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DESTRUCTION THROUGH PROSPERITY¹

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We've all been around long enough to know that you can do a right thing for a wrong reason. I mean, it's a good thing to be a leader in a church or a civic organization, but some people do that to advance themselves, to get access to other people's money, or to gain trust so that they can exploit children. We find such stories every day; and not only that, but many of you in this church have lived through such a sorry tale because certain people gained our trust for their own nefarious purposes.

In short, people will often tell you that they love you, that they care about you, but really they're just saying what they need to say to get you to do what they want you to do. That is the way of the world, and unfortunately, it's the way of the church. As long as you're useful, you'll be loved.

This is where we find Jesus at the height of his popularity. Jesus is very popular. The people love Him. They want to be around Him. In fact, they're almost smothering Him with their attention; but it's for the wrong reason. They think He may be useful to serve their own selfish purposes.

Let's begin today in Mark 3:7 and read on to verse 10. Keep in mind that the Pharisees have just tried to destroy Him by accusing Him of breaking the Law regarding the Sabbath Day. He's already got one group of influential people whom He can't please no matter what He does.

⁷ *But Jesus withdrew himself with his disciples to the sea: and a great multitude from Galilee followed him, and from Judaea,*

⁸ *And from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea, and from beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things he did, came unto him.*

⁹ *And he spake to his disciples, that a small ship should wait on him because of the multitude, lest they should throng him.*

¹⁰ *For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues.*

It's probably hard for us to imagine the kind of numbers of people that are being described here. There are many, many thousands of people coming to Jesus; and yet they are coming to Jesus, not because of who He is but because of what He can do. They have a distorted picture of Jesus and His heart, His ministry, and His purpose. Jesus came to heal our souls, and in order to show His power to change us on the inside, He sometimes would heal people on the outside as an illustration; but His goal was not to heal us on the outside. His goal was and is to change us and heal us on the inside. They came to Jesus expecting Him to deal first and foremost with their external problems when Jesus' purpose was much deeper, greater and longer lasting. The people were focused on their health issues here and now; but Jesus came to heal their souls for all eternity. They flocked to Him but they really didn't want to hear what He had to say.

Now, by our standards, it would seem that Jesus is a great success. He's a superstar. Any preacher today

¹ This sermon is unedited.

drawing crowds like this would be asked to do all manner of TV and magazine interviews. Other preachers would drop what they're doing and try to imitate that man's success. And yet, from this scriptural account, this popularity, this success, is actually very hollow, very shallow. What I hear from this sort of man in the ministry today sends chills up my spine. They describe their success in terms that are very much oriented toward very worldly desires. If you only care about numbers, there are a thousand worldly ways to grow a church. You can preach about *success* rather than *sin*, and you can sing Doobie Brothers or the Beatles in the worship service; but if you do that, you'll attract people to something that makes them feel good in a very shallow sense rather than really reach their souls.

I'm not saying that we should never, ever, under any circumstances, change the way we do things in church. What I am saying is that we want to keep the main thing the main thing: the gospel of Christ. Just as Jesus' main goal was to heal men's souls, so must ours be. And there are some things we can change as far as our methods go without altering that overarching purpose. For example, we've talked about restructuring our Sunday School because at the present almost all of our Sunday School resources are directed toward only two adult groups; but apparently we're not ready for that change yet so I'm not pushing it.

The problem is that it's so easy to get distracted from our main mission. You have all of these thousands and thousands of people trying to get to Jesus, but very few, it would seem, wanted to get to Him for the right reason. In fact, you see that word "throng" in verse 9? Jesus asked the disciples to take Him out in a ship so that the people wouldn't be able to "throng" Him. Well, the idea of that word is "to crush." People were coming to Jesus to be healed in such numbers that they were actually creating a dangerous situation in which people were going to get hurt.

It's not just these crowds of people that have the wrong idea about Jesus, either; as you read the gospels you can't help but notice how often Jesus had to address the selfish ambitions of His very closest followers, the disciples themselves. They just wanted to argue about who was going to get what for serving Jesus. They looked at Jesus as means to a selfish end. I think for the most part their motives were good, but there were times when that old nature, that selfishness, became apparent, and Jesus had to address it. He had to teach them over and over about being servants.

My point here is that you have all of these people coming to Jesus, but missing the heart and the purpose of Jesus. Friends, do you suppose if people were doing that back then, in the physical presence of Jesus, that people might still do this today? I think we all know the answer to that.

There are a few ways that this happens. The first is that sometimes people come to the church, not wanting Jesus really, but wanting some financial gain from the church. Now, I don't have a problem at all with someone coming with a real need and asking for help. I don't mind being a good Samaritan, but I don't want to be a sucker! I'm talking about are the professional comen. I have known people personally who go into churches, talk the talk, and I mean they really talk a good game, and then they'll present some need that they have and try to get an offering. And once they've gotten some money, they're off to the next church. We've all seen that from time to time.

There's a slightly more sophisticated version in which a person pretends to be an evangelist or missionary raising money for some charity work. I knew a man who left his children in a children's home while he traveled around to different churches raising money for a mission outreach in Haiti. The problem was that there was no mission outreach there. He simply pocketed the money. But he sure did talk the talk! Oh, he could preach! He could bring a tear to a glass eye; but it was all insincere.

