

A Community to be Reached for Christ

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[0 : 00] We were singing there about God's plans for us and that's been part of a series that we've been looking at over the last five weeks that it's coming to an end today.

This is the last of a series, a short summer series based on praying and planning, planning and prayer, plan and pray. And we've looked at various themes over this period. We've begun with an introduction which simply looked at the importance of committing everything we do to the Lord in prayer because as Christians we believe that, we believe that, and we'll go on to look at this next week in the start of another series that, you know, he says, without me, he says you can't do anything.

Without me you can't do anything and it's key to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. So it's about the importance of planning, all that we do in our lives, but also recognizing that we're committing our life and our thoughts and our plans to God.

So that was an introduction. Then we looked at how that outworks itself personally in your life, as you plan your life as you think forward. How does God involved in that even when things maybe don't go according to plan for us?

[1 : 14] And also what that means for your life as individuals within the church. So we looked at that in one week. And then we looked at planning and prayer in connection with the city and what it means to be involved in the city and be in the city center and be a church here and the connections we have as individuals and as groups within the city and how we reach that city with the gospel that we love.

And then the last two, last week and this week are slightly different. They're looking at issues that are huge issues for us as Christians and how we can bring the gospel into these situations and how we can reach into people's lives with the gospel and how we can respond and react.

They're kind of wisdom issues. How we live in the society, the world in which we live, how we can plan to pray and act into situations within our society that are difficult.

Last week we looked at abortion and the difficulty and the challenges and the need for prayer and grace as we considered that situation.

And today is the last one we're looking at. The title is a community to be reached for Christ. And I'm wanting today to look at the LGBT community and individuals and look to reach out to individuals and to that community with the gospel and the wisdom we need and the need for prayer into that situation.

[2 : 47] And the reason, I have a strong burden about that. So I guess that's part of it. But I think it's also because it's part of a much wider issue for us in terms of the world in which we live in indeed as is abortion.

Why particularly that community and those connected with it? Well, I think partly because it's presented to us as a very distinct community within our society.

They have a very strong sense of identity and belonging. And that identity and belonging is in their sexuality and in their chosen sexuality. And that is a really strong identity that they form.

And their great slogan is generally, love is love. And the reason I've got such a great burden about that is because I think they think that God hates gay people.

And they think that Christians are bigoted homophobes. They're the enemy. I think that's what a lot of gay people think. And quite often that is expressed within the gay community.

[4 : 04] And so in some ways it's quite an impenetrable community for us, sometimes because of our own homophobia, sometimes because of our own failure to reach out and our judgmental attitudes.

But I have a great concern that we reach that community with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I think we should have that concern for every person who doesn't know Jesus.

How do we reach out in love and in grace to these lovely people who work with us, who are part of a very distinct and different community, and who share with us all this spiritual brokenness as it reflects our own natural spiritual condition?

How do we meet that community with God's grace and truth? Because I think that's a huge issue. I think sexuality is a huge issue in the society in which we live. The unraveling, and it is broader therefore than what is simply presented in the LGBT community, the unraveling of gender identity and the increasing divergence in society's thinking and in the Christian ethic with its root in the character and grace of God, the living God.

[5 : 33] There's an increased divergence, an increased separation. And I'm concerned about that, and I'm sure we all are concerned about that for a variety of reasons. I'm concerned because I think sometimes as Christians we just stick our heads in the sand and we hide from the issue.

We're embarrassed by it and we're therefore maybe silent or afraid to say anything. Or we take the braced position, which is a defensive position, a separatist position.

We want nothing to do with a community and a world that is different from us that we don't understand and that is, preaches a different message to the one we believe.

It may even include a hatred of any who think and act differently. Or we accept it because deep down we actually think God is pretty harsh.

And well, love is love, isn't it? And so we just accept it. Or problematically also as Christians we maybe just...

[6 : 47] We've come to think that God is irrelevant to everyday issues. That He's a kind of esoteric reality. He just floats above real life and is just a theological concept and isn't really relevant to us.

And that of course is therefore much broader than a sexual ethic. But generally that we just don't think He's relevant to our lives and to our morality and our ethics. There's some kind of...maybe at best some kind of spiritual insurance policy for the future.

And I ask you into these last two things. Do you actually really know Jesus Christ and God at all if that's what you think? If you think God is harsh or if you think He's irrelevant, you need to look at your relationship or not your relationship with Him or the kind of relationship you have if that's what you think.

