

## ***Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith***

### ***“What is the Church?”***

Ephesians 3:8-12

Cedars Sermon Series

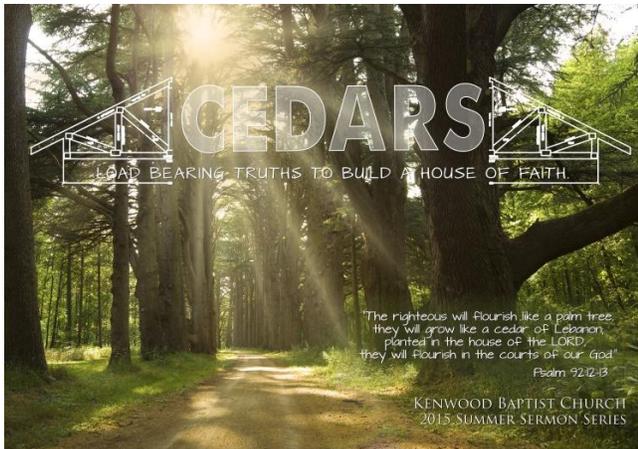
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

August 9, 2015

**TEXT:** Ephesians 3:8-12

We continue this morning in our summer series, *Cedars of Lebanon: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith*, and we’ve been looking at large questions that have framed Christian



theology over the centuries. We have looked at: “What is the Bible?” It is the place where we find truth: God's living Word; “What is God like? Who has He revealed himself to be in Scripture?” We saw that He is the incomparable God of glory that we meet in Scripture. We asked: “What is humanity?” We saw that you and I are uniquely made in God's image, and that we were created to know God and respond to Him in praise. Yet, we are

fallen and sinful, and we have inherited this from our ancestors. On the other hand, God has not allowed us to remain in our sin, but has sent forth Jesus Christ, His one and only Son to die on the cross, to absorb the wrath of God in His atoning death. We looked at: “What is election?”—God’s taking initiative to save. We looked at: “What is justification?”—God's declaration that we are right in His sight and how that leads to our full adoption in His sight. Last week we looked at: “What is Sanctification?”—God's commitment to us to make us holy and transform us and his commitment to do that up until the very day that we leave this world: the perseverance of God's people.

This morning, we turn our attention to a great question: “What is the church?” We have been asking people at the Days in the Park in a spiritual interest survey: “How do you perceive the church? What words would you use to describe the church? How can a church be of value in your life?” As I think of some of those conversations over the last two nights and conversations I have had with people over the years, there are three misperceptions that I want to frame this sermon around. Many people imagine that the church is a building, a building that you can drive by. Kenwood Baptist Church has unique challenges for visibility, but many people imagine

the church as a structure. A second misperception that people have about the church is that it is a secret organization. The Dan Brown types in our midst imagine that the church is like a secret society, that membership into that society is mysterious, and who knows what really goes on in there? A third misperception of the church is that the church is a cause, maybe a political viewpoint, a social issue, that Jesus is in the back pocket of a cause. Each of these misperceptions contains an element of truth. The church actually is a building, as we will find out, but it is different than you might think. It is an organization, but the way you become part of it is not mysterious, but glorious. It is a cause, but it is not a political or social cause. It is God's own cause.

Let's look in Scripture at "What is the church?" The word *church* is the old English word *cir(i)ce* or *cyr(i)ce*. It comes from the Dutch *kerk*, German *kirche*, and is based on the medieval Greek expression *kuriakon (dōma)*, that it is the Lord's house. Yet, when we turn to the Bible to discover the usage of the word *church*, we find out that the church in Scripture is not a building, but it is an assembly of people. In Deuteronomy 4:10, the Lord says to Moses:

*"Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when He said to me, 'Assemble the people before Me to hear My words so that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.'"*

The word is used here is a verb. It is really the verb *to church My people, to gather them together*. In Deuteronomy 31:30, we read:

*"And Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel."*

He recited them to the whole church, or assembly: the Hebrew word *kahal*, the assembly. The Septuagint translation renders *kahal* as *ekklesia*, or *church*, the gathered assembly of God's people. In Judges 20:2, we read:

