull you off the path entirely. And a big thing I'm going to ask you this series is what sin...what self-focused indulgence...keeps you from running the race God created you for?

And in the month of January I want you to throw it off. Cast it aside. Throw it down at the foot of the cross and I want you to

tell God you need help throwing it off. Truthfully its too big of a burden for you to throw away on your own. Or you would have already. You are like the guy thinking he can bench press 250 when he cant. You need some help. You need to ask the Lord for help and yes, you need to ask a friend for help. Maybe it's a new friend. That's what community group is for here. It's to help you make friends that also want to run with Jesus. And ya'll run together.

- Porn users – With the help of the Lord, throw porn away. You are free from that. You don't have to have it. Christ can give you victory over it. Tell SOMEBODY. GET HELP. We will help you if you will just ask.
- DEBT – Some of you are slaves to your credit cards. We have a course we offer called Financial Peace. Free yourself from debt. Things you want to do, things God is calling you to. Areas of generosity & ministry but you are enslaved to debt so you cant. TAKE A STEP THIS MONTH
- HUSBANDS & WIVES – throw off bitterness and anger and deceit towards one another. Take your marriage to the Lord. You have someone you are to run the race with hand in hand. Let the Lord...and LET SOME OTHERS...help you out.

You know why this matters? I believe God uses his people to introduce other people to himself. BUT, what I know from scripture is that God will not be mocked. SO, if we try and preach a gospel that is not changing us...a call to repentance and we have hidden sin...God will not honor that. We can build a big program here without the Lord. YOU can live a double life. You have that ability. To play the game and yet

secretly give yourself to your sin. But you will not find joy in the Lord. In fact Jesus called folks who lived that way in his day white washed tombs. Or -Nicely cleaned up containers of death.

And listen there is this moment in scripture where the people of God are going to battle but they get crushed because of the sin of one man. A non leader regular guy named Achan was hiding secret sin and the Lord did not go with his people, in fact the army suffered serious defeat, until that ONE man's sin was exposed. Now I'm not making a one-for-one comparison BUT I am saying that God takes your hidden sin, my hidden sin, so serious he will stop everything because he will not be mocked by you pretending to others like it doesn't exist. But the great news for you is that while Achan was put to death for his sin, Jesus was put to death for yours. So you can repent and instead of death you can find FORGIVENESS waiting for you! Freedom from that thing! Throw it off! Cast it DOWN!

Somebody needs to hear today and needs to let the holy spirit climb over that wall you've put up and RECEIVE the hope – YOU. CAN. BE. FREE! Not by pursuing pleasure that leaves you empty and numb. That's not freedom. That's slavery to sin masquerading as freedom. True freedom comes from Christ who actually fulfills the deeper desires you are trying to fulfill with those shallow, temporary fixes. But you've gotta trust him. Remember the cloud. And without knowing how its going to turn out...throw those sins & hindrances aside.

And as you do, look at verse 2...

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

SOURCE – He is the beginning of our faith. He is the one who not only grants us access to salvation. But he initiates our desire for his salvation. The gospel is the POWER of God to save. Jesus is the source. Some translations read author, some pioneer. He is the dayspring says Zechariah. The only reason we have any hope in this life is CHRIST. Our cause, our origin story as a believers and as a church...is CHRIST.

The title of this sermon series is "BECAUSE OF CHRIST." The Heartbeat of Mercy Church is Because of Christ. We are saved, redeemed, empowered ONLY because of Christ. It's not about me its about Christ and what he wants to do in and through me. So let's do a little group testifying. We are going to speak truth right now. I don't care if you are ALL ALONE at home. Nobody needs to hear your voice say these words than YOU anyway.