There's yet another variation in which a person or people will join a church, gain trust, get elected to some financial position, and then quietly embezzle money. It happens all over this world, in rich churches and in poor churches. We know about it because we had a group of such people try to dispossess us of this church. It's simply shameful. The point is that some people come to church for some kind of financial gain.

I've listed some examples of people coming to church, coming to Jesus, for some financial reasons, but there are other wrong reasons as well. Some come to find a place in a social club. We can all enjoy the social aspects of church, or at least we should if the church is functioning in unity and love like it ought to, but I mean some people feel that the church offers some prestige or some elitism. The result is that the church comes to be viewed as exclusive: "This is a church for rich white people," or "This church is for such-and-such people." No, no, no! If this is Christ's church, it is for *all* people! I really don't think that this attitude is held by our folks here today, and I certainly hope we never see any evidence of it because it is destructive to our mission and it will suffocate the work of the Holy Spirit.

But there is one more attitude that we must avoid, and to be honest I fear it has a fairly strong hold on us here. It is up to us to look inside ourselves and see if there is any evidence of this attitude, and if there is, we need to deal with it right away. The attitude to which I'm referring is faith misplaced into money. The one thing we should have learned in four years of exile was that *money cannot solve our problems*. Money doesn't love us and the only thing we can count on is that money probably won't be there when we need it the most. But our church has this bank account and I think we feel like as long as there's a "safe" amount of money in that account, we're going to be okay. We look at the money we have on hand as our security rather than the Hand that gave us the money in the first place. I've heard people say that we need more money so that the church can grow. Folks, money is useful, but it doesn't make a church grow. When we adopt that attitude, we start getting uptight about how that money is spent, and then we start arguing about it, we start getting very protective of it because it's our security.

Then that spills over into the way we think of our fellow church members and visitors. We start calculating how valuable people are based on what we think they give to the church. One thing I never, ever want to happen again is a release of who gives what in this church. It happened once when Mike Pemberton released all the historic giving information to the arbitration panel. There was nothing we could do about that, but it just struck me as very wrong and I refused to look at it. It happened another time after a member had left the church, and this time it was on our watch. It came up in discussion how much or how little an individual had been known to give. So let me say this: I don't know who gives what, and I don't want to know. And if you count the offerings, you have to understand that's a sacred trust and what people give is between them and the Lord. It's not the business of the rest of us.

I think that perhaps having money in our account also presents another problem in that some of us, I fear, may feel that we don't need to give our tithes and offerings. We feel that the church doesn't need it. Look, giving tithes and offerings is an act of obedience and love to the Lord. It has nothing to do with how much the church needs it, or doesn't need it, or whatever. And if we're not giving as we ought to, then we need to ask for God's grace in dealing with that because it is sin. As I said, I don't know who gives what here, and I don't want to know, so I'm speaking in purely general terms and not at any person or people. It may be that everyone here is giving what they ought to and if that's the case then so be it.

I will tell you what is hurtful, though: when our friends passes away and someone gets upset because of the loss of income represented. That, to me, is really hurtful and unnecessary, but it is the fruit of a faith that is misplaced. If money is our security, we will react in fear rather than in love at the passing of our

fellow church members.

Until we each look inside ourselves and see whether we hold any of these attitudes, we're not really ready to grow as a church because our attitude toward our guests will be all wrong. We'll view our visitors as being worth our time and effort—or not—based on what we think they will contribute. We'll look to our visitors to solve our problems instead of being on call to help them with their problems. We'll view the pastor's ministry purely in terms of perceived economic benefit to the church. We'll judge ministries like VBS and Royal Ambassadors in terms of how many people they bring to the church instead of how much influence we have in the lives of children. And we'll ultimately just end up hurting people.

The children of Israel were in the shadow of Mount Sinai while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law of God. They had heard God's voice and they had seen His miracles; and yet, there in the very shadow of that mountain, they asked Aaron to make them an idol of gold. They were so close to God, but they missed Him and His work in their lives because they put their trust in something they could see and handle. Friends, we must not do this! Money must not become our security because it will distract us from our mission and will lead us to destruction.

Friends, I say all of this in love. God knows our needs. Nothing that happens to Waverly Hall Baptist Church takes Him by surprise. As we strive to carry out His mission, I believe He'll supply the things that we truly need. And honestly, if it comes down to the point where the church just absolutely is out of money even though everyone here is giving as they ought to give, if we're just struggling to make ends meet, don't you think that I would be willing to be a bi-vocational pastor for you? I've done it before, and it's not unusual at all for a church this size. I don't want money issues to divide our church. I'll do the extra work at a secular job if that's what it takes to keep this church afloat because you're worth it to me.

I don't want us to be, like the disciples, so close to Jesus and yet so far from His purpose. I don't want us, like the crowds in Jesus' day, worried about what Jesus can do for the problems that are important to us but are really short term issues and ignore the long term healing that Jesus desires to bring to our hearts and souls. We have to keep Jesus' mission at the forefront of all that we say and do here at Waverly Hall Baptist Church.