

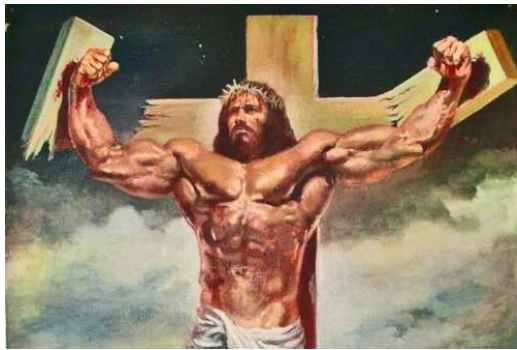
What If Jesus Was Serious...About The Church?

Week 9: Chapters 44 ~ 51

Chapter 44 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Servant Leadership Isn't What You Think

There's an old quote attributed to the French philosopher Voltaire that says, *"In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since."* The pastor and author A.W. Tozer said, *"What comes to mind when we think of God is the most important thing about us."*

This leads to the question...when we think about Jesus (who is God in the flesh) is the picture we have in our minds consistent with the Biblical record, or do we imagine a Jesus of our own making?



We might like the idea of Jesus who is a humble, gentle, caring, sacrificial, servant. But we must remember that we are called to BE LIKE our Master. This is the heart/cruc of discipleship/apprenticeship. Do we like the idea of ourselves being a humble, gentle, caring, sacrificial, servant type person? Is that the goal we are striving for? Is that really our ambition in life?

Or, do we warp/twist our picture of Jesus to be more like how we would prefer to be: powerful and in charge? I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say that while Jesus was "meek and mild" when He first came, He's going to be a warrior who sets the record straight and kicks butt when He comes again.

It is very tempting to impose upon Jesus an idealized version of ourselves...how we wish we were. But, friends, the picture we have of Jesus in the Gospels is the idealized version of humanity. Our identity and honor is linked to Jesus who consistently embodied and taught...

- **"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."** (Matthew 20:26-28/Mark 10:43-45)

- *“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:29-30)*
- *“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11)*
- *To faithfully follow Jesus means, in part, that we need to be prepared to accept being misunderstood, maligned, marginalized, and mistreated. Do you understand that this is what you signed up for? How, like Peter in the foot washing passage (John 13), are you/we tempted to make being a Christian easier and more socially acceptable/respectable than what Jesus told us to expect?*
- *In what ways have you seen Jesus misportrayed by people to fit a preferred image?*
- *How are you/we tempted to use Jesus for our own ambitions?*

Chapter 45 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Should Honor Church Leaders For Our Sake, Not Just Theirs

If you're familiar with the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20), the fifth commandment is, *“Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”* The first leadership/authority we ever encounter is that of our parents. Some of us were blessed with really wonderful parents; some of us, not so much. But none of us had perfect parents.

Spiritual leadership is often likened to parenting. Hmm, notice, of all the leadership/authority models that could be illustratively used, the one that is used is a familial one. (Church as family.) I suspect the reason for this is due to LOVE being the overriding value. Church leaders are meant to function with the same sort of love that parents have for their children. Similarly, church members ought to honor/respect their leaders in a way that is reminiscent of children to parents. Just as none of us had perfect parents...and perfection is an unreasonable expectation...we'll never have perfect church/spiritual leaders. (Though having good/healthy ones is certainly a reasonable hope and expectation)

And what is the role/goal of parents? To create a safe and healthy place for children to grow and develop and find belonging, identity, and their place in the family and the community. This holds true whether we're talking about a physical family or a spiritual family

Now let's contextualize this topic a bit. We live in the United States. The very founding of this nation was one of rebelling against authority. Regardless of whether it was justified or not, at the core of the American narrative, which we are immersed in, is a tendency to question, challenge, and mistrust authority. This is why the metaphor of parenting is so important and useful. Generally speaking, why do people become parents? It's probably safe to say that most parents didn't decide to become parents for the purpose of ruling over others for selfish gain. (Again,

generally speaking...obviously there are some pretty messed up parents/families out there.) Most people who desire to become parents do so out of an expression of love.

As we shift our culture and understanding of the Church from an institution to that of a family, this picture of spiritual parenting can be a helpful one.

- *What is the role of leadership within the Church? How do we determine whether leadership is good, healthy, godly or bad, unhealthy, selfish?*
- *What is your general attitude toward those who lead and are in authority?*
- *Who has served as a spiritual mother and/or father in your life? (This does not necessitate an official title; and there can certainly be more than one person.)*
- *What do you think it means or looks like to “honor” those who lead?*

Chapter 46 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Should Not Make Pastors Into Celebrities

So the last chapter discussed honoring church leaders. There are good, right, healthy ways to do that...and some ways that aren't so good. Putting pastors or other church/ecclesiological leaders on pedestals is really not helpful...to anyone. Yet, for some reason, there is a long-standing tendency to do so.

