

Can Anyone Tell The Difference?

We are receiving new members into the church today and I want to take this opportunity to share some thoughts about the church and who we are called to be.

In speaking of the church, here is what the bible says, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9**

Peter says God has called us out of something, specifically darkness and into God’s light. We’re called to something different, to a different lifestyle, with different values, desires, standards -- all under the umbrella of a different purpose. The bible’s description of the church sets it apart. A chosen people we are. The Greek word most often translated as church in the New Testament means “called out ones.” The church is a chosen people, a holy people, called out of darkness, but the question is, can anyone tell the difference?

Over the years some in the church resented being defined and stereotyped as narrow minded by folks that didn’t really know us or the gospel. We tried to redefine ourselves, to show we could fit into the culture and in the process we lost our distinctiveness. “See, we are just like you only we go to church.” The problem is the world looked at Christians and the church and decided, “You’re right. You are just like me. There’s no difference so why waste my time.”

Saints of God, we are called to be the church. He refers to us as “a people belonging to God.” He redeemed us by his grace and we are his possession, his people, set apart to him. We belong to God and not the world. Peter says then we are to live in such a way that the difference, the distinction is apparent to everyone. He thought there was no way you could miss it because it is the difference between darkness and light. You should be able to tell the difference between night and day and between the world and the church – the people of God.

The passage continues to define who we are and how we live. **“I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” 1 Peter 2:11-12**

Notice he calls us aliens and strangers (our place and attitude in the world). He suggests we live as strangers. We aren’t trying to prove we belong here. We don’t. As people who belong to God, we are to abstain from those choices that are not pleasing to Him (this is our response to the temptations of the world -- those choices that war against the spiritual life).

Notice Peter says those sinful choices and practices “war against your soul.” This is why we abstain from sin and the lifestyle of the world – because those practices are destructive to our soul. Peter is telling us to live in such a way that those who are not followers of Christ see the difference. Understand that difference is not wrapping ourselves in self-righteousness or a holier than thou attitude, condemning and pointing out the sins of others, but it is seen in our good deeds, living an others centered, servant hearted, Christ like life.

We are called to be different in order to make a difference. We are a called out people, a prepared, chosen, set apart people, selected for his purpose, his cause and calling. Let me mention three things this morning to which we have been called. As His church,

We are called to a higher standard. You may not like it but it’s the truth. The bible says, “Be holy, for I am holy.” 1 Peter 1:16. That sounds like a higher standard to me! Understand, God dares to put his name on us. We’ve been called the sons and daughters of God; the people of God. We are his possession and we are to bear his nature and reflect his character. We’re to live by the values of our heavenly father, not the values of our culture. So what if the rest of the world is living in sin and disobeying God’s word, that’s not who we are. That’s not how we live our lives. We are God’s holy people, God’s called out people, called to a higher standard. We bear his name, his spiritual dna. We have a responsibility to live for him and live like him because we have been died for. We are called to a higher standard and that’s at every age and position and stage of life.

Jesus said we are to be salt and light in this world. That means we are supposed to be transformational. Salt flavors and preserves. Light illuminates and gives warmth. We are supposed to be making a difference in the world, adding the flavor of Christ and his mercy and grace to the world; dispelling darkness not by pointing a finger at it and wagging our heads, but by reflecting the light of Christ. Bringing his light into the darkness. Not judging the world, but living our lives in such a way that as the bible says, the world, non-believers, won’t be able to find fault and will eventually have to acknowledge our good deeds before God.

We are called to a different and higher standard. The question is, can anyone tell the difference between us and the world? Are we different? Are we making a difference? In our family? Our school? On our job? In our community? Wherever the church is, can anyone tell the difference between us and the world? If they can’t, shouldn’t we be asking why? Have we compromised? Have we failed to walk in love? Have we failed to be like Christ in our dealings

with others? Have we let down our standard? How we live our lives, in word and in deed, should reflect that higher standard of the kingdom of God. Someone should be able to tell the difference!