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I HAVE NEW LIFE

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I AM LOVED

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I AM WANTED

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I AM WHOLE

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I HAVE GOD'S PRESENCE

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I HAVE A FAMILY

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I HAVE A PURPOSE

BECAUSE OF CHRIST – I HAVE ETERNAL VICTORY

BECAUSE OF CHRIST! you are alive right now Because of Christ. You are a new creation Because of Christ. Your family legacy is being re-written because of Christ. Your broken past

is left in the grave because of Christ. You have hope & peace because of Christ. CHRIST...Christ is the source of our faith. He is our SAVIOR. He is the one who is Better than anything else. He is the friend of the sinner, he's the healer. He's the creator & he's the sustainer.

He's the source of this Church's faith. Some of us planted Mercy Church and the reason we did it...is BECAUSE OF CHRIST. Because of who he is. Because of what he has done and in doing and Because you believe he can work through you. Why does every person go into the baptism waters? Not because of Pastor Spence. Not because of Pastor Scott. It's because of Christ THROUGH me. Christ THROUGH Scott. Christ THROUGH you. Apart from Christ I'm nothing! The source of Mercy Church is CHRIST. And I am resolved, this church is resolved, to preach of first importance CHRIST and him crucified. And the more we embrace our weakness and his strength through us, the more he will work through us.

Perfector – of our faith. He is not only the one who gives us faith and is the object of our faith...He is the one strengthening & refining our faith. I love this. Jesus doesn't just save you, he remains with you strengthening and refining your faith. The perfector is one who not only makes our faith perfect because he supplies it, but he is perfecting us. In other words there is a promise that as you and I commit ourselves to Christ...he is going to transform us. We ARE NOT who we once were and we will not be who we are. He's gonna keep working in us! There is HOPE!

Chiseling Moments –

- You are a raw block of marble. God is the sculptor. And he is making you into a masterpiece. But to do so, he's gotta use a chisel and a hammer. Serious sandpaper. And that's gonna hurt. Formation isn't always easy.
- Big spiritual moments are usually where God is revealing and chiseling away sin in my life. Where the people around me say "man you are showing anger a lot more. This is me lately btw. Common for guys as they hit their mid to late...20s. Get angry because I feel entitled to a certain ease of life. A certain respect. And When my kids disobey, that offends me. I'm spence Shelton. How dare you. And Jesus the perfector comes along and says NAH, we gonna chisel that entitlement away. And I'm like HEY. THAT HURTS. And I fight it. Until a friend, or my wife, or Christ himself through his word reminds me he is better than that anger...And I choose to believe he will supply not just strength but peace & joy...I'm going to do the opposite of what I want to do and I'm going to forgive. Some of that entitlement that has been breeding anger...tink tink tink.
- This month - ASK GOD to reveal the sin he wants to go to work on. And invite him into it. I'm telling you that's a scary prayer. But he will change you for the better.

Now let me close this individual portion by showing you why you can trust him with your life like that. Second part of verse 2.

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 12:1-2 (CSB)

Why did he endure the humiliating death of a criminal? Why did he see the shame of the cross...the shame of that criminals death...Pick up that shame and thought so little of that shame that he did not bother to avoid it. Then the author talks about the resurrection in the coolest of terms. He sat down...living people sit down. Not dead people. He rose from the grave ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. WHY?

Because of the JOY that lay before him...What is the joy? The joy is the salvation his death and resurrection would bring to you and I!

We are the joy of Christ. Christ didn't begrudgingly go to the cross. He went because you being saved from your sin and given new life brought him JOY! And he looked THROUGH death to see our life and said with his last breath said about our sin debt - IT IS FINISHED! Why can you trust him? Because surely if he didn't abandon you in HIS darkest hour...he won't abandon you in yours.

Because of Christ – because of what he did and what he is doing...you can trust him. You can throw off that sin and run with him FOR him.

Vision for Mercy Church

Now let me briefly tell you what this all means for us as a church. God has given us a mission that remains unchanged. To make disciples of Jesus who love God, love each other, and

love our world.

