

# Building A Resilient Church Culture

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[0:00] If I haven't said good morning to you yet, good morning. Please take out your copy of God's Word and turn with me to Ephesians chapter 5. If you join us regularly on the Lord's Day, you know that it's our general habit to preach verse by verse through the Bible.

We are going to begin in just a couple of weeks the book of Daniel, but in between, finishing up our last exposition of Philippians and now moving on to Daniel, there's a few things we want to talk about together.

You may have noticed on the bulletin that instead of a text for today's sermon, there's a title, which is a thing I even shudder a little to do. It says there, building a resilient church culture, which I have much to say about this morning in a short period of time.

But first, I want to note a few things. So we are going to begin with a text this morning and say much about this particular topic.

So first thing I want to say, note, as a general practice, we preach expositional sermons. Most simply put, this means that we take for the sermons point or points the main point or points of that week's text.

[1:23] It's text driven preaching. We exegete the text. We read it, explain it, and give application to it. Like we're drawing out of God's word what it means for us and for us today.

We are careful not to eisegete a text or read into a text what we want to see in that text.

There are just so many varied understandings of the Bible and often, not in all cases, but often this is because people eisegete it. They'll look for things in the text.

They want to take their opinion and find it in the Bible. So this is why we tend towards verse by verse because we don't want to be a cult.

We don't want to have a bunch of erroneous views that we have applied to the text, but rather we want the text to say what the text says. And verse by verse lends itself towards good exegesis and away from eisegesis.

[2:28] If you're looking at a whole book together, it's hard to avoid the context and hard to misinterpret it, although it can still be done. However, from time to time, a topical sermon has its place, which is what I will be doing this morning.

And I just want you to know that you should be especially discerning. Always be discerning. Be especially discerning when you're sitting under topical preaching.

A lot of you know me very well. I hope I've built some equity with you to open up God's word and make some application from it. Some of you don't. Some of you don't know me at all. And I just want you to be really discerning as I speak this morning.

I am not an authority. God's word is the authority. Second note, I am not trying to be an alarmist this morning. That said, your elders feel a burden to prepare you for challenges that we believe are coming.

It is our hope that you know us well enough to know that we love you very, very much. Right. Even if you're not a member of our church, if you just come here today, you profess faith in Christ.

[3:42] Like, we love you, brothers and sisters. And we want good for you. And we want glory for our God. And third note, I will not have nearly enough time this morning to exhaust this topic.

We're going to need to talk more about it. As I really thought down to think about this, I thought I could do an introductory sermon to set up the problem. And then I could do five sermons with what I

think is at least part, not all, but part of the solution.

But we're not going to do that. We're going to do it this morning in about 30 minutes. So we're going to have to talk more. We're going to have to be thinking about this. We're going to have to do it in our formal gather times and in our informal day to day going about our business, talking to one another.

I've thought a lot about what we're going to talk about this morning, but my thinking is not done. I'm not ready to be exhaustive even. So I hope that you'll ask questions. I hope that you'll push at my thinking.

I hope that you'll spend time with the Lord in his word as you consider the days in which we live. All right. So those are my notes. Now, the text we'll begin with today is Ephesians chapter five, verses 11 through 17.

[5:01] Beloved, this is God's word to us. It was written for his glory and our good. We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

Ephesians five, beginning in verse 11. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them for it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says awake, oh sleeper and arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Now, again, I don't have time this morning to tell you everything that this text means. This is not verse by verse exposition, but I do want to say some things about the text.

[6:09] I think it's a good place for us to begin thinking together. So we're exhorted in this text to not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to expose them by which he means to expose them as these unfruitful works of darkness.

Paul has previously given a sampling of the unfruitful works that he's referring to beginning in chapter five and verse three. Sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, idolatry, filthy talk, foolish talk, crude joking.

I don't think that Paul means for us to understand this list as exhaustive right there. An example. He's meaning to give us an idea of those things that we as Christ followers are meant to avoid and to expose.

He juxtaposes this kind of unfruitful living with a living that we must assume would be fruitful. Right. It's the opposite of the unfruitful living.

Verse 15. He says, look carefully, then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil.

[7:28] Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. So the fruitful life, Paul tells us, is in part careful and wise and efficient and informed.

And he is exhorting this kind of caution because our time is limited and because the days are evil. Right. He exhorts us in verse 16 to make the best use of the time.

