

"Stop Dating the Church" Part 1

Text: Ephesians 5:25-33

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 16, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Author, Joshua Harris shares this story about Jack and Grace. *“Jack and Grace met through a mutual friend. From day one they seemed to be the perfect match. Grace was everything Jack always wanted. She was beautiful, outgoing, and caring – always there when Jack needed her. For the first five months they were inseparable. Jack could hardly think of anything but Grace. He didn’t need to look further, he told his friends, ‘She’s the one.’*
 - *Now almost three years have passed. Jack still enjoys comfort and familiarity of being with Grace, but the spark is gone. Grace’s flaws seem more obvious. He’s not sure he finds her as attractive as he once did. And he’s beginning to resent all the time she wants to spend with him.*
 - *One night when she asks if they can define the nature of their relationship, Jack blows up. ‘We’re together, aren’t we?’ he asks angrily. ‘Why isn’t that enough for you?’”¹*
- What would you think about a guy who dated a girl for years but refused to ever talk about commitment?
 - Harris finishes his story with these words. *“You need to know something about this couple. There are millions of Jacks walking around today. And Grace isn’t a girl. Grace is a church.”*
- Have you ever found a book that communicates perfectly what you already think? Harris’ little book did it for me. The title is absolutely perfect. It is called, *“Stop dating the church – fall in love with the family of God.”*
 - To me, this image of Christians dating the church represents a massive trend that is occurring in our generation. It is a trend among Christians – Christians who on the one hand claim to love Christ but on the other hand have little or nothing to do with a church.
- There is no question about it. Christians today want to date the church. They do not want to be married to her. I must confess that I was the quintessential church dater in my university years. At least three things described me and every other church dater like me.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** Three signs you are dating the church. First, **a church dater lacks commitment.** This is the easiest way to spot someone who dates the church. They may attend occasionally but things such as schoolwork, kids sports, weekends away, or just plain old sleeping in characterize their priorities, not fellowship, service, and commitment.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Second, **a church dater does not want to be tied down with one church.** I have met countless Christians who go to one church for music and another for preaching. I met a guy who proudly said, *“I go to ten churches in Vancouver.”* You might call that speed dating.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Third, and this was me - **a church dater is critical.** They stand on the outside and make pronouncements about the music, the preaching, the cliques in relationships, the lack of this and that...etc. This person can recognize all the problems but is not part of the solution.
 - Are you getting the picture? Oh, I certainly would have affirmed the importance of the church but in reality I just flirted with churches, sometimes dated one church for awhile, broke up with her but didn’t tell her, and moved onto another.
- So here is the question I would like you to ask yourself this morning: Am I dating the church? Really it is a question of relational commitment. Am I committed to a church or am I simply dating it?
 - Now some of you might be groaning and thinking that this is exactly what you would expect from a pastor. *“Pastor, come on! You are passionate about it because it is your calling and function but my passions are different. I don’t ask you to be passionate about my interests so don’t push yours on me.”*
 - Let me absolutely clear on this: your function may be different than mine in the church but our passion should be the same.
- Today we are going to start a five part series entitled, *“Stop Dating the Church!”* In this series I want to inspire you to stop dating the church by showing you Christ’s heart for the church. I want to deal with some practical

¹ Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church*, 11-12.

questions such as, **“Can a person be a Christian and not be part of a church?”** and **“Is church membership really a biblical concept?”**

- I am not here to scold you or to guilt you. What I want to do is set before you the vision of the New Testament as it reveals the place of the church in the life of the Christian. What we will see is that far from being a burden and hindering our lives, being married to a church is the path to our greatest joy and spiritual growth.
- Alright so here we go on part one. I can think of no better way to inspire you to stop dating the church than to show you Christ’s heart for the church. So please turn with me to the book of Ephesians chapter 5.
 - So this morning I have two points to make and two questions to ask.