*"The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly [in the church] of the people of God."*

We read in 1 Kings 8:14 concerning Solomon:

*"While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them."*

The words used here for the whole gathered assembly mean the whole *church* of Israel. We read in Psalm 149:1:

*"Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, His praise in the assembly of His faithful people."*

In Scripture, church is not a building; it is an assembly of people gathered together, the

gathered people of God, a sacred assembly of God's people. When Paul describes the church, he describes it in this way in Ephesians 3:8:

*“Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the nations the boundless riches of Christ.”*

We see here the image of God's gathered people and that this grace was given to Paul, the grace of God expressed in his ministry: to preach, to proclaim to the nations the Gospel of the boundless riches of Jesus Christ. The assembly of God's people is not a building; it is not an inanimate structure, but it is a living structure, as the full counsel of Scripture unfolds, in which God's people are brought together under His rule and Lordship. They are a people with the knowledge of God, possessing the Gospel, the Good News of God, and this Good News of God goes to all peoples, and these peoples of the world are fit together, as we will see in Ephesians, in a glorious image of a living, moving structure built together with living stones. The assembly of God, the church of God, should be characterized and marked by this preaching of the Gospel. Paul says a preaching of the Gospel to all peoples, the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ, was entrusted to him. Paul bursts into praise in this last phrase of Ephesians 3:8 when he says:

*“. . . this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.”*

Some versions translate this, *the unfathomable riches of Christ*. The expression that he uses here is that the grace we have received in Jesus Christ is so amazing that you can't reach the bottom of it. I love to go in at the deep end of a new pool. It's always a challenge to go to the deep end of the pool and just make sure you can touch the bottom. Some pools you go into, the whole pool is just 3 feet deep, and it is not very exciting. You don't even have to take a breath. Other pools, though, are 10, 12, 15, even 18 feet deep. Your ears start to pop, but when you get down and reach the bottom, you have the satisfaction of knowing there it is. There is the limit. Paul uses a word here that says Christ's riches are unfathomable. You can't get to the bottom of it. You can't get to the edge. You can't trace out the limits of the grace that you've received in Jesus Christ. You can't find the edge of it and then move beyond it. The riches that we receive of God's grace in Jesus Christ are beyond tracing out. That doesn't mean that they're not comprehensible; it just means that you cannot go anywhere that would be outside the scope of Christ's grace. Romans 11:33 he uses the same word when he says:

*“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!”*

His ways are beyond tracing out. The wealth of grace that we have received in Christ is a dominant theme in Ephesians. In Ephesians 1:7 he says:

*“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.”*

In Ephesians 2:7, he says:

*“ . . . so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”*

The assembly, the sacred assembly of God's people, of which we find a local expression here at Kenwood Baptist Church, is a living structure. It's a living structure of lives transformed by the grace of God and fit together into a sacred assembly. This sacred assembly has a sublime purpose as Paul continues in Ephesians 3:9. He says that not only did God give him the grace to proclaim the Gospel to the gathered assembly of God's people, but he also received this mandate:

*“ . . . to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”*

Some of the conspiracy theorists, our second category people, say: “See, there it is. The church is mysterious, unknowable. I knew it.” What Paul says is something radically different and much more exciting than Dan Brown's books that repeat themselves with an unknowable, complex human design far less interesting than the Lord's purpose. The Lord's purpose, Paul says in Ephesians 3:9, is that the time has now come that the mystery of God, this mystery that has been reserved in His possession, His will, His design, reserved from all eternity, is made known. It is manifest; it is publicized. The language of mystery in Scripture refers to God's eternal purposes, His hidden counsel. He consults with none of us to ask: “What do you think I should do with the universe?” He has a plan from the beginning, and Paul says that this plan is now being publicized and made known to all people. Deuteronomy 29:29 says:

*“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.”*

God's mysterious purposes are now made known to the world, and what are these mysterious purposes? They are the realization of redemption for all peoples through faith in Jesus Christ. The hidden counsel of God's eternal purpose was to send His Son. He planned this before the world was founded, and He purposed it in Christ. The mystery, according to Paul in Ephesians, is the mystery which is Christ. In Ephesians 1:9, we read:

