

## **“The Church at Its Best”**

### **Matthew 4:18-22**

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Today we celebrate the thirty-third anniversary of Smoke Rise Baptist Church and thank God for His blessings upon us. I welcome former members back on this special occasion, especially charter members. You make our joy more complete with your presence.

The question that I would like to address today is this. When is the church at its best? When is it doing what it was designed and commissioned to do by our Lord?

How I would love to dialogue with you this morning and get your ideas. I value your input that much. However, I've been to the Promise Land, the fellowship hall, and have seen what we are having for lunch. It truly is a land flowing with milk and honey, at least it smelled that way to me. So, I'll start the dialogue here and we'll continue it over a piece of homemade pie. Besides, I think more clearly while eating the ultimate brain food, chocolate.

When is the church at its best? It is at its best when it accepts people as they are, challenges them to live up to their potential and forgives them when they do not. Let me explain.

**The church is at its best when it accepts people as they are.** Oprah Winfrey received the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award last Sunday night at the Emmys. In her acceptance speech, she talked about the importance of accepting people as they are in order to help them. “You must begin where they are and seek to understand them,” she said. She learned this from her father.

Her father is a barber in Nashville, Tennessee. Down through the years, his barber shop has also served as a gathering place for the homeless, outcasts and misfits. These same people found their way around all her holiday dinner tables.

One day, Oprah asked her father why these people had to be included in their holiday celebrations. “Why can't we have some **normal** people around our table?” Her father's answer changed her life. He replied, “They are **normal**. They want the very same things we do. They want to be known, loved and fed.”

I believe the church is at its best when it accepts and embraces people where they are on their journey, not where the church wants them to be or thinks they should be. When a baby is born, how many parents ask to examine the child before deciding whether they will accept him or her into their family? I don't believe I've met one that did that. Churches don't need to do that, either.

Some churches do, though. They impose social, cultural or theological expectations upon people before accepting them. They draw up a list of flaws they think they do not possess and use them as a litmus test for inclusion and membership. I do not think this is scriptural and it grieves me. I wonder how many people have been turned away from the church because they were not “**normal**?”

I marvel at the way Jesus called his disciples. He did not approach each candidate and drill him about his lifestyle and beliefs. He merely said, “Follow me.” He accepted each of them as he was, flaws and all, and invited each to join him on a journey of a lifetime.

Why did he do this? I think he loved them enough to teach them the truth about life, had confidence in them to learn what he was teaching and trusted God to lead and guide them. Healthy churches follow Jesus' example.

I want to thank this wonderful church for allowing me to imitate Jesus. On several occasions, I have told people that we are on a pilgrimage at Smoke Rise. We are learning what it means to love God and our neighbor and invite them to join us. I have assured them that we will accept them where they are on their journey as we join hearts and hands in our efforts to become like Christ.

If we are going to help people, we must begin where they are, not where we want them to be. And that process begins by inviting them to the table, listening to their story and walking in their shoes.

**Secondly, the church is at its best when it challenges people to live up to their potential.** After Lincoln attended a church service, someone asked him if he liked the preacher and intended to go back to that church. He said no. When asked why, he replied, “Because the preacher did not challenge me to do anything great for God.”

We do no one a favor when we enable him or her to underachieve. Who was your best teacher or coach when you were growing up? I would be willing to say it was the one who challenged and pushed you. It was the one who would not accept mediocrity. That may not have been your favorite teacher, but it was your best, wasn't it?

The church is at its best when it shows people an honorable and productive way to live, equips and encourages them to do it. I know I enjoy listening to a speaker that inspires me to live for more than the accumulation of possessions or the pursuit of worldly pleasures. Someone that challenges me to “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God” certainly influences my decisions. He or she makes me aware of the most important things in life, relationships, integrity, justice, compassion and motivates me to pursue them.

I believe the church is at its best when it is used by God to make people better. This is what faith does. Ask Zacchaeus or Paul.

**Thirdly, the church is at its best when it forgives people who fail to live up to their potential and offers them another chance.** The world has always had a problem deciding what to do with imperfection, ignore it or cruelly condemn it? There has been no middle ground. This is why the church's voice needs to be heard. Perhaps the church's greatest contribution to society is to offer another option to the discussion on what to do with mistakes. The world needs to know that it is possible to learn from mistakes and change. Are there better examples of this than the Prodigal Son, the woman caught in adultery or Simon Peter?

What about the example of Chuck Colson, who spoke in our church last spring? In 1974, he pleaded guilty to the crime of obstructing justice while serving in the Nixon Administration during the Watergate era and was incarcerated for seven months in an Alabama prison. This ordeal led to a profound religious experience that changed his life. He discovered the meaning and power of divine forgiveness.

After his release from prison, Colson founded the Prison Fellowship Ministries, which has become the world's largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners, crime victims and their families. This movement now has over 50,000 volunteers with ministries in ninety-three countries. The mission of this movement is to make broken lives new through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

One sentence from a 1973 Boston Globe article impressed me. After revealing that Mr. Colson was the White House “hatchet man,” a man feared by even the most powerful politicians during his four years of service to President Nixon, the article stated, “If Mr. Colson can repent of his sins, there just has to be hope for everybody.” Mr. Colson agreed and so do I.

I also think this is the time the church is at its best, when it shares hope with those who feel hopeless. This is what the church was designed and commissioned to do by our Lord. How grateful I am to be a part of a church that has been doing this for thirty-three years. May God continue to use us to make a difference in the lives of people and His world.