So I think it was...and I'm giving you a very long...I'm giving you a very long introduction, okay? But I think it's important because we read the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, a hugely significant sermon, hugely significant things that Jesus is saying in this sermon.

And when Jesus speaks, what we come to realise as Christians is when Jesus speaks, God is speaking and we have in Jesus Christ, God the Son.

[8 : 13] And that immediately sparks with us something...it focuses something very significant for us in our lives, is that whether it's with a sexual ethic or any other thinking in our lives, there are two opposing worldviews that come together.

And that's the reality, isn't it, for us? There's two opposing worldviews. And that's really important because we either think without God or we think with God.

We think of a world that's created by God or a world that is not created by God, a world that has a spiritual genesis or a world that is purely materialistic.

And these are two very important starting points for us. And we recognise that as Christians we have a worldview that begins with God at the centre, the revealed God who can only be known through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

So there is a God narrative to absolutely everything in our lives. The suffering, the good things, the happiness, the struggles, the identity crisis, the battles, everything that we have, we process through our knowledge of God through Jesus Christ that we've come to know and love.

[9 : 25] And we know the God narrative, don't we, so that we don't take a scissor to the Bible and cut it up and throw out bits. We recognise the God, the narrative of the Bible is from beginning to end.

And it's a narrative that is very clear. We did a series on it a couple of years ago when Corey was here, Creation, Fall, Redemption, Renewal. That's the God narrative.

That's the identity that we channel everything that happens to us around, that we are created by God, that as humanity we've rebelled and fallen from God, that redemption is only through Jesus

Christ and that ultimately there will be a renewal in the new heavens and the new earth to which we are moving towards at the moment.

And that for us is a better story. It's the better story of our lives. And the question I'm asking you and I asked myself is, do we believe it?

Do we believe in the God narrative? God is the Creator. We are made in His image. Everything that happens to us, we recognise and see through that perspective.

[10:32] And we do so because it's a rational faith based on the evidence of creation, of the Word of God, of the Christ of history, of our own reason, our own morality, our own intellect, our consciousness and all these things.

You know, it's not a mindless faith to have the God dimension. It is based on, it's a reasonable faith that we believe in the God who as uncreated one is the source of all life, to whom we are accountable as image bearers.

And all we have comes from Him. And so because of that humanity is always looking for acceptance and approval and a verdict on our lives, vindication.

And we believe that approval, that acceptance can only come from God. It's not something we can work up ourselves. It comes because of what Jesus has done on our behalf who himself paid the price for us and we know about that reality.

And in that God picture, there is heaven and there is hell and there is good and there is evil, the shadows of which exist in this life which we all know and experience.

[11:48] And He's the answer to our who and our why and our what knows because that is the worldview we have. It is God is at the center of that worldview and we live, we are here today and we are breathing today because God is gifted as life and we don't fizzle into non-existence because God exists.

That's the worldview. Then there is the other worldview and ultimately there's only the two. There are shades and I'll do just a couple of shades on this one.

Now God is so it's a man-centered, human-centered rather than a God-centered worldview. That is what Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount doesn't come into it. It's a man-centered.

So there's no meaning in life out with the meaning that we can make ourselves. It's a materialistic worldview. A worldview without what we don't need God and we don't need His rules.

We can find our own verdict, our approval, acceptance and our vindication somewhere else. It's not in God or in some kind of deity.

[12:57] But we live for the moment and we find justification for living in the moment. There's no exclusivity except that of our own feelings. No beliefs, no rights, no compass, no absolutes beyond what we can build ourselves.

No ultimate purpose beyond survival and no accountability out with our society's structures. Death is the end of our existence.

No judgment to face, no ultimate justice, no heaven, no hell. This is all it is. That's the materialistic worldview, a worldview without God if we follow it through.

And I guess as part of that we can have a worldview with a God of sorts, kind of a God. So you know, not everyone will say they're atheistic or even agnostic.

Some people say, yeah, I believe in God, just don't believe in the God you believe in. Okay? So we live in a world with a God of sorts, but it's a blind faith. It's not faith based on a revelation of God and based on the character and person of Jesus and his claims.

[14:01] God is a jolly benign, jolly green, and maybe he's not green, maybe he is. Jolly green giant, a big sort of jolly giant who doesn't get involved in the dirt of this world, whose belly wags in jolly mirth in the face of injustice and suffering, who ignores our guilt and our questions and our longings and can't be bothered making himself known.

He's content with just a wish fulfillment of whatever kind of God we want him to be, a God of our own imagination. He really has nothing to say because we've made him up.

