

STATE OF THE CHURCH

Shepherding a church through a pandemic:

1 Peter 5:2-3 Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Concerned for the health of our members and our community. Concerned for our testimony in the world we are called to reach.

The pandemic is global. This is not a local issue. It is not a California issue. It is not a Sacramento issue.

By the grace of God, and through the miracles of science, personal cooperation and sacrificial love of neighbor, we know that help is on the way.

As a shepherd of the flock of God at Capital, I am concerned for all who have been impacted by this pandemic. There are business financial concerns, personal financial concerns, mental health concerns, physical health concerns . . . the list is long.

One of my observations for us involves the beauty of our diversity. We have many members from the African American community, the Latino community, the Asian community. The impact of COVID-19 on our Black and Brown communities is much greater than that of the White community.

Deaths per 100,000 – White 94 – Hispanic or Latino 116 – African American 144

This leads me to consider our response regarding opening our doors for services in regard to the potential impact on many of our members.

I want to encourage our African American and Latino members today. Help is on the way. We are believing God for your protection and safety. I know many are concerned about taking the vaccine. This past Monday, T.D. Jakes interviewed several leading health experts regarding the safety of the vaccines. It is available on Youtube. It is titled "Coversations with America: Unpacking the COVID-19 Vaccine."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEXB0lyxqgs&t=33s> January 25, 2021

One of the key places I go for trustworthy information is biologos.org. Francis Collins discovered the genes associated with a number of diseases and led the Human Genome

Project. He is director of the National Institutes of Health. He is also a dedicated follower of Jesus.

I would like to direct you to an article on this website regarding science:

<https://biologos.org/common-questions/should-we-trust-science>

There is a deeper harmony that emerges when we allow a genuine dialogue between scientists and theologians. And this is just what we would expect from a God who has created the world and created us to be his image bearers. All truth is God's truth, whether it is discovered in the pages of Scripture by a Christian theologian or in the cells of living things by a scientist with no religious affiliation.

There are Christians in every field of science, contributing to the consensus. They see the harmony between what they know from science and what they know from reading the Bible and following Jesus. They see their scientific work as a way to bring glory to God—the source of all scientific truth. They can help us understand the bigger picture of what God has done, and we can see that the process they are involved in is trustworthy.

Annual deaths in the United States from disease before vaccine.

Annual deaths in the United States from disease after vaccine.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewherper/2013/02/19/a-graphic-that-drives-home-how-vaccines-have-changed-our-world/?sh=56803fcb3302>

Also, at biologos.org, there is an interview conducted on December 3, 2020 by Russell Moore who is president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. The ERLC is the moral and public policy entity of the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er7XjryDHkg> December 3, 2020

Addressing the Christians tuned into this conversation, Collins urged them not to see wearing a mask as "a political statement" or "an invasion of your personal freedom."

"This is a lifesaving device," he said. "Think about it that way. And remember, when you put on that mask, you're protecting yourself from other people, but mostly you're protecting them from yourself. You're doing the altruistic, loving thing of saying, 'I'm going to protect people from me.' And that's a Christian action if ever I've heard one."

Here are the principles I am living by as a shepherd of our flock of God at Capital.

1. Dependence

First, and most importantly, dependence on God, His Word, His Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, dependence on those who are trained in important fields of community life. Have I mentioned that I'm not an epidemiologist?

Some have come out in anger and judgment toward others who aren't as careful as you think they should be?

Some decry this whole thing as a political hoax?

Dependence seeks best practices and makes decisions that treat this virus as a legitimate threat and finds the right approach that balances caution with hope. We are not walking in fear. We are striving to walk in wisdom and faith.

Different churches are going to come to different decisions regarding what that looks like. It is not my intent to influence other pastors or churches. I am not the pastor of pastors. I am the pastor of one flock called Capital Christian Center. It is my sincere intent to communicate as the shepherd of our Capital family the principles behind the direction I am leading our church.

Thankfully, I'm blessed to have multiple medical professionals in our church who've been more than happy to serve their spiritual family by lending their expertise to our decisions.

Each Sunday, I preach to people who are exponentially more intelligent than me in so many areas. Where the medical field is concerned, I need them.

Moreover, I want the rest of our church to know I need you too. Can you embrace with me the principle that dependence is not a weakness, but a way for us all to be strong together?

2. Teachability

One of the liabilities of the western Protestant model of ministry is that it tends to make pastors think they should be autonomous knowers.