Our vision has been and remains to see a gospel awakening in Charlotte carried to the ends of the earth. That is a generational vision. A mountaintop that should God allow me to pastor Mercy until I die...that's what I long to see. Where there is a maturing, multiplying, multicultural church, preaching the gospel faithfully, within 10 minutes of every person in the Charlotte area. Where orphan care, homeless care, poverty alleviation, racial justice initiatives, prisoner rehabilitation, addiction recovery – where the CHURCH of Jesus Christ is leading the charge to bring healing in pockets of brokenness. And noticeable shifts are happening. Where the % of churches on the decline is in the majority instead of the minority. Where pastors are being trained & sent out regularly because more churches are needed to shepherd more new disciples. Where Unreached Unengaged Uncontacted people groups are being reached by missionaries sent from Charlotte. THAT'S THE LONG RANGE VISION. That's the mountaintop. And I am begging God to let me see it.

What we are going to do in January is say ok if that is the mountaintop generational vision, how can we focus that in to the next 5 years? What does it look like for Mercy to contribute to a gospel awakening over the next 5 years? We believe we need to focus on three characteristics of God's church.

Over the next 5 years, Because of Christ, Mercy Church will devote itself to being a maturing, multiplying, multicultural church.

Our 5 year vision is not a destination on a map but instead a portrait of who we want to become that is based on what we believe. And I am so excited about it.

Maturing – This is a lot of what we’ve talked about today. As your pastor my job is to help you grow into the image of Christ & to equip you for the ministry he has created you for. So we are going to focus resources and energy on maturing as believers. For adults, This means we’ll be doubling down on our commitment to community groups and to our equip ministry. Because growing as a Christian involves some educational learning and some walking through life together learning. You’ll hear about that in week 3 when we talk more about our value of taking next steps in discipleship together.

Multiplying – Like I said, God uses people to reach people. We are called to multiply our individual influence by sharing the gospel and we are called to multiply our ministry as a local church. In a few weeks I’m going to share more details on what that means but here are the bullets. You ready:

- By 2025 we are going to raise up & train 2 church planting teams and send them out from Mercy to plant local churches.
- We are going to establish a missionary training center here that will send at least 10 missionaries to live full time overseas with more in the pipeline. We’ve already begun this with two rounds of our first-level training steps happening in the summer and fall of 2020.
- As you know We are going to plant a campus of Mercy church in NE charlotte very soon this year. Our hope is

to open by Easter. Right now, if the Lord allows, we will be planting a mercy campus in Union County in 2021. Again more to come on that. if that’s near where you live, start praying.

Multicultural – I will be delivering an entire sermon on this in a few weeks because pursuing multicultural unity under the name of Christ is one of our values as a church. In 2021 we are establishing a team of mercy members, led by pastor Rashard Barnes, who will assess Mercy’s ministry and make recommendations to the elders on what next steps we can begin to take to become the multi-cultural church God has created us to be. We get to experience more of God with more cultures represented in this body. One culture does not have a monopoly on the worship of God. Just as every individual christian has baggage but also a redemption story, so does every culture. Again more to come but we will listen and learn and by his grace grow into all he has for us there.

ALL of this, and actually there is plenty I haven’t laid out because this is just one sermon. But all OF THIS is because of Christ. Mercy God has been so good to us. Blessed us in so many ways.

I believe he has brought you...I’m absolutely not joking 100% not preacher rhetoric serious – I believe he has brought you here because he has gifted you a certain way. He wants to draw you closer to himself...maturing you as you participate in this body. He wants to multiply his name through your ministry here. As we figure out your giftings...you operating in your gifting will be how the gospel multiplies. And he wants

you to experience the power of a culturally diverse family of believers on mission together. Maybe you come from a minority culture and you will be a pioneer here. That's a high calling and we are going to do our best to honor you as you lead our church.

May God reveal to you your next step as he leads us through this series together. And may everything we do be clearly and joyfully done Because of Christ. Let's pray.