He's an idol, he just fits in. You know, we will hear sometimes, I don't believe in that kind of God, I don't believe in your kind of God. My kind of God and so on.

No demands made by the sovereign and completely subservient to our wishes who just shrugs at love is love. Yeah, love is love.

And so all of us need to come to that point as believers, if we are Christians here today, if you're not a Christian, I hope you'll be challenged by at least some of that thinking, we recognize that our

worldviews clash.

[15 : 14] They have to clash. You know, if God, if he's real at all, if our God is a real God, then our worldviews are going to clash. And we can't simply skip around the meadows all of our lives because the worldviews clash.

They're absolutely different. If it matters at all, then our worldviews are going to clash. If God has communicated through His Word and through the person of Christ, then it matters. And with regard to sexuality, if we focus into that one area, it matters because our worldviews clash because the Bible says, and this is a very, very simplistic and quick summary, that sex is His gift. He created it. He knows all about it and is to be enjoyed within His framework of marriage between a man and a woman, oneness with the security, identity, love and respect of that. Outside of that, it ceases to reflect God's purpose. It's crazy. That's mental, you say.

[16 : 23] That's for 200 years ago, at least, if not a thousand. You can't possibly believe that today. Are you unrealistic and naive? Yes, of course we are.

No. It's a clashing of two worldviews. It's a clashing of two understandings of who we are, physically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally, all that we are.

Of course, it's way out of line with today's thinking, absolutely, entirely and completely. And until we come to terms with Jesus and the reality of who God is, then we will never wrestle with these issues and we will simply make up our own minds.

So the big problem is not sexuality. It's the problem of our worldview. It's the problem of who is Lord of our lives. Is it ourselves?

Do we choose what? Do we just listen to what is the majority of opinion of society or do we follow the living God who in grace and in goodness and in love is a redeemer?

[17 : 28] And in coming to terms with that, we can only do so by coming to terms with Jesus. And that's what I really want to stress this morning.

I am not interested in a moralistic diatribe, let me tell you. But what I want to focus on is coming to terms with Jesus as the key.

In this passage, Jesus is speaking to religious leaders and others who have taken God's word and who have twisted it, the Old Testament they took. And they twisted it because it suited them and it made them think in a way that is a natural way to think.

He was correcting their religious misinterpretation of God's word. God's word, you have heard it said, Jesus said, you shall love your neighbor and you will hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.

That, the Old Testament did say love your neighbors, but it didn't say hate your enemies. They made that wrong interpretation of God's word.

[18 : 34] And so Jesus is correcting them and reminding them that the way of grace is very different from what they think.

And that's significant. And throughout the New Testament, Jesus explains the law of God, the Ten Commandments, in relational terms, in loving God and loving your neighbor.

And the two worldviews clash because the world says, see verse 46, for if you love those who love you, reward you have, do not even the tax collectors do the same.

So the world says you just love the people that are like you. You just love the people that you're friendly with, the people that think the same way as you. Well, that's just what, that's how everyone acts, isn't it?

He says, no, the way of the gospel is different. And it says that the two worldviews clash when it comes to love as well. And he spoke all the time of those who were right with God and those who were wrong with God.

[19 : 38] And he always made clear that it was not based on their own inherent goodness or the way they loved, but rather their relationship to Him. He challenged those, all of those, you look through the gospels.

He challenged those who trusted in themselves for their hope, who made themselves their own saviors, either through their morality, their wealth, their sexual relationships, their political aspirations.

Whatever they looked to for approval or for acceptance or for a verdict, they were their own saviors. And he was saying, no, that's not how it is.

We can't live like that. We can't live in our own wisdom because we all fall short of the glory of God. And so beyond the sermon here and into the whole New Testament, his life as God in the flesh is shocking for us.

And I hope you're shocked this morning. And I hope that I'm shocked this morning. I've been a Christian for 45 years, and I'm warning the Word of God to shock me this morning, because he spoke of exclusivity throughout the New Testament, that he is a part of a trinitarian God with trinitarian love.

[20 : 53] He is pre-existent before Abraham was born. I am. He performed miracles and signs to seal the message that he brought. He could see into people's minds and hearts, and he always said that every human being was a rebel and a sinner under God's just wrath.

And we twist God's commands of love and rebel against His authority and are tormented by the resulting chaos of chasing shadows in life under the lustful gaze of death.

And it's tough to take. Jesus is no powder puff leader. It's tough to take what he says.

But he spoke honestly, and he spoke as God about exclusivity. He spoke about generous grace. What's the greatest parable in the New Testament?

