*Where Do We Go from Here? #2*

**Putting God First**

*Matthew 22:37-39*

 **How many of you have ever been in a complicated relationship?** If we're being honest, every hand in the room should probably be up and whether you realize it or not, somewhere there's somebody holding up their hand because they've been in a complicated relationship with you! Relationships can be complicated, can't they? When Facebook introduced the relationship status line, they made sure to include "It's Complicated" as one of the options.

 I believe relationships get complicated for 3 main reasons. One is past baggage, one is that we're overcomplicating things and the third reason is that we're in a relationship we NEVER should have pursued in the first place.

 I can remember a time in my younger more foolish days when I found myself in a complicated relationship I never should have been in. I was 15 and she was a 26 year old hairdresser. I went in for a haircut and came out with a date. She lived out in the country a single-wide trailer with her 6 year old daughter. I was 15 and in those days in South Carolina, you could not drive at night unless you were with a 21 year old. It was getting dark and I was in a hurry. As I rounded the corner there was cow in the road. I slammed on breaks, but it was too late. I had beef-tips all over my 1967 Impala.

 The date never happened. I'm so thankful I came to my senses and I'm so thankful God was willing to sacrifice an innocent cow to help me out! Maybe some of you are looking for a way out today. Maybe you're here today and you're in some complicated relationships.

 Today I want to talk about what has been a complicated relationship for so many of us, but it's probably not what you're thinking. I'm talking about your relationship with the church. Not necessarily this church, the "The Church".

 People have complicated relationships with the church for two of the three reasons I listed a minute ago. It's definitely a relationship God wants you to pursue, but many of us have **"baggage"** with it because of bad information, mean people or hurtful experiences in a church. Others of us find church complicated simply because we're **overcomplicating the whole process**.

 Here’s the good news. If you are processing past baggage, you're in a safe place to process those feelings and questions. We're glad you're here. If you've had bad experiences in the past (maybe even with someone in this church), I'm truly sorry for what you've experienced, but please don't let that negative experience taint all the good God wants to bring into your life through the church. It's not nearly as complicated as you might think.

 In **Matthew 22**, Jesus meets a lawyer who was struggling with his faith. He was an expert in his field, a Pharisee, and he tried to keep every law on the books. The problem was that in addition to the big 10, the Ten Commandments, there were over 600 other laws that he was supposed to keep.

 One day, he ran into Jesus and asked him, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus replied and said, “I want to make it simple enough for you to remember it. I want you to remember these two things, these two laws. I am going to boil your spiritual life down to two commandments. Here they are.”

**Matthew 22:37-39**

**37** Jesus replied, "`You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.'

**38** This is the first and greatest commandment.

**39** A second is equally important: `Love your neighbor as yourself.'

These verses give us the Cliff Notes version of the Bible. They tells us what we need to do. These verses tell us what to do. Remember this: Love God. Love People. It’s simple; it’s not complicated. Here at Stevens Creek, we show our love for God and people by serving the world. Let’s go back to verse 37: `You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.'

What does that mean?

Well, to the ancient Hebrews, the heart referred to the core of one’s personal being. In other words, our affections are to be fixed on Jesus more than anyone or anything else. Those things that we truly love are the things we spend the most time with!

When I first started dating **Patty**, I did not spend as much time with my college roommates. I wanted to be with her. She had my heart. It was a natural response for me to want to be with her. When you give Jesus your heart, it’s only natural that you want to spend more time with him. We put him first in our lives. Jesus become our priority.

When Jesus said we’re to love God with our soul, He was saying that we must love God so much that we’d be willing to give up our very lives in service to Him. This verse is referring to us being willing to use any part of our lives for the service of God. We have been given so many things. It’s our responsibility to give back.

Now remember that Jesus was talking to a group of religious leaders that felt as though they had to keep over six hundred rules and regulations to be right in the sight of God. Jesus took those 600+ rules and regulations and narrowed them down to two. He first said, “Love God.” Then He said, “Love people.”

Here’s our big idea:

**Loving God means putting God first.**

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." - God must be first in every area of your life.

***When we put God first…***

1. **Our priorities fall in line.**

If you want to have a work/life balance, then it is important to get crystal clear on your priorities. You have to determine what’s important to you? If you are a Christian, God obviously comes first. Jesus said,

**Matthew 6:33**

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

God is the ultimate priority. Until He is first, everything else will seem out of kilter. We put him first by making room for him in our lives. On a practical level, we spend time getting to know him by reading the Bible. We ask him to lead us and guide us. Then, we spend time listening for his promptings. We make decisions and live our lives in a way that honors Him.

 We are talking about priorities. Put God first, then what? Your priorities may look like this:

1. **God**
2. **Self**
3. **Family**
4. **Work**
5. **Church**
6. **Everything Else**

When you look at this list, this list may surprise some of you. Why would “self” be second on the list? It’s second because I can’t take care of anyone else unless I take care of myself. This maybe a word from the Lord for some of you.

If you have ever flown, you may have heard the flight attendant say, “In case of an emergency … put the oxygen mask on yourself first before attempting to help others.” This is how I look at life. I have to attend to myself first in order to help others.