Notice the second thing to which we've been called. We've been called to a higher standard because **We are called to a greater purpose.** Let me tell you up front, a greater purpose demands a higher standard. We aren't called to just take up space, live any way we want and then hope to die with the most toys. We've got a greater purpose. We are the people of God, the purposeful church of the living God and that demands a higher standard.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you decide to play golf. If you want to learn to play as a hobby, you can go hit some balls, learn the basics, play a couple of times a week and become pretty good. But if your purpose is to play in the PGA and win the US Open, that demands a higher standard of work and practice and preparation. You are devoting your life to that purpose. A greater purpose demands a higher standard.

If you want to be a gymnast and go to college and be on a college gymnastic team you have to work hard at it and your coach will set a pretty high standard for you in order to achieve your goal. But if you want to be an Olympic Gold medalist, that demands a whole other standard. That means living away from family and training everyday. That means working and practicing while your friends are having fun. It means sacrifice, hard work and determination. It means a higher standard because: **A greater purpose demands a higher standard.** Pick piano, playing football, anything you want. I can play piano okay, but if I wanted to be a concert pianist, that is a greater purpose that requires and demands a higher standard.

You get the picture. We've been called to a greater purpose so that means living by a higher standard. Our choices in life are based on that higher standard, based on his standards. We live according to a biblical standard because we live for a greater purpose.

What is that greater purpose to which we are called? There are a lot of answers to that question revealed in the Scripture. Let me mention 3 things. **What is our greater purpose? To do the good works for which we were created.** The bible says, **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** **Ephesians 2:10.** God created and designed you with a purpose. Every day there are opportunities to make the right choice, to obey God, to bless and serve others, to be salt and light, to carry out God's purpose and His will in your world. Don't live your life in such a way

that you compromise or lessen or weaken your ability to perform those good works for which you were created. You've committed yourself to a higher standard because you are committed to a greater purpose – to do the works he created you to do!

What is our greater purpose? To reflect the character of Christ in our world. The passage from 1 Peter tells us we've been called out of darkness and into his light. We are now given the amazing opportunity and responsibility to bring the light of Christ, the brilliance of his character and his nature, his love and compassion, into the darkness of the world.

What will that look like? Some of you have read Gayle Erwin's book *The Jesus Style*. If not, there are copies available at the information desk. Reflecting the character of Christ in the world will look something like that. Being a servant, others-centered, compassionate and gracious. I believe the character qualities of Christ are revealed to us in what we refer to as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Galatians 5:22-23.** How transformational those qualities become when lived out in our world. They're revolutionary!

Here is our greater purpose. Here is our higher standard. Reflect the light of Christ in a dark world. Live the life of Christ before a wicked world. Can the world tell any difference? If we live for Christ, if we live to do his works, if our lives reveal the fruit of the Spirit, the world can't help but notice the difference. It's light shining in darkness!

What is our greater purpose? To live out the message of the gospel every moment, in every situation. There are a lot of hopeless people in this world, living in brokenness, looking for answers, looking for relationship. They want to know if there is any truth left in this world. Is there any reason for hope? And here we come, the people of God, called to faithfully live out the message of the gospel. Here we are, letting the light and life of Christ shine through us, in the good times and in the bad. We are to be living like Jesus before the world. We need to be what the apostle Paul referred to as "living letters". He told the church in Corinth **"You yourselves are our letter...known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ..." 2 Corinthians 3:2-3**

Do we have a purpose? Yes. We're to be that letter from Christ, living out the good news of Jesus before everyone we meet. We live out the message that God so loved the world he gave his only son that whoever believes in him would not perish but would have eternal life. We live out the message that God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn the world but that the

world through faith in him might be saved.

Do we have a purpose? Absolutely. We are sent as Christ's ambassadors, delivering a message to the world that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." We've been sent to bear that good news. God wants you to come home to himself and be saved. If you come to him he'll forgive you and make you a new person from the inside out and you can have an amazing relationship with the God of mercy and grace.

Do we have a purpose? Yes. It is to spread the word that redemption is available to all, that no one is too far gone, that there is no such thing as a hopeless case. Listen, the church is the only hope this world has. We're the only people that can offer hope to the hopeless, the only people that can bring light into the darkness of this world. Do we have a purpose? Oh yes. There is no greater purpose and remember, a greater purpose demands a higher standard.