This is counter to the New Testament.

Paul's letters bear out the mutual blessing and benefit he received from churches he planted, and the people he learned from who were members of those churches.

I want to receive the blessings that come from being teachable. So, I routinely seek the wisdom of God and the wisdom of those around me. That includes national leaders of faith, health, and science.

3. Submission

To the truth of God's Word.

How we respond to government overreach matters.

We are commanded by God's Word to have a general posture of submission to governing authorities.

It is also because we reap what we sow.

If someone disagrees with a decision you make, do you want their first reaction to be calling for your termination? How about a nasty email? Or would you prefer passive-aggressive Facebook posts?

If I behave in such ways toward the government, I would be encouraging you to act in the same way toward me.

I'm not saying we should roll over when there is a violation of religious freedom. There is a time when I will be among the first to stand up boldly against that. In my estimation, through much counsel and study, I see the moment we are in as a health challenge that we will come through successfully. In this time we show grace, pray for our leaders, and think of redemptive ways to address perceived overreach or bad decisions.

What are you learning from me right now? Are you willing to learn from me right now?

Have you judged anyone lately?

Sadly, the answer for most of us (including me) is... yes.

It is the basis of racism, sexism, vandalism and almost every other 'ism' you can think of.

It is also fundamentally incompatible with authentic Christian faith.

Jesus said Christians should be known for how deeply we love. Yet studies show that in the eyes of many non-Christians, we're known for how deeply we judge, not for how deeply we love.

The problem in many cases is not that unchurched people don't know any Christians. The problem is that they do. And they don't like us—for good reason.

Christians will argue: well, who's going to stand up for truth?

Understood.

Yet in Jesus, grace and truth are perfectly fused.

Remove grace from the truth and you don't actually have truth at all, but a cold imitation.

The opposite is also true, of course. Remove truth from grace and you don't have grace, but a weak imitation.

Fusing grace and truth is an exceptionally difficult venture and is usually only successful when we spend significant amounts of time on our knees and when the source of our attempt is actually Jesus himself. I am rarely good at it, flipping from one side to the other too quickly.

But when you see grace and truth fused, it takes your breath away. Why did people travel for days on foot in extreme conditions to meet Jesus? Grace fused to truth is what our hearts most deeply long for.

But in the church today, the hard edge of truth has crushed many. And one of the most frequent expressions of loveless truth is found in judgment.

Judgmentalism is incompatible with God's Word to us.

4. Love

The presence of judgment almost always guarantees an absence of love.

Think about it through the lens of your marriage, a friendship or even someone you work with: it is virtually impossible to love someone and judge someone at the same time.

But wait, you ask: what if they're making a mistake and I need to correct them?

First of all, look at your mistakes and the depth of your sin, and deal with your issues first. In the process, you'll encounter a loving God who forgives you despite your rather dark sin.

And having been loved, you can love others.

I try to remember this rule: If I'm judging someone, I'm not loving them. You can't judge someone and love them at the same time.

5. Help (it's another word for serve)

Ever notice that people who judge almost never help and people who help almost never judge?

That's because judgment creates a line. The line is labeled "better than" or "smarter than" or "more righteous than" the person who needs help.

Help knows no such line. It just knows how to help.

When Jesus taught on judgment, not only did he tell us not to judge, and to remove the massive timber from our own eye before trying to find the speck of dust in someone else's eye, but he then showed us the purpose of removing the speck from someone else's eye: it's to *help* them.

The Christian purpose of stepping into someone else's world is not to judge someone, but to *help* them.

If you're not trying to help, don't bother. You'll probably only make it worse.

And if you are trying to help, you'll likely notice something else has disappeared: any sense of judgment you once carried.

6. Humility

Judgment is never grounded in humility (As in *oh my, I'm also a mess. Let's figure this out together.*)

Judgment is grounded in arrogance. That's because a judgmental person almost always carries with them a sense of condescension.

Judgment always says I'm better than you, I know more than you and I'm also superior to you.

No wonder people run from it.

Very few people get judged into life change. Many people get loved into it.

Humility, by contrast, fosters empathy. It says "I'm like you. I get that. Maybe we can help each other."

People run to that.

7. Prayer

There's also a connection between judgment and prayer.

Judging someone and praying for someone are pretty much mutually exclusive.

You can't pray for someone you judge because you're actually not *for* them. Sure, you can pray *about* them, but again, your prayer won't be grounded in humility. It might be grounded in anger, or in arrogance, or superiority, but it won't be grounded in love.