Some of your translations this morning may say your time. Right. There is a time and it is a limited time. And this time in which we live is evil.

There's a work going on to be against the church and not for it. By God's divine appointing, he has made us Christians in the 21st century.

Assuming that you have trusted in the saving work of Jesus Christ. He has made us for this time.

And these are our evil days. This text originally written to these Ephesian believers was also written for us and has bearing on our lives today.

[8:42] So we must ask, what are the particular evils of our day? What unfruitful works of darkness are we meant to be exposing?

And there are so many. There's so many. And there have always been so many. We don't live in a particularly unique time. There's so much evil in our world.

So today I want us to consider a particular rising tide. One that is making ground inland at a steady rate. One that we will have to build a resilient church culture to stand against.

This particular evil is the evil of the redefinition of our anthropology. Who we are as humans and why we exist.

And this is happening in many, many ways. Here are the prominent examples. The unborn. The unborn are called babies if they are wanted.

[9:49] They are called fetuses or many other things if they are unwanted. Men and women. Right? The suggestion of our world is that they are social constructs and not biologically defined at all.

Minorities, which seems honestly to be any human definition other than straight white men, must be necessarily oppressed.

We are mixing up the world that God has made and the way that he meant it to be functioning. Now, we don't have time today to explore each of these ideas and look to the scripture for the answers. Right? This will have to come over time, but not this morning. But we need to have our eyes open to the fact that each of these ideologies stand in contradiction to the scripture.

To hold a Christian worldview of the sanctity of human life, the biological assignment of gender by our God, the proper exercise of sexuality within a biblical marriage, and a God-ordered justice will make us more uncomfortable in the coming years than I think most of us are ready for.

[11:06] Your elders' concern for the church is that we will have to be deliberate in our efforts to build a resilient church culture.

This seems to be happening at a very rapid rate, but it's been going on under the surface for quite a long time. One author by the name of Rod Dreher, you may or may not have heard of his book, *The Benedict Auction*, has recently written a newly released book called *Live Not By Lies, I Would Commend It To You*, where he suggests that we are living under, and a growing sense of living under, something called soft totalitarianism.

Now, totalitarianism is a system requiring complete subservience. You have to fit in, you have to be homogenous with whatever the ideas of that system may be.

An example of totalitarianism in a hard sense would be the communist regime of the USSR. You must be communist. Communist China fits into this category as well.

So, we, Dreher suggests, and I agree, are living under an ever-increasing soft totalitarianism, which is largely coerced by the economy and by the social constructs in which we function.

[12:31] You have probably felt this on social media. If you don't fit in with what all your friends are saying, you will be suddenly ostracized, right? If you want to say something of any measure of truth that goes against these narratives, you'll be, the word coming into your mind, canceled.

You'll get shut out of all things because you don't toe the line of what the totalitarian system is suggesting is true.

So, we have to recognize that we are Christians, but we're also Americans, and that our larger culture speaks to us. And I would suggest to you that the highest value of Americans is comfort. We really like not being challenged. We really like ease. Like, we're living for the next vacation, right? Toes in the sand is the high ideal of our living.

Many of us are arranging ourselves this way. You can sell just about anything if it's going to make somebody's life easier. It may not be a good thing, but it may make your life easier, and therefore, we love it as Americans.

[13:51] The second highest value until it gets in the way of the highest value is the value of autonomy. We want to be independent, right? We want to do what we want to do when we want to do it.

No one can be an authority over us, and we've seen over this past year, unless that makes me uncomfortable, and I'm willing to give away autonomy to be comfortable. So, this is what's speaking to us.

This is what the culture at large is doing, and we're going to have to think carefully as God's people about how we're to be distinct in that way.

If we are to be a people who have been awakened by the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we will need to look carefully how to walk, not as unwise, but as wise.

We're going to need to make the best use of the time because the days are evil, and we're going to need to be not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

[14:48] We are to be wise and foolish because God has saved us from our foolishness. Verse 15 says, look carefully then how you walk.

Verse 13 to 14 talks about the salvation of our souls. For when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible. For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says, and this is as woke as you need to be, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

This is Paul's loose quotation of Isaiah chapter 60 and verse 1, which says, Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Many commentators believe that Paul's use here in verse 14 is, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Awake, O sleeper, and recognize that people apart from Christ, are dead in their sin.

This is the great problem of humanity, right? Because of the fall and our inheritance, Adam is our federal head. We are sinful at birth.