I remember one of my classes in college. (Keep in mind that I went to school to study ministry.) The professor really grilled us students, all of whom had intentions/aspirations of going into ministry, as to WHY we were going into ministry. He was trying to get us to do some deep soul-searching to see if there was any wrong motivation at work in our hearts.

Sadly, many people go into ministry for wrong reasons that they are not aware of. Some go into ministry because they want to be in authority over others. Some have an unhealthy need for attention and affirmation. Some have a need to be needed. Ministry has a way of stroking egos and salving insecurities. Additionally, ministry can also attract people with workaholic tendencies (because the work is never done) as well as people who are lazy (because there's often little oversight and church folk are generally nice and gracious people who like to assume the best of others).

But pastors/church leaders need as much accountability and as many checks in place as anyone else...perhaps more so. Moreover, spiritual health is not a static thing for anybody. Health and growth cannot be assumed but must be pursued and maintained. In fact, and I hope I don't sound too cynical, poor health and dysfunction should be assumed unless proven otherwise. (Which is what my professor understood and was trying to point out)

So one way in which we can “honor” our pastors/leaders is by protecting them...primarily from themselves...which basically means they are not any different from anybody else. We all need people in our lives who can encourage us and stand with us...and call us out on our crap when

needed. This requires a certain level of proximity and familiarity. Beware of any pastor/leader who avoids these things. And please, PLEASE, don't put them on pedestals...they're just humans, simply your brothers and sisters in Christ, nothing more and nothing less. Because, here's the thing, people like to be put on pedestals, and, if they see pastors/leaders put on pedestals, then they just might strive to go into ministry in order to be put on a pedestal. (My professor was trying to make sure none of us, unconsciously, had the pedestal as our ambition/motivation...because it's a very real danger.)

- *What is your general viewpoint and attitude toward pastors/church leaders?*
- *When have you seen a pastor/church leader put on a pedestal? (Or, for that matter, how do you know if a pastor/church leader is being put on a pedestal in an unhealthy way?)*
- *How close are you, or how close do you tend to be, with your pastors/church leaders? Do you know them as real people or simply as performers and managers of church stuff?*
- *Why do you think there is such a tendency to give deference to leaders (of any kind, in any field)? What might be some healthy ways to relationally even the playing field?*

Chapter 47 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Authority Should Come From A Leader's Character, Not Their Popularity

...and I would add, not from their position or title either.

As I reflected on this chapter I was reminded of one of the benefits of having fellowship meals (Big Ask Dinners, Dinner & Discussions, various pitch-ins, etc.). It allows people to get to know the leaders of the church and the leaders to know the people of the congregation. It creates proximity and familiarity...we get to know one another better. This allows for character to be observed and trust to be built.

Please allow me to go on a little tangent. It seems to me that the itinerant system baked into the Methodist system is designed to keep leadership based on popularity/personality at bay. And, generally speaking, I would say it is effective at that. But at what cost? Research shows that a pastor needs 5-7 years at a congregation to reach the point of having the credibility to start being effective. How many pastors (Methodist or otherwise) last that long at one congregation? Additionally, the question can be asked whether the appointment system allows for leadership/authority based on character. Or, said differently, a congregation has to rely on someone else's assessment of a pastor's character. All that to say, there seem to be big decisions made with very little relational knowledge. (I'll end my little op-ed now.)

I love the phrase Skye used "*gravity of their soul*" as a way to describe character. I hope that's something we're all trying to develop...gravity of soul...regardless of the role or responsibility we hold.

I also like the recommendation Skye offers, *“Maybe we should reconsider the amount of spiritual maturity we grant to people we do not, and cannot, know, and instead invest more energy into the relationships with the godly women and men who are closest to us even if they are unknown to the wider world.”*

- *How much do you trust the leaders of CUMC? What gives you reason to trust or not trust?*
- *On what basis do you allow someone to have voice and influence in your life? Do you know them personally, and do they know you personally?*
- *Who is someone you would describe as having “gravity of soul”?*

Chapter 48 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Should Be Suspicious Of “Visionary” Leadership

Skye opens this chapter with a good question, *“What binds a church together?”* (Yes, we all know the “right” answer...let’s say it together...“Jesus!”) But in your experience of church would you say that this has been what holds the church (and, of course, by “church” we mean the people) together? (Go ahead and aim that question toward CUMC.)