You never truly pray for someone you judge.

Conversely, if you want to stop judging someone, pray for them.

It's impossible to judge someone and truly pray for them at the same time.

8. Evangelism

If you want to kill evangelism, fill the church with judgmental Christians.

People run from people who judge them. They run to people who love them. Think about it; that's what *you* do: you run from people who judge you.

When grace and truth are fused, people usually run toward it because the combination of truth and grace describes a reality they're facing and brings actual hope that things can get better.

God never asked you to judge the world. He did ask you to love it.

I definitely speak to this as someone who is part of the problem.

One of the things I struggle with is the rush to judge others instead of taking a look in the mirror. That's the exact opposite of what Paul instructed us to do.

The reality is that people's lives are plagued by problems. There is an epic battle raging in this life, and people get taken down every day over addictions, failed relationships, misguided beliefs and things that we think will give life, but, in the end, only destroy.

We need to help outsiders because we have been helped. We need to help each other on the inside and thereby better realize our mission.

True judgment is reserved for God. Love seeks to help.

Love says *there is a problem*, but humbly, prayerfully, empathetically I'd love to help with that.

The person on the receiving end of help senses it. They know when they're being judged. And they know when they're being loved and helped.

That's what I hope to do. And that's what I hope, in the end, we all do. Because I, too, am a judge who is seeking to become a loving helper.

We'd be so much better as a church if we did the same.

Start with Ministry, not Theology

So how do you engage outsiders?

You start with ministry,

If you look at how Jesus approached outsiders, he always started with ministry and ended with theology. He loved hanging out with people who were nothing like him. Jesus liked people who were nothing like him. It's why he became friends with prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers and everyone else the 'righteous' people of his day despised.

Jesus would start with ministry and then eventually get to theology.

You know who does the opposite? People who judge. If you're a judger, you start with theology. You say things like "I can't hang around people like that. Don't they know what they're doing is wrong."

When you start with theology you become intolerant.

Intolerance destroys influence.

Our judgment betrays God's acceptance.

Don't forget in Jesus' day who started with theology. The Pharisees and religious leaders.

Imagine what would happen if we started with ministry. Imagine what would happen if we communicated God's acceptance of sinners? We would have influence. And we would use that influence to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. And yes, ultimately, they would change.

After all, human sin was dealt with at the cross. I was not saved by your righteousness. Change will come over time. Transformation is a sanctification issue far more than it is a salvation issue.

When we start with 'go and sin no more', you destroy your influence before you even know someone's name. When we start with ministry, you gain so much ground with people that eventually they are even anxious to hear a 'go and sin no more' moment.

Remember the example of Jesus. The Gospels are very clear that Jesus lived in a politically charged environment. Judas Iscariot may have been involved in rebel militia prior to his discipleship. There are references to revolts and pressure put on Jesus to launch a revolt.

There are incidents where an opponent tried to trick Jesus into aligning himself on a political matter. Some even wanted to forcibly make him King. But Jesus visibly resisted all of these efforts. When Pilate asked him, “Are you a king?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

The point is that Jesus resisted making a political statement, and he certainly refused to offer a political solution. We do not want to join the crowd of those that pressured Jesus to take a political position. We admit that faith in Christ should shape our morals and values, that our morals and values will shape our political views.

There is nothing wrong with having a political opinion. But our message needs to be Christ-centric. Ministry during this chaotic season has been difficult. Our society is experiencing a convergence of storms—a global pandemic, deeply divided and angry political environment, deeply divided and angry social environment, catastrophic economic upheaval, and manifold natural disasters (fires, hurricanes, floods.) It can be difficult to know how to respond correctly to the circumstances of the day.

We want to heed Colossians 4:-6, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

I want to wrap up with a look at some of the things our team of pastors and our Capital family have done together over the past several months. We have a lot to celebrate:

(Insert slides of our ministry celebrations)

Where are we going?

We are striving to practice the way of Jesus.

Our Spiritual Theme for 2021: Breakthrough through Passion and Prayer

Focus inward toward God:

Scripture (Corporately Every Sunday – Personally every day)

Worship and Prayer (Corporately Every Wednesday at 7:00 – Personally every day)

Fasting

Sabbath

Focus outward toward others:

Small Groups

Hospitality

Generosity

Vocational Excellence

The Poor

A Broken Heart for Broken People