[16:28] We are dead. We are separated from God, and we need a solution to this problem. The next phrase, and arise from the dead, speaks of repentance and faith, turning away from that dead state and turning toward the solution to that great problem.

The sacrificial work, perfect life, the third day resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the last phrase, and Christ will shine on you, speaks of God's grace to those who will believe in Jesus.

Because God has saved us from our foolishness, we are to be a people who pursue that which is good and true and beautiful.

We are to do so for our good and for the glory of our God. And it is going to get more difficult to do that in the future.

I would not claim to be a prophet of any kind, regardless of what you think about prophecy. I think it's going to get more and more difficult, and it's going to get more and more difficult sooner than we think.

[17:45] But pressure on the church has been rarely bad for the church. Typically, when persecution comes, faithful Christians become more faithful.

They don't do it by accident. Thomas Watson said, this is on your bulletin, How much good comes to the saints by affliction? When they are pounded, they send forth their sweetest smell.

Affliction is a bitter root, but it bears sweet fruit. So, how do we build active, a thing we're going to have to be doing, build a resilient culture that's going to stand up to, that's going to remain firm, church culture?

And I use that term culture because I believe that we have to come at this from a lot of different ways. This is not just an education piece from a stage. This is going to be us together working at this.

How do we do it? A church that will stand against the rising tide of soft totalitarianism. A church that will contend for the truth, once for all delivered to the saints.

[18:55] A church that will work for our good and for the glory of God. I want to briefly outline for you five overlapping areas that I think we need to work on.

All of these things are things that our church already does in some measure, have recognized in some degree. So, I don't think that any of them are going to make you go, Whoa, I never thought. But I hope that the weightiness of the need is kind of placed upon you this morning as we consider these things.

So, there's five of them. I'm going to move pretty quick. So, hang on. Number one, robust theology. If we do not have a robust theology, we will fail to understand cosmology, the world, how it was made, how it's ordered, anthropology, who we are in the world, what our purpose is in the world, and certainly biology.

All other studies are subservient to the study of God. We're going to have to have robust theology, not weak theology.

We're going to have to be versed in the Bible. Proverbs 1-7, we spoke of this last week on Mother's Day. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

[20:16] Fools despise wisdom and instruction. If we care to be wise, as we've been exhorted to be in our text here, and as we're being exhorted

in Proverbs 1-7, we must recognize that that begins with the fear of the Lord.

Reverence and awe. Humility on our part, recognizing who God is, and being about knowing Him. Not merely knowing things about Him.

I think our church is all too guilty of that. Lots of head. Not as much heart as there ought to be.

Theology done well leads to doxology.

It leads to praise. When we hold doctrines rightly, it warms our affections. We know this God, and we know how He'd have us order ourselves for our good and for His praise.

It ought to lead in that direction. So hear that when I say robust. It doesn't just mean that we need to read more books. It means that we need to grasp onto those things that have been taught us as we continue to learn.

[21:24] In a highly psychologized age, we are being inundated with the messages that we are the center of the universe, and that our feelings dictate our reality.

This is happening all the time. I am so grateful to know, at very least this in the world, that I am not a good source of truth.

Truth has to come from outside of me because I am so fickle, right? I can think one thing one day and the opposite thing the next. That's why we praise God for His revelation, for a book.

It's written down. It says something, and it means something, and we can take it up, and we can read it, right? This is ultimate reality, not my feelings.

Many churches in our day, and we do not need to be this church. We need to avoid the temptation to become this church. Many churches peddle what sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton called therapeutic, moralistic deism, right?

[22:33] Self-help. What happens when it becomes extremely uncomfortable to meet with God's people when really what those people were seeking was a bit of comfort, right?

Comfort me, pastor. I just want to know that my life can be a little better than it is. I don't think we'll gather anymore if that's what's at the center of our teaching.

But if God is the center of our teaching, right, if we have a grand and high view of God, then come what may, if God is for us, who can be against us?

We do not need a high view of man. We need a high view of God. We need to be able to understand that our God is in control of all things.

Not only is he sovereign, but he rules provisionally. He's working all things for a purpose. And we don't have to guess what that purpose is.

[23:35] It's for the praise of his glory. He's making himself known. And he's doing that through a people who are being shaped to know him more and more and more.

That we would be a people who stand in the face of opposition and say our God is greater than this opposition, right? Come what may, we have God.