It's got to be the prodigal Son. Luke 15, the three lost items, and it finishes with the lost Son, the prodigality of God's grace that Jesus revealed in the Father with his arms open wide, reaching out to the lost broken Son.

[22 : 10] And we see that in his priorities as he lives his life. What was Jesus' priorities? It was correcting the religious elites in their self-righteousness and their reliance on morality.

But he spent a time with outcasts, with enemies of the state, with those who were rejected by the religious, the immoral, those who lived in the shadow lands, the lepers, the prostitutes, and all who broke God's love, love, and searched for what only God can offer.

And in his message, we see the same. He didn't hold political rallies. He didn't advocate changes to Roman social structures through the courts.

He didn't rail against slavery or social injustice, not because he didn't care, not because these things shouldn't be changed, not because he had nothing to say, but because he could see the deepest injustice and the most significant revolution that was needed, and it was needed in the heart of every individual.

What does he say in John 3, verse 16? I don't think I put this up, but you know that, don't you? For God so loved the world.

[23 : 28] He said this, Jesus. He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. That was the core of his message. That was what he focused on.

That was what drove his ministry and drove, because he could see into every heart. And he knew that a political change or a moral change or an outward change doesn't, it doesn't meet the need, ultimately.

It's not the answer. It's not outside in, it's inside out. And he saw and knew that. So we recognize and see that Jesus came, and beyond his life, beyond his sermon, his life was shocking.

I'm going to say something equally radical here. His death was beautiful. His death was beautiful. Okay, Romans 5, 6 to 11.

For while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly, for one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare to die, but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[24 : 33] Since therefore we have been justified by His blood, much more will be saved from the wrath of God. For if we were enemies, for if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.

More than that, we also rejoice because it's beautiful in God through our Lord Jesus Christ whom we've now received reconciliation.

So it's a strange thing to say, isn't it? And I've mentioned it before here. It's a strange thing we sing about someone's dying on a cross. It's a strange thing to think about and do and believe in, but it's both the darkest moment in the history of humanity and also the brightest moment in the history of the world, where He subsumes all the suffering and sin and guilt and death, faces the power of the darkness in the devil and the just wrath of God against us on Himself, willingly, personally as God the Son.

It's the most inexplicable, mysterious, outrageous, simple, glorious reality that has ever happened in this world, the cross of Jesus Christ.

And if the cross for you is just symbolic, or if it's just something you hang around your neck as a symbol, then there's something utterly radical and revolutionary about what Jesus did in God in coming to answer our need.

[26 : 03] That's why it's beautiful, because in Him we find a better story. It's a better story. It's an answer that is inexplicably complete and good, and that we cannot come to the Father, our Creator God, unless we come through Jesus Christ.

That's why the ethic matters. That's why the morality matters, because we love God and He has made us and molded us for Himself.

So it's a better story, and Jesus, that better story is focused here, love your enemies. It's the better story, because that's what God did for us.

He loved us while we were there, while we were still enemies. It's a better story. It's a better story of healing, and all that that involves in life.

You know the world we live in, it's full of rage and anger and suspicion and blame and abuse and hurt and lust and emptiness. And grace is the beginning of healing.

[27 : 05] It's the wholeness, and it may take a lifetime even though we're justified and made right before God, but it's in the context. It's always that the healing is in the context of being accepted and forgiven and knowing He loves us and can't show.

We might die for a good man, but He says while we were still enemies, God the Son provided our salvation. So His healing, it's a better story of justice.

He's taken on and He's defeated evil and sin, and that will one day be destroyed. And yet He speaks very bluntly about our accountability to Him, and that we are guilty and will be separated from Him unless we come to God the Father through Jesus Christ, who is made righteous.

We are made righteous because of His substitution and sacrifice. That's where we find approval. That's where we find our verdict. That's where we find our acceptance through Jesus Christ.

He's provided a way back with the open arms of love and says, I am with you. I will never forsake you. That's the place of justice.

[28 : 17] You know, we don't shy away from justice. We don't shy away from the difficult issues because there are many, and I know there's many difficult issues. And I'm not being simplistic, but it's a better story of healing and of justice, and it's a better story of sexuality.

It's a better story into our heterosexual and homosexual brokenness, marital infidelity and the insecurity of looking for ultimate identity and purpose in fluid gender conceptions and our sexual attractions.

That's where we find faithfulness and God-imaging and purpose in both our singleness and our celibacy in our community and in marriage. That is a radical and rebellious construct in the world in which we live.