Let’s be brutally honest here. There are all kinds of substitutes/replacements for Jesus that can be used to (try to) hold people/a congregation together: tradition; denomination; leadership/personality/charisma; similar social, political, cultural stances; worship style preferences...all kinds of things...all of which are less than Jesus. Now might be a good time to remind ourselves of the definition of a Church: **The Presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.** If Jesus isn’t who is ultimately holding us together, then we are something other than (less than) a Church.

As Skye points out in this chapter, “vision” can also be something that binds a congregation together. Vision isn’t a bad thing. In fact, it’s really important. BUT, it’s also something that we don’t need to create or manufacture. It’s already been given to us...we simply need to receive it. Vision is about what God has revealed to us...and His greatest revelation is Jesus. Scripture and the Spirit, when properly listened to and understood, will always lead us back to Jesus.

The role of leadership within a church/congregation is to always keep Jesus at the forefront. We are HIS church after all. Last year we talked a fair amount about discernment. This is what we should constantly be trying to discern: the will of Jesus for His people in this time and place. And this discernment activity/responsibility is the role of EVERYONE, not just the leaders.

- *What binds us (CUMC) together? (Those who have been part of CUMC for decades may have a different response than those who have been around for less than five years. The issue isn’t who’s right/correct but rather to listen to one another’s perspectives.) Obviously, we all know the “right” answer...but what has been your observation/experience? What would you offer to support that?*

- *What does a group of people bound together in Jesus look like? What would you expect of such a group?*

Chapter 49 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Church Leaders Must Care About What Happens Outside The Church

You may have noticed that one of the books of the Bible that Skye refers to frequently is Ephesians. This should be expected from any book dealing with the Church as Ephesians deals with ideas and instructions for the universal church. Some might even call it Paul's most ecclesiological book. (Ecclesiology means the study of the church.)

And it is not by accident that after Easter we will be studying Ephesians together as a church family. (I hope you're excited...I know I am.)

Skye gives us a little preview of what to expect in Ephesians in this little chapter. Skye/Paul remind us of the cosmic scale of Jesus' mission (thus the Church's mission). Jesus, the Church and faith are not parts of our life or aspects of our life that are neatly compartmentalized. Rather, Jesus is the Source and reason/meaning/purpose of our life, and being a part of His Church is integral to life.

Allow me to remind you of one of my favorite illustrations for all this: an app versus an operating system. Unfortunately, many people view Jesus, Church, faith as an app...i.e. something they can use (or not) as wanted/needed. But, properly understood, Jesus, Church, faith is like an operating system...nothing works without it...it orders, integrates, and synthesizes everything else. This is why Jesus, Church, faith can't simply be a Sunday thing.

In fact, I wonder if it might be helpful for us to ditch the language of "mission" and "ministry" and simply think in terms of "life". There is life in Christ...and there is life apart from Christ. Christ rules over every part of life...so choose life in Christ or live consistent to and in harmony with that ultimate reality. And a leader's role is simply to remind people of this reality, to keep this truth constantly before people...all people...helping them to live into that reality.

- *Ideally, there should be no such thing as a "Sunday-only Christian". Sadly, however, that does not seem to be the case. Why do you think that is?*
- *Do you feel that you have been equipped to live out your faith in all of life? What would be helpful for you in order to live out Christ's reign and rule in your life?*
- *How does your faith shape and influence Monday through Saturday and not just Sunday?*

Chapter 50 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Church Leaders Exist To Equip Us, Not To Use Us

Oh, this chapter is so good and important...but also hard to hear. The issues Skye brings up in this chapter are a big part of the reason we see the need to emphasize Church as family over Church as institution. We don't want to be a "vampire church".

How can we know if we are (potentially) a "vampire church"? Well, one question we might want to ask ourselves is: Why do we want new/more people at CUMC? Is it because we're getting older, tired (less energy), less capable of doing some long-standing programs and need some new, younger people in order to keep them going? Is it because we have a pretty significant amount of debt and we need help paying it off? Friends, if we answer yes to these or similar questions, that sounds suspiciously like using people.

Or, are we so in love with Jesus, so glad/excited to be part of His family and Kingdom, that we just want others to experience Jesus too? Do we think that being in Jesus' family, part of His Kingdom, following His way is the best/greatest opportunity anyone could have, and we simply want to offer that to as many people as we can? If we answer yes to these or similar questions, then our hearts are in the right place.

