

## “Strengthening the Church”

*Matthew 16:13-18*

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

This is one of my most favorite passages in all of the Bible. Right at the start of the year, our group was in Israel and we always make it a point on our Holy Land trips to go by this site and visit and teach there.

Caesarea Philippi is located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It's located in what is known as the Golan Heights and is near a natural spring. It's a beautiful setting (**SHOW B-ROLL**), however at that time of the Bible it was known as a place of great idol worship. In the Old Testament, the Canaanites and Phoenicians worshipped Baal from the location.

During the time of the New Testament, this city went by the name Panias, because it was home to a shrine that was dedicated to the false god, Pan. Pan was a goatlike figure (kind of scary if you google any images of him) and he was the god of the wild. To this day you go there is what is called the “Cave of Pan” where Pan was worshipped and sacrificed to.

It's in this setting that Jesus asks what some consider to be the most important question he ever asked. You know, Jesus asked a lot of questions in scripture...over 300. It'd be a good, long series to preach one of these days – maybe take the top ten! The questions of Jesus.

Well, it's here at Caesarea Philippi that he asks a doozie. Let's look at it together.

**Matt. 16:13-18 – “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”<sup>14</sup> And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”<sup>15</sup> He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

The title of the message is: **Strengthening the Church**

We are bringing to a close our *FOCUS* series today, and I want to thank you for the positive response that we have received from this series. Our goal has been to take a step back and look at the big picture of what we are doing as a church.

I call this working **ON** the church/ministry, not just **IN** the church/ministry.

**Illus. Super Bowl** – Tonight is the Super Bowl...got two Texas quarterbacks going head to head! I can't wait! All I want to see is a good game, and the Eagles lose – that's all I want! Tonight, though both teams will have coaches up in the press box. Why do they do that? Because

there is a difference in perspective from what you see on the ground at eye-level and what you see up in the press box when looking down on the whole field.

This series has been an attempt to get up to the press box and look down...to get out of the trenches for a moment and really wrap our mind and heart around NOT just what we do, but WHY we do what we do.

And what we have said in *FOCUS* is that we can have a lot of programs and ministries and events, but at the end of the day if we are not doing what is ultimately important, than what we do is not going to last. We've encapsulated in a statement what we believe is MOST important. And remember, this has both personal and corporate elements to it!

### **Champion Forest advances the Kingdom by making disciples, loving our community, and strengthening the Church.**

So, just a quick glance back to previous weeks in order to get us going, let's review what we are calling our "Focus Priorities" and the driving question behind each of them.

"Champion Forest advances the Kingdom (Big K – we're helping bringing God's eternal Kingdom to earth by how we live) and what does this look like? How's it going to happen? By first:

#### **1. Making Disciples** – this is the Great Commission

Matt. 28 – the final words of Jesus before he ascended – "Go and make disciples". We unpacked this in week two of our series, if you missed any of it, go online and listen to it.

The driving question behind this "focus priority" is this: **When I stand before the Lord, will I be happy with what I have to present to him?**

At the end of the day, it's the souls of people we lead to Jesus and make look more like Jesus that matters the most and what we will be MOST proud of – earthly accomplishments fade...I bet 95% of the people in this room can't tell us who won the Super Bowl two years ago – who was the MVP? That stuff will fade away...it won't last. But making disciples will.

Secondly, we will advance the Kingdom by:

#### **2. Loving our Community** – this is the Great Commandment

We are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength and we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We spent an entire message last week talking about what it means to love our neighbor and the part that each of us plays in being the hands and feet of Jesus in our community.

The driving question behind this "focus priority" is: **If Champion Forest disappeared tomorrow, would anyone in the community know, care, or miss us?**

We want to make our presence known and felt by how we love our neighbors!

I believe we have been doing this, are doing this now and prayerfully will continue in the future. The final “focus priority” is:

**3. Strengthening the Church** – This is what I’m calling the “Great Commitment”

And I want you to notice the wording...it’s chosen very intentionally – the word is “strengthen, and the “C” in church is capitalized.

When we talk about about “strengthening the Church”, we’re talking about being committed to the bride of Christ – the church at large...the universal Church.

We LOVE our local church called Champion Forest. But Champion Forest is just a small part of the larger Church. And we want to play our part in helping to strengthen the larger body of Christ.

Notice we use the word “strengthen”. We don’t build the Church. Jesus said in Matt. 16, “I will build my Church” – it’s Jesus’s Church and he will ensure it gets built and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

We don’t build anything when it comes to the universal Church, however we can strengthen the Church and that’s what this message is about.

What part does Champion Forest play in seeing the Church of Jesus Christ flourish? How can we make sure that we are doing everything in our power to see that the witness of Christ is going forward and that the larger body of Christ is blessed and built up?

Why is this even important? Why does it matter that we care about what is happening down the street in churches like Faithbridge, Houston Northwest, The Met or in our city like Houston’s First or Community of Faith or in both major cities and rural places around the country AND the world?

- Do we have a part to play?
- Can we help?
- If so, how and why?