And it's a better story of promise, of fulfillment, of purpose, of meaning, of significance, of worth, and of a future where Jesus says, no more tears, evil destroyed, death defeated, and the unimaginably good and glorious good life of having come out of the shadows which hold every longing and in Christ finding these longings fulfilled in the new creation of the new earth.

Can I close by just taking us back to the issue that I began the whole series with, which is about planning and praying. I think we need to plan and pray into this situation in our lives, in the relationships you have at work, university, neighborhood, whatever it might be, and in society as a whole.

[30 : 13] 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 9 to 12 says, I think for me very significant things, Paul speaking to the church in Corinth, I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters since then you would need to go out of the world.

But now I'm writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of a brother, a Christian. If he's guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, a vile or drunkard or swindler, not even to eat with such a one, for what have I to do with judging outsiders?

Is it not those inside the church here to judge? What's he saying there? He's saying we need to be looking into our hearts, not judging the world outside. Why should we be surprised if someone's worldview that doesn't have God acts in a way that we find morally questionable?

Why should that be the case? Of course that's the case. It makes sense, doesn't it? And it is empty moralism to stand in judgment or expect change in any individual without them coming to know their need and the grace of God and the hope of salvation.

The question is, do we, who in here will cast a first stone with regard to sexual purity? Who of us will?

[31 : 43] Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9 is for by grace that you've been saved through faith. This is not of your own doing. It's the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one can boast.

Can we boast? Of course we can't. What story do we have to tell? Where is our identity?

The message of grace, the message of the Word is not that God hates gay people and loves straight people. Please, get over it.

But that's what many times they hear. And maybe that's what you think. And if you think like that, then you need to repent. You need to fall on your knees and ask God to forgive you because it's by grace that we've been saved through faith.

And that not of yourself, we have no place for boasting. What is the condition of our heart? The grace, the gaze of judgment needs to change, doesn't it?

[32 : 44] So we find it so easy to judge, even within the church, to judge everyone else, except us. The gaze of judgment changes when grace has touched our hearts because what did the prodigal son come to realize?

It wasn't everyone else, the father and the brother and everyone. It was himself. What have I been doing? He came to recognize. The gaze of judgment needs to change. And I think in prayerfulness, that's a prayerful reality.

I think prayerfully also we need to consider the experiences, the experiences of that community and of these different individuals that we may come to know and love.

The rejection, the abuse, the hatred, the homophobia, the despair, their perceived understanding of a gospel that hates them as individuals.

And the hypocrisy that sometimes they see in the church, the sexual abuse that comes before the courts and all that goes with that. I think it's a survey that says that the gay community find the evangelical church the most judgmental and hateful group of people that they know.

[33 : 56] I think that's a challenge. We need to try and understand and pray into it and love.

And I'm going to say this carefully that we love our enemies. You may perceive them as your enemy or they may perceive us as the enemy.

But Christ commands you today to love your enemies because they are broken like we all were as Christians and still are but healed.

And we love them because they, God loves us. See meaningful shadows in their quest for identity, belonging, community, love, individuality and respect.

But appreciate and debate with them a better story and be honest with them about their need along with ours of accountability to the living God.

[35 : 04] It does matter how we live and what we think of Jesus. And death isn't just the end because we go to meet with the living God. That's what the cross is all about.

And live out that better story. God must be real. So if all we do is verse 46, we love those who love you.

If the church is just a social club, just our mates getting together, then it's just a social club. That's all it is. But He commands us to live holy, sacrificial loving life and seek opportunities to know and to love all who we come into contact with, breaking the mold of easy believers and pride and judgment.

And even if they reject us and reject the message of the gospel, we keep loving them in the way that Jesus did. There's a powerful verse in John 6, 6, I want to finish with this.

After this, many of its disciples turned back and no longer walked with them. So Jesus said to the self, do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered, Lord, to whom shall we go, you, of the words of eternal life?

[36 : 16] But it's the fact that many people, I think I missed a verse before that which says after these hard sayings, many people walked away. And yet Jesus still prayed with tears for these people.

And we, even though we may be rejected and our worldview that we have come to know through Jesus Christ may be rejected, we still love, we keep loving.

So I'm asking you to pray specifically for that community and for those who belong to it and the individuals that you may meet who have a different understanding of sexuality that is completely, maybe out of line with the Christian ethic and what we believe to be good and right and wholesome and pure.

And love them and pray for opportunities that Christ and the good news of the gospel of redemption, break in and transform them as we believe it needs and has done with us.