

“Modeling Godly Character”

Introduction: As we head into the final weeks of 2016, we will continue to explore the theme of fruitfulness as we find it in the Bible, now looking each Sunday at a different “sign” that God’s word gives us of what a fruitful life looks like. Those of you who have had opportunity to be in a small group this fall have been looking at what our curriculum calls “6M’s” which I mentioned last week I’m going to change to 7 Signs. And I want to call them “7 Signs of a Missional Church” because the word missional helps us to see what the fruit is for, as well as the fact that we are in this together, as a community called a church, and not just as individuals.

Our first sign, Modeling Godly Character, taps into a word–character—that’s been a huge topic of discussion and reflection in these months leading up to Tuesday’s election. By most standards, the two candidates slogging it out for president are the most disliked pair ever to run for office as both have serious character flaws. Whatever the result on Wednesday morning, we’ll need to make sure we’re not pointing fingers but be on our knees as people of God, holding our next president in prayer.

We’ll also need to be thinking about our own character. Who are we in this world, and what have we been called to do? What I want to put forth to you this morning is that as followers of Jesus, we have a modern, missional calling that arises out of a rich, ancient context. As Peter unfolds this for the church, he says we are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you might declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” And one of the main ways we do this, Peter goes on to say, is to “live good lives among the pagans,” that is, by modeling Godly character.

I. An Ancient Contet - God’s People Israel

A. Let’s begin by thinking about the ancient context of this calling. Writing to Christians in the first century A.D., Peter uses language from 1500 B.C. that was originally applied to God’s people Israel, as our reading from Exodus 19 reveals. It roots the church in some very deep and rich spiritual soil. This ancient context goes back to God’s people enslaved in Egypt, being mistreated and crying out in misery. God hears the cries of his people and in his mercy, rescues them in a miraculous way, bringing them out of the land of slavery and leading them toward a land of great promise. At a campsite along the way, he reveals to them that he has rescued them not so that they could form a club of former slaves who were now free, but so that they could make known this living and merciful and gracious God to those around them. God had rescued them, he had chosen them, not at the exclusion of others, but for the blessing of others. It was the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, made 400 years or so earlier, that through the descendants of Abraham the entire world would be blessed (Ge. 12:1-3).

B. Remarkably and wonderfully, Peter applies this language, and this calling, to the church. We have been shown mercy, God has heard our cry, and we have been rescued from the slavery of sin, brought out of darkness and into the wonderful light of the kingdom of God. Importantly, God has done so not just for own sake but also for the sake of others. As a church we are to be a sent, missional people. Mission is not to be just one program among many; it is the nature of who the church is. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” Jesus said to his first followers (John 20:21). So what are we, as sent people, to do? The first sign of such a missional church is modeling Godly character.

II. A Modern Calling - Holy Priests

A. This sign is captured in the phrases royal priesthood and holy nation. Though taken from an ancient context, these phrases contain a modern calling. We are to be “holy priests.” What is a priest? At its most basic level, a priest is an intermediary between God and the people. Priests are to bring the people to God and to bring God to the people. What both Exodus and 1 Peter declare is that in some manner, we are all priests. This means that what we say and in particular how we act will either woo someone closer to Jesus or drive them away. Unfortunately, just to say the word “priest,” in light of the abuse scandal visited on our Catholic friends, has driven people from the church. So we need to make sure that we attach the word “holy” to guide and inform our actions.

B. To be a holy nation is not to be a people based on ethnic identity or geographic borders but to be a world-wide people of God who reflect the holy character of God. Negatively, this involves identifying and abstaining from sinful desires. As Eugene Peterson puts it, as expressed earlier in Peter’s letter: “Don’t lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing...” Positively, as Peterson continues, “let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God’s life.” And then later, from our text “Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices...” (*The Message*, 1 Peter 1:14-15; 2:12).

C. What, then, does this holy, good, exemplary, life shaped by God’s life, look like? It is in the writings of the Apostle Paul that we can put together the most complete picture, particularly in letters he wrote to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians. These letters describe character traits that grow out of and blossom from our relationship with the Holy Spirit, God’s empowering presence, a gift to all who turn to Jesus in faith, whose role is to transform us from old self to new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Perhaps the most familiar and most basic of these pictures is found in Galatians and what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22-23). These he places in contrast with the character traits that arise out of our sinful nature, or acts of the flesh, things like sexual immorality, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, fits of rage, jealousy, selfish ambition, envy, drunkenness (5:19-20).

D. At first sight these acts of the flesh may seem like just a random list of bad things but what links them is that they are all actions that flow out of a desire to live as the center of the universe and to use others for our own gratification and distorted ends. The alternative way, the way of the Spirit, the way of life shaped by God’s life, is the way that seeks the best for the other. As we live in that fruitful way on our frontlines, an “exemplary life among the natives,” it speaks loudly and it can draw others to explore just who this Jesus fellow is who has brought us out of darkness and into his wonderful light.

E. Paul, as well as Peter, go on to give some very practical places in which this godly life is to be lived and modeled: as citizens in relationship to our government, as spouses, parents, and children in our homes, as employees at our places of work, and among neighbors. This is important to recognize because we may get to the end of our day and feel that little has been done for the sake of the kingdom. But in actual fact, the interactions we have with colleagues, family, or friends all offer opportunities where the fruit of the Spirit is both ripened and tasted.

So as we prepare to come to the table of the Lord this morning, let us take the time to examine our character. May we lay down at the foot of the cross those things which are not of

God, asking Jesus to take them away, and to enable to grow within us character traits that reveal his glory.