Then how can we live it out? Everywhere he calls us to holiness and godliness and to this higher standard. "Be holy as God himself is holy." Can we live like that? A higher and holy standard? Not by our own efforts, no. But here is the third thing to which we've been called as the church. **We are called to a Spirit empowered life.**

The bible speaks of a sinful nature and a redeemed nature. In the book of Romans the bible says, **"Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you."** **Romans 8:8-9.** We aren't controlled by sin and a sinful nature. As the born again people of God we've been given a new nature. We are controlled by and empowered by the Spirit of God that dwells within us. We are reflecting the nature and character of Christ, remember? Paul continues in this passage, **"...and if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you. Therefore...we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature to live according to it..."** **Romans 8:11-12** Our obligation is to live a life surrendered to the Lordship of Christ and to the control and power of his Holy Spirit!

How can we live by this higher standard? How can we live out this life of greater purpose? We do it by the power of the Holy Spirit that lives within us. It's transformational power. It is the power that raised Jesus from the dead giving life to us, empowering us to make redeemed choices, right choices, to live a holy life, to say no to sin. We live a life of obligation, not obligated to a sinful nature to live according to it, but instead to live a life that is pleasing to

the one who died to save us and give us eternal life. Cooperate with the Holy Spirit!

We are the church of Jesus Christ, living by God's holy standard, living a life of great purpose by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's rely on his all sufficient grace and his enabling power and let's be the church he has called and chosen and set us apart to be.

We are the church of the Lord Jesus Christ! He is calling us to a higher standard. Let's live so the world can tell the difference. They'll know we are Christians by our life, our love.

You are part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. You've been called to a greater purpose; called to serve God, to obey His word, to do good works before the world so others can see and be changed from death to life through Christ. It is a great purpose and calling; so great that you'll need the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit to live out your purpose. You'll need to trust Him and obey Him. He will lead you and strengthen you. He will convict you and teach you and point you in the ways of truth and victory. Jesus said he wouldn't leave us alone to do this, he would come to us, he would be with us by His Holy Spirit. He is with us church! He is with us so we can live a life that makes a difference. We can live so the world can see Jesus in us. We can live so the world can tell the difference. We are a called out church, called to...

A higher standard, a greater purpose and a Spirit empowered life!

You are part of a place of healing, hope, laughter and peace. Some of you came feeling hopeless and you've found a life of hope. Some of you came without purpose and you've found your purpose in Christ. You've come to the right place – to his church, his body. We welcome you. Come walk with us as we learn to walk and live by his higher standard. Come journey with us as we discover and live out his purpose for our lives as individuals and as a community of faith. Come walk with us as people empowered by the Holy Spirit, doing business as Carbondale Assembly of God. A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his wonderful, glorious, brilliant light.

We are receiving new members this morning. As I call your name I would ask that you come forward and stand at the front facing the congregation for a moment.

You are a part of Carbondale Assembly of God. All of the resources of this church are

available to you because this is your church. With all of its strengths and weaknesses, this is your church. Pray for it, support it, defend it, live in such a way that you always bring honor to the Lord and his church.

I want to read something to you taken from Jerry Cook's book, *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness*. I've been reading this to folks who join this church for 33 years now. It is our pledge, our commitment to you. "We want you to know that we are committed to you. You'll never knowingly suffer at our hands. We will never say or do anything, knowingly, to hurt you. We will always in every circumstance seek to help you and support you. If you're down and we can lift you up, we will do that. Anything we have that you need, we will share with you and if need be we will give it to you. No matter what we find out about you and no matter what happens in the future, either good or bad, our commitment to you will never change. And there's nothing you can do about it. You don't have to respond. We love you and that's what it means."

You are part of the family of God and you have chosen to be part of this church family as well. We welcome you and receive you with open arms.

I want to pray for you.

Now I want you to turn and face the congregation again and I'll ask the pastors and deacons and staff and their spouses to join us as we welcome you and extend the right hand of fellowship to you as members of Carbondale Assembly of God.

Our official church board has recommended that I take a few weeks off to get some rest. In the past 18 months we've had the stress of the building program and of course six months ago Paula's Dad passed away and then we had a scare with her mom's stroke. The board felt I needed some time off and I appreciate their concern. I also appreciate the fact they want me to come back. So I am basically taking off the next month to rest, read and pray. I would appreciate your prayers. I know you will be here to support our pastors as they handle things the next few weeks.