

Building a Resilient Church Culture: Part 1 - Intro

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Preacher: Nathan Raynor

[0:00] We'll spend some time today in Ephesians chapter 5, verses 11 through 17. But you may have noticed, perhaps you have a bulletin, that instead of a text for today's sermon, which is normative for us, there is a title, Building a Resilient Church Culture, Part One.

A little over a year ago, I preached this sermon, and your elders now, a year later, thought it wise to revisit the idea and develop it further.

So today, I'll re-preach that sermon, some small edits, and then in the coming five weeks, Lord willing, we will think together about each of my five sub-points, which I'll cover in brief this morning. Before we get started, I want to note a few things. Number one, as a general practice, we preach expositional sermons.

Most simply put, this means that we take for the sermon's point or points, the main point or points of that week's text. We exegete the text, right?

[1:11] The text drives what we're doing together, it speaks to us. We read it, explain it, and we give application from it. But we are careful not to eisegete a text or read into the text what we want to see in the text.

And this is why we tend to preach verse by verse, because it lends itself toward good exegesis and away from eisegesis, although it's still possible to do so.

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 sitting under topical preaching.

Number two, I am not trying to be an alarmist this morning. The elders of the church don't want to come off as alarmists. That said, we feel a burden to prepare you for challenges that we believe are coming.

It's our hope that you know us well enough to know that we love you very much, and we want good for you, and above that, we want glory for our God.

[2:26] And thirdly, I will not have nearly enough time this morning or in the coming five weeks to exhaust this topic. So we will need to talk more about it, both in our formal gather times and in our informal day-to-day gathering.

This needs to be a primer for more conversation. I've thought a lot about this, but my thinking is not done. I do hope that you will ask questions, that you will push at my thinking, and that you will spend time with the Lord and His Word as you consider the days in which we live.

So, Ephesians chapter 5, beginning in verse 11 and following, before I read it, let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's Word to us, that it was written for His glory and our good.

And so we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands. 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.

[3:41] 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. So we are 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 unfruitful works of darkness. Show them for what they are. Paul has previously given a sampling of the unfruitful works that he is referring to beginning in chapter 5 and verse 3.

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, but to give us an idea of those things that we are meant to avoid and to expose.

He juxtaposes this kind of unfruitful living with a living that we must assume would be fruitful, if it's to be the opposite of the unfruitful living.

[5:01] Verse 15, 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.

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.

By God's divine appointing, he has made us Christians in the 21st century, assuming that you are in Christ.

He has made us for this time. So to be clear, 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.

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

[6:14] And to be clear, there are so many. The list goes on and on.

Today, I want us to consider a particular rising tide as we think about this need to build a resilient church culture.

It's a rising tide that is making ground inland at a steady rate. One that we will have to build a resilient church children to stand against. We're going to have to do it if we're going to survive.

And this particular evil is the evil of the redefinition of our anthropology. Who we are and why we exist. This redefinition is happening on multiple fronts and I'm sure this is not exhaustive.

It's happening as it concerns the unborn. Unborn children are defined as babies if they are wanted, fetuses if they are unwanted. And praise be to God that Roe and Casey have been overturned, but this cultural evil still exists.

This is happening in the case of men and women. It's fine, gender as social constructs and not biological definitions.

[7:29] This happens as it concerns minorities, which these days seems to be any human who is not white and straight. And these minorities are necessarily viewed as oppressed.

Now, we certainly don't have time today to explore each of these ideas and look to the scripture for the answers, although it does have the answers. 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.

I think things are going to be tougher than you might imagine. Your elders' concern for the church is that we will have to be deliberate in our efforts to build a resilient church culture as our society swiftly moves toward totalitarianism.

Now, totalitarianism is a system requiring complete subservience. It has at its head some set of ideas, and if you don't fall in line with every one of those ideas, then you do not belong.

[8:56] You will, in the case of hard totalitarianism, be put in the gulags of communist Russia. So, hard totalitarianism comes in the form of these kind of regimes, right, that rule and reign over a people.

You step out of line, you're punished. Soft totalitarianism is what we're going to experience in our day, at least for some time, and probably just soft totalitarianism.