The driving question behind this “focus priority” is one of stewardship. I’ll put it on the screen for you...here it is:

**How are we stewarding the gifting, resources and influence God has graciously given us?**

I’m not going to stay here long, but Jesus gives a parable in Matt. 25 known as the “Parable of the Talents”. I’d encourage you to read it in your time alone with the Lord this week...just sit on it, and let the truth of it soak into your life.

Bottom line is Jesus teaches that people in life are given a certain amount of “talents”. Now, “talent” represents many things. In this context, it was a monetary value, and certainly this can be bridged to today. God gives different people different amounts of wealth – it all comes from his hand. When we interpret this text in a broader sense we know it can mean an ability that God has given someone or a spiritual gifting God has bestowed upon you.

We’re all given certain “talents”. In this parable, one person was given five talents, to another two and another one. In fact, just look at the way this is worded in Matt. 25.

**Matt. 25:14-15 – “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants (key term) and entrusted (key term) to them his property. (Lesson: We are God’s servants and what he gives to us, he entrusts to us...meaning, it’s not even ours in the first place! Our wealth is not our wealth. Our talents are not our talents. Our gifts are not our gifts...they are God’s that he has entrusted to us and each has different gifts, talents and wealth and different amounts of talents and gifts and wealth.)<sup>15</sup> To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.”**

Again, read the rest of the story in your own time, but what happens is the Master comes back and he wants to see what the servants did with what he had given them! They are called into account for how they handled what they were entrusted with – this is ALL about stewardship.

Now, a steward can be defined as this:

**Steward – someone entrusted with another’s wealth or property and charged with the responsibility of managing it in the owner’s best interest.**

Paul writing as an apostle states how he sees himself and how others should view him, and this can be said of every single person that names the name of Christ:

**1 Cor. 4:1-2 – “This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (speaks here of the gospel and the riches and truth associated it. Combine this with what is taught in Matt. 25 and Luke 19 and other places – it’s clear – whatever God gives to us, is his and we as stewards have a responsibility and obligation to manage it well – with his interests in mind...not ours!) Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.”**

This is the goal of a steward: Faithfulness...we must be found trustworthy.

Going back to Matt. 25, one person is given five talents...another two and another one. The people that wisely stewarded the five talents and two talents – they were affirmed...they were celebrated. They were honored AND rewarded. To them are the words spoken:

**Matt. 25:21 – “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”**

But, to the person that was given one talent, and did nothing with it. He didn't steward it well – there was rebuke...there was judgment. Just read (v. 25-29) – This person's talent...his gift...his influence was taken away and a harsh and severe judgment awaited him.

This is how serious God takes this stewardship! Each of us are going to stand before God and give an account of our lives!

And the only question that is going to be asked is, "have we been faithful? Have we been trustworthy stewards of all that God has entrusted to us (our families, our intellect, our talents, our skills, our finances) – it's the driving question behind this "focus priority".

### **How are we stewarding the gifting, resources and influence God has graciously given us?**

It's very personal, and at this point in the message, I want you to really think about this. How are YOU stewarding the gifting, resources and influence God has graciously given you?

- That business acumen you have – it was given to you by God – are you honoring him with it?
- That wealth that you have – God gave that! He gave you the people skills, the mind, the talent to make that money - are you investing in the Kingdom or building your own kingdom?
- Those children you have – those are God's children on loan to you. Your responsible for the shaping and molding of that child – are you going to be happy when you stand before God with what you have to present to him as it relates to your spouse and your children?
- God, according to scripture and we'll get into this a little bit more in just a second has given you a supernatural, divine, spiritual gift that is to be used for the direct purpose of edifying the body of Christ – are you exercising your spiritual gift? Do you even know what your spiritual gift is?

We are stewards, and what we do with what God has entrusted to us – MATTERS!

Jesus tells another stewardship parable in Luke 12. And the point of the parable is if the master tells you to do something and then goes away...when he comes back, he better find faithfulness! He better find the steward doing what he told him to do before he left! Listen to his closing point in this parable:

**Luke 12:48b – "...Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."**

From a corporate standpoint, Champion Forest is a five talent church.

- He has given us more resources than many other churches...

- He has given us more people than many other churches...
- He has given us more influence than many other churches...

And therefore just as individuals who have been entrusted with more – MUCH MORE is demanded...much more is required.

And so, what does this mean for us as a church? It means we have to make sure we are using the gifting, resources and influence God has graciously given us NOT to just strengthen our church, but the Church.

THIS is what this “focus priority” it’s about stewardship. If we want to be faithful and trustworthy, we must make sure that we are leveraging what God has entrusted to us in a way that is pleasing to him. And a five talent church, doesn’t just spend on ourselves...doesn’t just think about themselves – that’s NOT a “well done good and faithful church” move or mindset.

Instead, we commit to advancing the Kingdom by using the gifts, resources and influence God has graciously given us to strengthen the Church. How do we do this? First, we strengthen the Church by:

### 1. Our Giving

When we give needs are met – plain and simple. It honors the Lord...it helps us break the back of greed in our own life. It demonstrates trust when we give – a lot of reasons we should be in the giving game!

What I want to communicate today though is that giving financially is one of the primary ways that we can strengthen the Church.