If I don’t look after my own health and become sick, I am not much use to my family or my employees. This is why I try to eat right and get sufficient rest. We are in a much better position to serve others when our basic needs are met.

My family comes next. Frankly, this was very difficult when the kids were little. I had a hard time balancing my work, my schooling and my life. Early on though, my mother-in-law gave me a wake-up call and I adjusted my schedule.

Today, things are much easier. This fall is the first time in nearly 25 years that we do not have a child in school. Well, Sarah is doing an MBA, but I am not responsible…unless she needs us to babysit.

We are learning how to be grandparents. This was yesterday. *(Show Picture of Patty giving Summit ice-cream)*

Family time is important. When our kids were home, we worked at having dinner together every night possible. We tried to make meal time special and we still do. We went through a season that every Friday night, we ended up at a pizza place, not because they the best pizza, but because they had a round table where our entire family could sit. This gave us a chance to reconnect.

 After family, my next priority is **work**. I love my job. I am honored to work here. It’s the best job in town. I love it so much that sometimes I take it home with me. In fact, at times I am so focused on what I do that I miss what is going on around me. You know that one of the most challenging things in our “connected world” is that we seldom get unplugged. Do you ever find yourself answering office emails when you are at home? It can be dangerous. You have to step away. If you work too much, it becomes counter-productive. Work is a priority. God has given me the ability to create wealth and I love what I do.

 After work comes **church**. If we are going to love God with all of our heart, then we should make church attendance a priority. We should be willing to serve Christ and his church. If we don’t make worship a priority, we generally end up worshiping something else. Church is a great way to start the week on the right foot.

After that comes the “***everything else***.”

 If you were to list out your priorities, what would it look like? Is God first in your life? You see, if God is not first, then your life is going to be out of balance. Memorize this verse: “Seek first the kingdom of God…” Put God first.

 I hear some of you are saying, “I don’t have time for God. I am too busy. I have a long list of things I want to do before I can add God into the mix.”

 Here’s what you need to understand:

You don’t need to get everything done. You only need to get the right things done and leave the rest with God.

You’re only human and you can only do so much.

 So, what does this mean? It means you have to be willing to ***say no*** to somethings, even some good things. You have to say, “No” so that you can focus on the main thing.

 Here at The Creek, we have had to say “No” to some incredible things along the way, so that we could focus on what God has called us to do. We are here to create a place where the **lost can be found** and the **broken can be healed.**

 Here’s an example. If you lived in Augusta ten years ago and said the word, “Scrooge,” more than likely you would think Stevens Creek Church. For years, we owned the rights to the Christmas Production, “The Gospel According to Scrooge.” The production grew so much that it became a ticketed event. It was not uncommon for churches to bring busloads of people to our production. Todd started working in July for this event; it was great. When it was over, all of those people went back to their churches. We finally realized that God did not call us to do Christian Entertainment, but God called us to **reach lost people**. In the future, Scrooge may come back, but if he does, maybe we would only give tickets out to people that bring unchurched folks with them. If we did that, then Scrooge would help fulfill the mission.

 Here’s what I am saying, **“If you want to be effective in your life, then you have to learn how to say “No” to some good things in order to say “Yes” to the best.**

 It begins with putting God first. In your own life, putting God first gives you a guidepost for making the right choices. When you make the right choices, then you will experience, your best life possible.

***When we put God first…***

1. **Our problems are put into perspective.**

 All of us face problems. We are either facing a problem right now or we have just gotten out of a problem or headed into one. Oftentimes these problems hit us right out of the blue. You did not see it coming. Problems and pain have a way of changing us. Pain never leaves us where we started. It will either make you better or bitter. It won’t leave you where it picks you up. It will take you to another place.

 What do we do? We change our perspective. Turn your attention to God. We realize that God is bigger than any problem; he is bigger than any situation that may come our way. ***Our big problems pale in comparison to our big God***. Let acknowledge the fact that we have some big problems.

 Last week, I encouraged you to write prayer requests down on the tear-off card of the worship guide. As I prayed through your requests… I noticed two recurring themes … we are praying for our friends and family members to come to Christ and secondly, for people to be healed. On these cards, it seems that cancer is rampant. I don’t know what you personally are going through right now, but I believe that you can get through it … in **prayer**.

 People are in crisis. People need the Lord. We are in 21 Days of Prayer. Please join us in this endeavor. The auditorium will be open at 6:00 AM tomorrow and we will gather at 7:00AM for a prayer service. On Saturday, we will gather at 9:00AM. Carve out some time this week to have a conversation with the Lord. This is not a time for shallow stoic prayers. This is a time to cry out to the Lord.

 We have to press through the pain, press through the problems until the answer comes. **A necessary part of getting through a tough time is an honest, heart-felt conversation with God.**

 Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed with loud cries and tears. I want you to cry out to the Lord. Pray through your pain. If you are hurting, tell God about it. It’s okay. Part of getting through this tough time is getting honest with God. Pray your pain out.