Those of you who know me know that I'm not much of an optimist, but in this case, I'll say it'll likely come just in the form of soft totalitarianism, which means it will be coerced by the economy and will be policed on social media.

Just as an example, think for a moment, since the overturning of Roe and Casey, how many companies have morally postured themselves as being for quote-unquote feminine rights, right?

We have to be thinking about what brand of pants we wear. I don't want to think about what brand of pants I wear. I just want to wear the pants. I just want a pant company to be a pant company and not be politically and socially engaged, right?

[10:13] But in a growing sense, if you're not on board, then you're canceled, right? Cut out of society, ostracized as a result.

I think, just as a kind of high view observation, that the highest value of Americans is comfort. It's what Americans generally, it's true of us too. What we like more than anything is our comfort. Our second highest value, until it gets in the way of the highest value, is our autonomy. We want to do what we want to do, when we want to do it, unless we're uncomfortable, and then you can tell us whatever you want us to do.

We saw this play out across a recent pandemic, right? Able to give up so much if you just keep me comfortable, right? Don't cast me out.

Don't cancel me. Don't call me out on the streets or in the grocery store. We are going to get pressed more and more and more by this society to toe a line that if we're to be biblical Christians, we will not be able to toe.

[11:16] It just won't be possible to do so. If we are to be a people who have been awakened by the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we're going to need to look carefully how we walk.

We're going to be wise, verse 15. We're going to need to make the best use of the time. Why? Because the days are evil. We ought not be foolish.

We need to understand the way of our Lord. We ought to be wise and unfoolish because God has saved us from our foolishness.

Verse 13, 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.

And this is a citation from Isaiah chapter 60 and verse 1, loosely, which says, Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

[12:26] Now, this citation in Ephesians chapter 5, verse 14, many commentators believe, was a hymn sung by the early church calling anyone in their midst who had not yet believed in Christ to repent and place their faith in him.

Because it's a gospel summary. Awake, O sleeper, you who are dead in your sin, who have yet to be awakened to the light of Christ.

Arise from the dead through repentance and faith. And God's grace in Christ will shine on you. Because God has saved us from our foolishness, we are to be a people who pursue that which is good and true and beautiful.

and we are to do so for our good, loving, kind instructions from our God and for the glory of our God.

And this is going to cause discomfort. This is going to cause persecution. persecution. I have wrongly said in the past that the church has always thrived in the midst of persecution.

[13:45] And broadly that's true, right? Capital C church, the church has always pressed on throughout space and time. But in particular locations, that hasn't always been true.

There have been places in history, in the world, that persecution has altogether stamped out the Christian witness. We want this to not be true of us.

We want rather what Thomas Watson once said, this is on your bulletin, this is what we want to be true of us. He said, 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. we want this to be true of us, of Christ's family church.

So how do we build a resilient church culture, a church that will stand against the rising tide of soft totalitarianism? And to be clear, we will have to build it.

[14:52] It won't just happen. We will have to be strong because the tide will be destructive. It will have to be cultural, not to be ingrained into who we are as a church.

Not a six-week series and we all move on, but we have to be thinking about these things together. And so I want to briefly outline for you five overlapping areas that we believe we will need to work on.

This is probably not all of it. Much of this could be exhausted more, it could be worked out, it could be talked about, but I think this is a very good place for us to start. Before I get into them, as a note, it's already been pointed out to me that there's an acronym here, CRASH, and that's not on purpose.

Although in thinking these things through and having these particular points, I did notice that they spelled out CRASH, and I put it in that order because it helps me remember it, and I've been talking about this now for a year. So that's the order that I put them in, but I don't know that they necessarily need to build in this order, and I'm not trying, you know, I mean, somebody probably would have had some cool graphic made, but that's not me.

So, number one, and we'll take these in the coming weeks in this order as well. So, number one, clear mission.

[16:19] The church needs to know why it exists. What is the church, and what is the mission meaning of the church? If we are not crystal clear on why we exist, then we will always be distracted by some lesser purpose.

Perhaps by a gospel implication, but not the gospel itself. Why does the church exist? What Jesus said in Matthew chapter 28, verse 18, and following, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, this is how I know that this is a work of the church, because that's a church ordinance, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. I'm going to develop this next week more. Why does the church exist?