When we give, we don’t keep everything that is given under this roof – a large portion of our giving of course goes to personnel and to operations, but a large portion also goes to missionaries serving all over the world...to churches that are being planted in hard to reach cities all over the United States. Your giving goes to support ministry partners locally and internationally that are doing incredible work.

Let me give you just three examples of how your giving is being stewarded so that the Church is strengthened.

1. CF Connect – did you know that through CF Connect – this is our pastor encouragement and church resourcing ministry that we started and that your giving goes toward. Did you know in the last 2 years we have invested in nearly 300 pastors from over 35 different states (**Show PICS** and tell story of gathering, Amazon mission trip, marriage conference and preaching symposium in Oct.)

Did you know that through CF Connect, we are helping plant – I’m talking serious funds over 20 church plants all over North America. Not only that, but check this picture out – this is of several

of us that we have had the privilege to partner with to help plant a Spanish ministry (**SHOW PIC**)

Even in our FORWARD campaign, we made a commitment, we're not going to just renovate and refurbish here, but 10% of what we took in through FORWARD went to CF Connect so we could help encourage pastors and plant more churches. It was a small, but significant way of saying, "it can't just be about us!"

2. IMB – As a Southern Baptist Church, we are committed to partnering with the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board. If you were here last month when Paul Chitwood spoke, we gave him a check for \$250,000 dollars that was just from our World Missions Offering – that doesn't count what we budget to missions and IMB.

Last year we gave a half a million dollars on top of that to the SBC/IMB. You ask, where does this money go? What do you do with it?

And again, I'm just talking about IMB – I'm not talking about our other mission partners we give to per the budget and World Missions offering. The IMB has over 3500 missionaries that we help support! In 2021 which is the latest numbers we have 22,744 new churches were started all over the world and we saw 107,701 people baptized. Bottom line the more you give, the more we give and what happens when we give? The church is strengthened!

3. Our Residency Program (**SHOW PIC**) – I won't say much about this except here is the vision of this: 20 residents a year for the next 25 years – that's 500 residents – we'll move them up, send them out all over the world. If those 500 residents touch a minimum of 2,000 people that's one million people touched, ministered to because of this program.

What happens as these young men and women go out and minister all over the world – the Church (Big C) is strengthened! This is why it's so exciting to give...your giving is making a difference – get in on this! Don't miss out. We have a responsibility – text **GIVE** to 77069 to set up online giving. Start somewhere!

We advance the Kingdom by strengthening the Church, and we will do this by our giving and secondly, by:

## 2. Our Serving

Yes, our local church is strengthened when we serve but as a part of that so is the universal Church. Whenever we serve and use the spiritual gift God gave us, we make the Church (Big C) stronger.

Paul wrote about this in: **Eph. 4:11-12** – “**And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.**”

We build up the body...we strengthen the body when we use our spiritual gift to serve the body.

This is another sermon for another day, but just read 1 Cor. 12:12-31 – it’s all about how we as individuals are like certain parts of the body...and as members of the body we need one another. We work together. The foot needs the hand...the eye needs the ear – we need one another.

If you are not using your spiritual gift to strengthen the Church, you are missing a large part of what God has designed for your life, and it could just be that joy and purpose and life you are looking for will be found when you are serving and seeing how God uses you to help strengthen the larger body of Christ.

I had a meeting with three men this week about the prison ministry they are involved in – the Church is strengthened in prison as these men go each Tuesday night and use their spiritual gift of mercy and teaching to help equip them.

I’ve had two meetings the last two weeks with men that are in the second half of their career and they are asking the question, how do I move from success to significance – it’s the Halftime book idea by Bob Buford – both want to know how can I steward what God has entrusted me in a way that strengthens and builds the body

I LOVE having these conversations! It’s strengthening the Church as they move forward and follow the call of God on their life. Finally, a third way we strengthen the Church is by:

### **3. Our Going**

I’m talking specifically in this about going on mission trips. When we go nationally and internationally on mission trips, we go for the express purpose of helping a pastor and/or church. And what does this do? It strengthens the Church.

It actually has a reciprocal affect as well. Because when we go on mission, we come back more even more committed to Christ and our local church (little “c”) because it enlarges our view of what God is doing through his Church (big “C”) in the world.

I realize that not everyone can go across the sea...and some may not can leave your house – you can pray though...and your prayers combined with those who can go, can make an eternal difference.

A lot more I could say about this...my simple challenge would be to try and make a mission trip happen sometime this year.

You can text **MISSION TRIPS** to 77069 or go online and see what trips we have lined up this year.

You could go to Nepal, the Amazon, Kenya, New Orleans, Galveston, Miami, Honduras, Austin, Germany, Mozambique, El Salvador, Indonesia, Columbia – all price points for all people.



We are going to continue to be what you have always been Champion Forest and that is a GOING church. Because, when we go, the Church is strengthened.

**Champion Forest advances the Kingdom by making disciples, loving our community, and strengthening the Church.**

If we will keep our FOCUS on this...on living out these “Focus Priorities” on both a personal and corporate level, we will hear the words we ALL want to hear one day, “Well done thy good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

May it be so. Let’s pray.

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*Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.*