THE CHURCH IS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Point #1: We must love the church because she is Christ’s bride.**
 - Most of us are familiar with this passage as the one that teaches how husbands and wives are to relate to each other. Verses 22-24 speak to wives and our text today, verses 25-33, speaks to husbands. But I want you to note this: the husband and wife relationship is not the only theme here. Interwoven throughout is another theme. Did you see it? What is it? It is how Christ relates to His Church.
 - **READ 25, 29, 32 - Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . .²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church . . .³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.**
 - In fact Paul’s point here in this extended section is that husbands will never understand how to relate to their wives unless they understand how Christ relates to his Church.
- So how does Jesus Christ relate to His Church? In the Bible God’s relationship to His people is pictured in many ways such as Shepherd to sheep, Creator to creature, King to subjects. Here Jesus is the groom and the church is his bride. Jesus himself spoke this way.
 - In Mark 2 the Pharisees attack Jesus’ followers for not fasting. Jesus responds by saying, **“How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is still with them?”**
 - Likewise, John the Baptist refers to himself as the best man and Jesus the groom.
 - Again, Paul in 2 Cor 11:2 says that he promised that church to **“one husband, to Christ.”** Christ is the groom and the Church is His bride.
- So why should you love the church? Because as imperfect as she is, she is Jesus’ bride.
 - Many Christians say they love Jesus but they have little or nothing to do with his bride. They say they love Jesus but they criticize the church. But that is like you saying to me, “Barton, I love you and want a relationship with you but I can’t stand your wife. Or, Barton, I want to hang out with you but just make sure Heather is not there. She really annoys me.”
 - If you claim to love me then you must also love my bride. She and I are one. To ignore her is to ignore me. To criticize her is to criticize me. To attack her is to attack me. You cannot claim to love me if you want nothing to do with my wife.
 - We must love the church, not because the church is so loveable (she is often not very loveable) but simply because she is Christ’s bride.

HOW CHRIST RELATES TO HIS CHURCH

- Second point: **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Point #2: We must love the church because Jesus loves her.** She is Christ’s bride and because she is his bride, he loves her.
 - **READ 25. “Christ loved the Church.”** The problem with this word ‘love’ is that we use it in so many different ways. We love ice-cream and we love our kids. We sing songs about love and have feelings of love.
- But songs, words, and feelings do not prove love. Love is proved by action. It is not what you say that proves if you love; it is what you do. So let’s unpack this. How has Christ proved his love for His Bride?
 - There is a past, present, and future sense to this love - what Jesus, the groom has done, is doing, and will do for His Bride, the Church.
 - First, what Christ has done in the past to prove his love?

CHRIST'S PAST LOVE FOR HIS BRIDE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7) Christ has shown His love for His Bride in that he gave up his life to gain her.**
 - We are at the heights of the scripture here. Look at verse 25. ***“Christ loved the Church.”*** How is this love demonstrated? In the fact that Christ gave His life for her.
 - It is right here that we come to the heart of it all. It is right here that we see Christ's heart for His church and it is a heart that burns with love.
- God's ultimate motivation for all he does is his own glory. But it is also true to say that it was love that motivated God. It was love that motivated God in eternity past to choose a people whom he would save instead of condemn: ***“In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.”***
 - And then in time, it was love for those people, the Church, that God the Father sent His Son into this rebellious world. ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.”*** It was love for the Church that God the Son gave up his rights as God, his right to be worshipped and adored, humbled himself and became a man to be mocked, rejected, and hated.
 - It was love for those whom the Father had given Him, that motivated Jesus to do the will of God and be beaten, whipped, and nailed to a cross.
- But oh dear people, it was not the nails that held Christ to the cross. With but a whisper he could have destroyed the entire universe. But he did not. Why? What held him to the cross? It was love for the people that the Father had given Him.
 - It was love that kept him there enduring the judgement of God. It was love that motivated him to drink the cup of God's wrath to the very last drop. All of this was motivated by love.
 - ***“The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.”***
- So before time began he set his love upon this group of people called His Church and in time, he sacrificed his own life to attain her.