To be heralds of the good news of Jesus Christ. We attach some things to that as we carry that message forth, but this is the thing we need to stay clear about.

[17:34] We have a mission in this world. We will need to readily identify what battles we ought to engage in and what the war is that we cannot avoid.

We need to understand what it means to be the church militant, and the church victorious. So that's number one, clear mission. Number two, robust theology.

If we do not have a robust, think a well-developed, a thick theology, we will fail to understand cosmology, anthropology, and certainly even biology.

theology. All other studies are subservient to the study of God. Proverbs 1 and verse 7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

We must humble ourselves under God's word, and we must be a people of it. We have to be thick in our theology. In a highly psychologized age, we are being inundated with the message that we are the center of the universe and that our feelings dictate our reality.

[18:50] Feelings seem to rule the day. And beloved, I will tell you, this is true in our church as well. Your feelings may or may not be consistent with the truth.

But your feelings never define the truth. God defines the truth. But we live in a culture that is telling us that opposite thing all the time.

Define your truth. What's good for you must be good. But our creator knows what's good, what's best for us. Many churches peddle what sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton called therapeutic, moralistic deism.

And this is not good for the souls of mankind. We do not need a high view of man. We need a high view of God.

We are going to have to learn to do theological triage on the fly. I'm not going to explain theological triage to you this morning. There's people in the room going, okay, good. Good. But you need to know how to do it, right?

[20:01] We need to know what to encounter, what not to encounter, what battles to fight, what hills we ought to die on, and what things don't matter. It's part of developing a robust theology.

We're going to need to develop the ability to hold and communicate nuanced positions. We don't need to be the kind of people that try to sort out the world's problems in 240 characters on Twitter. So, clear mission, robust theology. Third, accurate histories. I must admit that accurate was the A. I actually put it in there because it made crash. Accurate histories. If we do not understand where we have come from, we will not see clearly where we are going and we will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

We're going to have to be a people who have knowledge of our history, local, national, world, most particularly church history. Who are we as God's people?

[21:09] What mistakes have God's people made in the past? I'll tell you right now, we have such a place to observe soft totalitarianism at play in Europe and what's happening to the church there.

Churches that are thriving there, how have they stood against that tide and those that haven't, how have they failed to do so? We have much to observe and much to learn about this.

And I will say, as Baptists, we need to especially pay attention to Baptist church history. We need to be steeped in it. Now, less than the other things, you may not have to participate in this quite as much, but we'll work to do it for you.

We'll work to bring these things together for you and help you to understand the mistakes of the past that we might be better in the future. So, clear mission, robust theology, accurate histories, fourth, 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 foundation from which to say difficult things into a confused culture.

[22:22] It's important that we build equity with people as we bring correction to people. John 13, 35, Jesus says, by this all people will know that you are my disciples.

If you love to debate reform theology, if you have love for one another, the way we love one another is a witness to the world around us.

Jesus said, Matthew 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.

For God's church to stand in this age of people who will hate us, our response is going to have to be a response of love. And we have to show that to people through sacrificial hospitality.

It means it requires something of us. We have to give something to make it possible. We have to be uncomfortable at times. We have to give of our resources to have people feel welcome. And this word hospitality means a welcome to the stranger.

[23:34] We have to do this amongst ourselves, that we know we have a people, a place that we belong, and we're going to have to do this to others as well. If the church is to survive in a secularizing age, we're going to have to show sacrificial hospitality.

Clear mission, robust theology, accurate histories, sacrificial hospitality. See, I don't know if I could do this if it wasn't in an acronym that spelled crash. Fifth, 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.

This is why the evil one is so bent on destroying families. Think about the direction from which attacks on the church most readily come in our day.

In almost all cases, it's the family. We need to have healthy biological families. We need to have healthy adoptive families, both formally and informally, that we would pull people into our family life in informal ways and also officially, formally, be an adoptive culture.

[24:52] So these things are things we need to be thinking about and talking about, and we're going to do that over the next five weeks, Lord willing, that we would have as a church, clear mission, robust theology, accurate histories, sacrificial hospitality, and healthy families.

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

So in closing, let me read today's text one more time and ask that you consider how you might be wise, perhaps with us in our evil days.

And then I'll pray. 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.

[26:05] 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. Thank you.