We are going to have to, as a people, be able to do theological triage on the fly. We've talked about theological triage, understanding those things that are primary doctrines, right?

Those things that we must agree on to be Christian. Those things that are secondary doctrines.

Those things that we need to agree upon to be a church, right? Coming together and fellowshiping together, functioning as a church body.

And then those things that are tertiary, like well-meaning Christians can disagree upon and that's okay. And those things that are, anybody remember the word? Quaternary. Which means they mean nothing.

[24:40] They just don't matter at all. And too often, we take third tier and fourth tier issues and we make them first tier issues. This happens all the time.

We're going to have to be able to be undistracted people, right? By doing theological triage on the fly. When stuff comes our way, knowing, is this the thing that I ought to be talking about? Or let's let go, right?

We've got to get good at that. And we're going to have to be able to hold and communicate nuanced positions. Our world is constantly making it either this or that.

And very often, it's a both and. It's somewhere in between. We're going to have to be better at that as God's people, right? What does the word say? It's often very nuanced, right?

It's not out of balance. It's perfectly balanced. Many Christian doctrines are like walking a tightrope. There's two ways to fall off, right? And the world trying to push us off one way or the other.

[25:40] As a people, we're going to have to hold each other on that tightrope. And we're going to have to be able to communicate in that way as well. So robust theology. We're going to have to be about this work.

Secondly, accurate histories. Accurate histories. Going on in the world right now. And there has been throughout the ages.

It's not a new thing. I was a history minor. So I had to take historiography. And you learn all about the varied ways that history has been twisted up throughout the ages.

But we're going to have to understand where we have come from. Or we will not see clearly to know where we are going. And we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

We're going to have to work at this. We've talked quite a bit about starting a church library. We had some wonderful theological books donated to us.

[26:40] And we thought we should do this. And we think we could gain more and more of this. And if you know me, you know I like a good book. Don't give it to me digitally. I want to mark in it and turn its pages. Smell it.

It's a wonderful thing. But we've also talked about we might need to grab up some good history books too. This could be a time to just start pulling together those pieces so that we can be keenly aware, accurately knowing our local history, our national history, our world history.

And then I would say most importantly, our church history. The American church is repeating heresies that were settled many, many, many years ago.

And if you don't know these things, you're going to possibly get swept up into them, right? You need to be keenly aware of those mistakes made in the past. And then I'll just say to you, we ought to particularly know our Baptist church history.

Third, accurate histories. Third, healthy family. If we do not have healthy families, then our church will not hold together because the family is the first and foundational institution of all societies of any kind whatsoever.

[28:02] Right? This is in large measure why we've worked as a church to build healthy families. We see it as a gift given by God with responsibility given to it.

We've wanted to push in that direction to help your family be healthy for your sake, but also for the grander sake of the church and the world beyond.

Right? Healthy churches are built on foundations of healthy families and healthy societies are built on foundations of healthy churches. And this is why the evil one is so bent on destroying the family. So much messaging of our world is against the family. So we're going to need to continue to work at developing healthy families.

Right? We should have kids. Congratulations, everybody. You did it. A lot of children in our little church. And I would encourage you to continue to do so.

[29:02] It's a wonderful thing. Children are a blessing from the Lord. Right? Let's continue to outnumber others in this way. It's a good thing to have children and to raise them up.

It's a good thing for your primary discipleship relationships to be your children. That's okay that you invest a lot of time in them.

So we're going to need to have kids biologically, but we're also going to need to be adoptive. The church needs to serve the great need of our communities by adopting formally. I'm really grateful for the people in our church that have been doing that and the heart's desire of a lot of people in our church to both foster and or adopt.

This is a wonderful thing. It's a great witness in the world in which we live, a world that seems bent on discarding children. The church can say to that world, no, we want those children.

And we can do this in larger and larger order. So we should be adoptive formally and we should also be adoptive informally. There are people coming into the life of our church that don't know what healthy family life looks like.

[30:07] We're raised in difficult situations, feel alone all the time, and families need to draw those people in. Come. You are welcome. We want you at the table with us.

So we'll need to be about that as part of our view of what healthy family looks like, including others in that as well. Fourth and closely related, sacrificial hospitality.

If we do not love one another as we should, and if we do not love our neighbors as we should, then we will not have a ground from which to say difficult things into a confused culture.