CHRIST'S PRESENT LOVE FOR HIS BRIDE

- But he did not just love her in the past. He loves her in the present love as well.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Christ is presently showing His love for His Bride in making her holy. READ 26 - *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.*** He is causing Christians to hate sin, to cleanse themselves. To become more like Jesus.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Secondly, Christ is presently showing His love for His Bride in caring for her. READ 29 - *For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.***
 - At present Jesus is building up his church, caring for her, defending her, and making her strong.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) Christ is presently showing His love for His Bride in his unbreakable union with her.** Verses 31-32 are shocking and profound. I wish I had more time for them. But just look quickly. **READ 31 - *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”*** This is a quote from Genesis 2 and is clearly a reference to husbands and wives and yet in verse 32, Paul says, **READ 32 - *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.***
 - Listen carefully: Paul is saying that God created marriage and specifically sexual union for a purpose. What is that purpose? To illustrate the unbreakable union that Christ would have with His bride. Sexual union is the deepest type of bond between two human beings and Paul is saying that it is merely an illustration of Christ's union with the Church.
- Do you see Christ's present love for his bride? He is making her holy, he is caring for her, building her up, and his union with her can never be broken. That is Christ's present love for His blood bought bride, the Church.

CHRIST'S FUTURE LOVE FOR HIS BRIDE

- But all of this past and present love will culminate in a future day. We could put it like this. **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Christ will show his love for His Bride when he presents her on their wedding day.**
 - **READ 27 - *so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.***

- He bought her with his blood, he is presently making her holy and one day Jesus is returning. This day will be his wedding day. He will present the Church, his Bride, and show what He has done for Her.
 - As John Stott says, ***“On earth she is often in rags and tatters, stained and ugly, despised and persecuted. But one day she will be seen for what she is, nothing less than the bride of Christ, ‘free from spots, wrinkles or any other disfigurement, holy and without blemish, beautiful and glorious.’”***²
- I must tell you that one of the great privileges of being a pastor is getting to be with a groom and his groomsman those hours before the wedding starts. But I must confess a secret...
 - When the moment comes for the bride to enter, I almost never look at the bride and I never glance at the groom. Let me tell you why. Because if I chance a look I know I will see such an intensity of love between their eyes. And if I see that it evokes my emotions and while you are wiping away your tears, I have to lead a ceremony. I have seen make 220 lb muscle bound rugby players fall apart in a pool of emotion. I’ve seen the largest men blubber through their vows.
 - Oh can you see the picture of Jesus, the groom, standing by His Father? Can you hear the moment when the Father says to the billions of angels, “Please stand with me to welcome my Son’s bride?” Can you see the moment when all his blood bought people enter into God’s great throne room? Can you imagine the joy that will be upon Jesus’ face when he looks upon all those whom he loved and bought with his own blood?
- We read of that day in the book of Revelation.
 - ***“Then I saw [her] coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” “Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude...shouting, ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.’”***
 - So there you have it, Christ’ past, present and future love for His Bride, the Church. Why should you love the church? Not because she always acts in ways that are loveable. You must love the church because Jesus loves her. He has shown his love in the past, the present, and he will show it in the future.

APPLICATIONS

- Having made the two points, let’s turn now to ask two questions. First, **(SHOW SLIDE 12) Do I have Christ’s heart for the church?** People often speak of having Christ’s heart for the poor, or Christ’s heart for the lost, or Christ’s heart for children that is all good. But do you have Christ’s heart for the Church?
 - What is that heart? Next to God Himself, there is nothing that Jesus loves more in this universe than His Church.
 - There is nothing else on this planet that Jesus is so committed to as His Church as demonstrated when he said, ***“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.”***
 - What is Christ’s heart for the church? It is nothing less than absolute commitment, stronger than the one flesh of a husband and wife; absolute love, care, dedication, and self-less sacrifice.
- I ask you brothers and sisters, can we really claim to be followers of Jesus if we do not love that which he loves? Can we claim to love Jesus if our attitude to His Church is one of indifference, mild interest, or God forbid, a critical spirit?
 - Oh who of us right now should not repent? Join your heart with mine right now, ***“Jesus forgive me for not loving your people as you do. Forgive me for not being dedicated and committed to that which you love so deeply. Forgive me for dating your church when you treat her as your bride and show it in action. Have mercy on me oh God.”***