 We are not use to this. We are used to hearing sweet, sanitized prayers: “The Lord bless you and keep you and make his face shine upon you. May the lord give you a safe trip home and make everything work out.”

 Prayers in the Bible are different that our prayers. If you read the Bible, you will often see that people came after God. They chased God. They were persistent. Abraham came after God. Moses came after God. David, Isaiah.... they came after God and said, “God, do not ignore me. You've got to do this. You promised. Please keep your promises.”

 People would say to them, “You can't talk to God that way.” But, God was not offended. He honored their persistence and their boldness. Cry out to the Lord. Pray through the problem. Don’t give up, but be persistent. God is honored by people who pray bold and persistent prayers.

**Luke 11:10**

For everyone who ***asks*** receives; he who seeks

finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be

opened.

 Most of us like quick answers. We want to pray it on Monday and have an answer by Thursday. You need to know that just because you ask it on Monday does not mean that you receive it on Thursday. You may have to ask for three or four years, but you just keep coming to God in persistence. Because everybody who asks and seeks and knocks, asks, seeks, knocks and asks, and seeks and knocks, they receive.

 I know that your pain may be great, but don’t give up. PUSH … pray until something happens. Pray until the answer comes.

Put your faith in God. Choose faith over fear. Put God first.

***When we put God first…***

1. **Our future has a purpose.**

 ***Have you ever discovered your purpose?*** Do you know why you have been placed on this earth? You see, the purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment. It's far greater than your own happiness, even your own peace of mind. You were made by God and you were made for God and you were put here for His purposes. Until you understand that, life is not going to make sense.

 Today, I want to challenge you give your life to God and get involved in what God is doing in the world. For three years, Jesus poured his life into twelve men. When he left this earth, he told these guys to take his message to their friends and families, to their communities and ultimately across their world. He wanted them to do something. He wanted them to make a difference.

**Acts 1:8**

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

 Jesus told his disciples to start at home. He wants you to start where you are. Jesus wants you to bloom where you are planted. He wants you to let your light shine into the darkness.

 Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” He simple said, “Take what you have been given and give it to other people.” It’s not rocket science. Freely you have received so freely give.

 Today, God is calling you to join with Him in a mission to change this world. This mission is bigger than your job title or your career. God is calling you to be a part of His-story. The Bible tells a story about a guy that Jesus healed. And after Jesus healed him, he wanted to travel with Jesus and Jesus said, "No, I don't want you to do that."

**Luke 8:39**

"Go home and tell everything God did in you." So he went back and preached all over town everything Jesus had done in him.

 He wanted to go with Jesus, but Jesus sent him home. Jesus says the same thing to you. You mission starts right at home, in your own neighborhood, in your own community. The Bible says he went all over town. That's what God wants you to do. He wants you to go to your friends, your family, your coworkers, your neighbors, anybody who crosses your path, the person who delivers the paper, helps you with gas or a clerk somewhere.

 God says "I want you to share the Good News with the people first in your Jerusalem, with the people in your home."

 It does not start in some foreign country. It starts in your own backyard. It starts in your own country with people who are closest to you, those who you are in contact with all the time. Most of us have people around us every day that need the message of Christ.

 Now, why don't we do this? Somewhere along the line we have convinced ourselves that people are not interested. Nothing could be further from the truth.

 People are interested in spirituals things … now more than ever. We need to be willing to have spiritual conversations with our friends. We need to be bold enough to **invite them to church**. Invite your friends to experience the power and freedom of Jesus Christ.

         Take the risk**. Ask them to come with you**. I will do my best to answer their questions in a way that they can understand it. Here’s the bottom line: ***I need you do what I can’t do and I will do what you can’t do.***

            I can’t invite your friends to church, but I can explain the message of Christ in a way that they can understand it. If you will get them here, I will do my best to communicate God’s Word in a way that captures their heart.

            Here at The Creek, we value your lost friends. We respect them. We pray for them. We plan for them. We want them to experience life in the power of God’s Spirit.

            Through the years, we have been mis-understood in some church circles because of our deep passion to reach people far from God.  Some folks don’t understand why we what we do. Some folks don’t’ understand why we may not always give you the Greek word for this or the Hebrew translation for that.

            Here’s what we know: **When someone is drowning they don’t need the Greek word for lifesaver; they just need one.**

            If you will invite your unchurched friends, I will work hard to communicate the message of Christ in a way that they understand.

            If you will invite your unchurched friends, Todd will work hard to create memorable services that will make them say: “WOW, I did not know that church could be like that.”

            We need to partner together.  I need you to do what I cannot do and I will do what you cannot do. Together we will touch this community for Jesus Christ.

Some people say, “Marty you are just trying to build a big church. Isn't our church big enough?"

 We don't grow for our benefit. We grow because everybody needs Jesus, because people need the Lord.

 See, the wrong question is ***"how big should we get?"*** The right question is **"Should anybody be left behind?"** A church that doesn't want to grow and reach out is basically saying to the world you can go to hell.

We have the best news in the world. We have a message of hope. We have to share it. That’s our mission. That’s our purpose. When we put God first…Our future has a purpose.

Closing Thoughts and Prayer.