Other important questions we could ask are: Do we have a track record of developing people into mature followers of Jesus? Would people who have been part of CUMC for years attest to being equipped and empowered to live the way of Jesus in a fully integrated life?

- *In your own words, what is the role, function, and responsibility of Church leadership, and what expectations come with that role/function/responsibility? How do you (or how should we) then measure leadership effectiveness?*
- *Are you more mature/developed as a disciple of Jesus than you were five years ago? (And how would you measure that?) How are your character and your relationships different today than five years ago? What role did Church leadership and Church involvement play in your life and development over the past five years?*
- *Have you ever felt used by the church? Please describe/explain.*
- *What other questions might you propose that could help determine the health of a congregation?*

Chapter 51 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Church Shouldn't Be Strong, It Should Be Anti-fragile

May I share with you some of the thoughts that have been swirling around in my head of late? It seems to me that the Church (the big "C" Church, globally and historically, across time and place) was always meant to be a minority movement and thus vulnerable to being misunderstood, maligned, marginalized, and mistreated. That being the case, it has always been tempting to look for ways to protect ourselves, to not be so vulnerable and weak. Then, in the

fourth century, along came Emperor Constantine who made Christianity the sponsored religion of the empire. The Western Church has never been the same since...Church and State in bed together. This resulted in a shift from the Church being a minority movement to the Church having power and privilege...and with it corruption and abuse. The oppressed became the oppressor, the persecuted became the persecutor. And, basically, to be born in the empire meant to be a “Christian”...or to be a “Christian” one simply needed to be born in the empire.

This is not to say that authentic conversions and disciples were not made during that time. It's just that they were...the minority (ironic).

Fast forward to the New World as (Christianized) Europeans migrated across the Atlantic to America. The Church, in what would become the United States, has always been in the majority and in a privileged position...that is, until around the middle of the last century when things started to shift. As secularism was on the rise the Church recognized that it was losing influence in the public square. So, the Church (or certain vocal segments of it) turned to politics to gain power and security...and the culture wars were on...and are still going on.

It is tempting to think that if the Church is in the majority (at least in influence and power, if not actual numbers) then the Church is strong and successful. But I'm thinking that when the Church is in the majority it's not because we've been “successful” at making disciples of Jesus, but rather because we've compromised and lowered the bar of what it means to be “Christian”.

When we run with a false narrative of what it means to be strong and successful, the Church becomes unfaithful. History demonstrates that the Church is at her healthiest and most impactful when it's operating from the margins, even being persecuted. God is not looking to make His people “powerful” (as the world generally defines powerful). Rather, God is looking to create a faithful, resilient remnant.

Throughout the Biblical story God warns His people not to put their/our trust in power, military might, money, intelligence, or position over others, but rather to place their/our hope and trust in Him. He is all we need. To build a life, or a church family, on any other foundation is fragile at best.

- *How are you tempted to protect yourself, or those you love, in ways that may not be the Jesus way?*
- *What do you think/feel about being in a marginalized minority?*
- *How fragile vs. anti-fragile do you think CUMC is? (And why do you think that?) How could CUMC become stronger (in the anti-fragile sense)?*
- *What do you think it takes for a church family to be healthy and resilient? (What factors contribute to health and resilience? What factors contribute to fragility?)*

Soul Training Exercises

- Read & Reflect on...
 - Mark 10:35-45
 - John 13:1-17
 - Hebrews 13:7-17
 - I Timothy 5:17-20
 - I Corinthians 3:5-19
 - Acts 14:8-15
 - I Timothy 3:1-7
 - I Samuel 16:1-13
 - Acts 2:14-21
 - Colossians 1:15-20
 - Ephesians 4:1-16
 - I Samuel 17:40-50
 - Acts 8:1-4

- Slow Down
 - As we wrap up this series we are about to step into the season of Lent. Lent is a good time to slow down, reflect, and take inventory. The invitation this week (and throughout the season of Lent) is to literally slow down. Examine the usual pace of your life and how that pace might be forming and affecting you.
 - Dallas Willard is famous for saying “*Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day. You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.*” Inspired by that, John Mark Comer wrote a book titled, “*The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*”.

When I say “slow down” I really mean that in practical ways. Try walking slower, driving slower, eating slower, talking slower. Try giving yourself some gap/margin between activities. Allow yourself moments in the day to sit still and breathe deeply. Try as much as possible to avoid being in a hurry. Additionally, take note of when you feel hurried. Why did you feel hurried? What does “hurried” feel like to you?

After you’ve been doing this for a while, take some time to process what you’ve noticed with a friend.