THINK GLOBALLY, LOVE LOCALLY

- Having confessed our failure to love the church as Christ does, we now have to ask, **(SHOW SLIDE 13) “How do I practically go about loving the Church?”** This is a good question because clearly this passage is referring to all Christians, from all time, for whom Christ died. How do you love this global group of Christians called the Church?

² John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 228.

- The New Testament is crystal clear on this. Let me explain it by quoting a bumper sticker: **“Think globally, love locally.”**
- All of us should be concerned with the global church, with its mission, with the persecuted church, but according to the New Testament the primary way we love Christ’s church is to join ourselves to a local church and to love it.
 - Notice that Paul is not here writing to a mass group of unidentifiable Christians listening to internet sermons, and having private devotions. No he is writing to a specific church in the city of Ephesus.
- You see in the NT when a person became a Christian they were baptized and immediately joined to a local body of believers. In fact we could go so far as to say that the NT knows absolutely nothing of a person who claims to be a Christian but is not an active member of a local church.
 - The whole NT vision is that the believer’s life will revolve around the church. They will serve. They will love. They will practice hospitality. They will habitually attend corporate worship. They will devote themselves to each other, sharing in each others joys and carrying each others burdens. All this lofty theology of Christ’s love for the church is concretely played out in the everyday lifestyles of Christians in a church.
 - So how do you love the Church? **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Love for Christ’s Church finds its primary expression in a living commitment to a local group of believers (i.e. – a local church).**
- I am not talking about just attending and sitting in the pew. I am talking a marriage. A living commitment. Wives what would you think if your husbands said, **“Honey, look I may not talk to you, help you, or serve you but I am in attendance at our house a lot. That means I love you.”** Love is commitment in action.
 - That is why we think Community Groups are so important. In Community Groups we seek to live out the ‘One another’ commands. We seek to love one another, pray for one another, bear one another’s burdens, rejoice with one another...etc.
- At this point some of you will still say, **“I agree but the church just has too many problems. People are too difficult. There are too many problems in the church.”**
 - I am the last person you need to convince of that. I am one of a small handful of people who know more of the problems of Central than anyone else in the church.
- But I will tell you the one thing that keeps me going. It is simply this: that Jesus loves his bride. If I claim to love Jesus how can I do any less? And so in the difficult times I pray, **“Jesus, give me your heart for your church. Give me your love.”**
 - And then I preach the gospel to myself. I say, **“Barton, Jesus did not demand that the church be perfect before he loved her. He loved her and laid down his life for her while she was completely unlovable. Why then are you demanding that she be perfect before you love her?”**
 - You see Jesus loved me and continues to love me despite my many shortcomings. Oh Lord, give me your heart for the church!

CONCLUSION

- So how would you characterize your life? Are you dating the church? If I could describe your response to the church with body language would it be hands up pushing away, back turned, half embrace or full embrace? The Church is the Bride. Husbands embrace their brides.
 - What needs to be done today to start loving the Church as Christ does? Friends, this is not a burdensome thing. This is for your joy because God gave the church to shape you into the image of Christ. The only true joy in life is when we become like Christ.
- So friends, today is the day. Stop dating the church. Start loving the family of God. Get to know those around you. Arrange your priorities right so that you do not miss being part of the body. Start loving that which Christ loved so much that he gave his life for.
 - Stop dating the church – fall in love with the family of God.