I'm asking a rhetorical question, so don't raise your hand. But has anybody ever won an argument on Facebook? I doubt it.

I just doubt it. It's not the context for these kinds of things to happen. So if we're going to speak winsomely into a confused age, we're going to need to do so with sacrificial hospitality.

[31:16] We're going to need to say to the world, our home is open to you. Right. We have been shown great welcoming in Christ. We want to turn and extend the very same thing to one another and to the world around us.

And we're going to have to think about structurally. How do we do that? Well, how do we do that deliberately? This morning, just as a small example of that, I'm so glad all of you are here.

It's a wonderful thing to have you. We didn't have enough chairs put out, did we? We were kind of scrambling to put out chairs because everybody shows up in this little window of time and we made it happen. I think there's people sitting across the hall because they couldn't find a seat over here.

How do we love each other best? How do we not let anybody slip through the cracks? How do we look at every single person and say, I don't just regard you according to the flesh.

So you've got a seat and some coffee. But I see those unseen things. You're a soul. I want to give you good and careful care. We're going to live in a more and more difficult time, a more hard time to follow Christ.

[32:29] We're going to need each other all the more. Jesus said in John chapter 13, verse 35, By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

Isn't that just striking? I mean, it's not proper theology that he says, although proper theology feeds proper love. I would contend with you. He doesn't say it's political affiliation.

But he says love. If you have love for one another. So we're going to have to show each other sacrificial hospitality. We're going to express that kind of love for those within the church, but also those without.

Again, Jesus, Matthew chapter 5, verse 43 and following. You have heard that it was said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

We are meant to be a people who are meek in the face of opposition, right? Loving those who are ensnared by the world, right? Who are getting caught up in this totalitarianism I am talking about.

[33:40] We're meant to love them. We're meant to pray for them. We're meant to invite them in. Come. Come and see. Come and see the goodness of our God. And fifth.

The church is going to need a clear mission. A clear mission. If we are not crystal clear on why we exist, then we will always be distracted by some lesser purpose.

There's a lot of good things the church can be about doing. But all of it ought to be a vehicle for the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

I'd love to talk for an entire Sunday about mission and the mission of the church. But let's just sum it up in that way. The primary thing that the church is meant to be doing is declaring the good news of Jesus Christ, right?

We are a gospel people saved by the gospel. We must be clear on what our mission is. Matthew chapter 28, beginning in verse 18. Jesus said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

[34:45] Jesus reigns, right? He's in his session. He's seated at the right hand of God. He has all authority, both in heaven and on earth. So then he says, go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And I would say to you, we're meant to go convert people, grow them in depth, right? Verse 20, teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you. He commands us to baptize, which I would suggest to you means that we're meant to form churches in the process of that.

And he says, behold, I'm with you always to the end of the age, right? Jesus says he's been given all authority in heaven and on earth, and he's with us to the end of the age.

And what does he want us to do? Make disciples by planting churches. That would be my suggestion to you, right? We have to be clear on what is, are the battles, war, right?

We have to be clear on what those things are. What engages us? What do we involve ourselves in? And what do we not involve ourselves in? I see a lot of Christians getting involved in matters that I think are lesser and I think are distracting.

[36:02] We must hold the understanding that the reformers held that the church is militant, not in taking up arms. That's not what I mean at all.

I'm not a Christian nationalist. It's meant to be moving. It's meant to be going, right? The gates of hell will not prevail against the church, right? What are the weapons that we fight with?

The fruits of the spirit, right? It's all these wonderful, kind, loving, generous. That's the way we go as we're militant. But we're meant to be moving. We're meant to be going. We're meant to be sharing.

We're meant to be winning, discipling, growing up, planting churches. We're meant to be doing all of that, not sitting on our heels, but pressing, pressing forward and the church victorious, right?

The battle's guaranteed. We will win because Christ has all authority and he is with us to the end of the age. So these five things, again, I don't think it's exhaustive.

[36:59] They're overlapping. They're things we need to be thinking about.

They're things we need to be growing in, deliberate in, pressing on in.

It is our prayer that we will be a resilient church culture and that we will stand against the rising tide of soft totalitarianism, this evil age that we live in, and that we will do so for our good and for the glory of God.

In closing, I'm going to read today's text one more time and ask that you consider how you might be wise in our evil days. Paul writes, take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible. For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says, awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Look carefully, then, how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Let's pray together.