*“In all wisdom and insight, God made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ.”*

He goes on to say in Ephesians 1:10, that the mystery of God's will was:

*“ . . . as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.”*

He uses the language of mystery again in Ephesians 3:6, which makes it abundantly clear:

*“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*

He says God's eternal purpose is this. There is no hidden, unpublicized agenda in God. God's eternal purpose in Christ was to save men, women, and children from every nation of the world to the praise of His glory. That is what He intended to do, and He is carrying it out day by day, week by week, month by month, until we reach Revelation 7 when an innumerable multitude is gathered before the throne saying: “Praise God and the Lamb on the throne who purchased people for God from every nation.” This is the mystery. It is not a conspiracy theory; it is God's eternal plan. That plan is now revealed; it is published; it is out in the open; it is not hidden; it has come to light in Jesus Christ; and it is on display in the life of the gathered assembly, the church. God's eternal purpose to build a sacred assembly, living stones, into a place of His own dwelling, is not a conspiracy, but a revealed mystery, His plan made known in the world. That plan is that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ becomes part of God's family through faith. There is nothing you must do other than accept Christ as Lord and Savior. The Gospel of Jesus Christ alone in this world has the power to reconcile humanity to God and humanity to one another. The Gospel is the only foundation for real racial reconciliation, and the church exists in the world as a picture of God's new creation.

I remember when I lived in China, the pressure to reveal your identity in Christ was heavy, and it could be dangerous. Many Chinese nationals were very guarded about revealing their Christian identity. My teaching partner and I were there teaching English, and we were working with Bible studies among students and trying to encourage home churches. We met a Chinese woman professor in the sciences at the university who kept coming to see us and talk to us. She was talking around the subjects of Christian faith not explicitly, not overtly, but she was circling around them, getting closer and closer, until maybe after the sixth or seventh visit with us she looked up at my teaching partner, Simon, who is 6’9”, and she looked more straight at me, and then she just said, “Are you a Christian?” There it was, out in the open. I didn’t know if I said, “Yes, I am,” if we would be reported. The question just hung there. Simon looked down from his 6’9”, and I looked straight at her, and we just said, “Yes. Yes, we are Christians.” She looked to the left and to the right, and then she looked at us and she said, “Then you are my brothers!” Only the Gospel reveals this truth. The nations of the world are co-heirs, members of the same body, fellow partakers of all of God's promises in Jesus Christ. The church is a sacred assembly of people who announce the Gospel of Christ, who reveal the mystery of God's will accomplished in Christ. The church, with its local expression at Kenwood Baptist, is a sacred assembly of people empowered by the Spirit to display God's wisdom in real transformation. Paul goes on in Ephesians 3:10, and he says a remarkable thing:

*“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made*

*known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, its revealed in its revealed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm.”*

Note the important phrase: through the church, through this sacred assembly. God says in His Word that this gathered group of believers, transformed by the Holy Spirit, is to reveal and display the wisdom of God to the universe. I don't know what you thought you were doing when you came to Kenwood this morning. Maybe you thought you wanted to see your friends or to catch up on the latest news of the church. Whatever your reason, I would suspect that not many of us thought that the real reason we were gathering this morning is to display the wisdom of God to the heavenly powers. Yet, that's what the Scripture says we are doing. God's will, His plan to redeem the nations in Jesus Christ and to transform and renew the image of God in people's lives, in family systems, in cultures, and societies, is to be happening through the church. That's God's plan, and He intends to use the church as His great place where He will display His wisdom in this world. What are we doing when we gather together in this sacred assembly? We are learning to walk in together God's ways, that the image of God would be renewed in us in such a way that the wisdom of God would be on display in our lives. What is God's wisdom? God's wisdom is spoken of in Deuteronomy, that the revelation of God's will in the Scripture is described as great wisdom and understanding. The nations of the world are to look at God's people and say: "Surely this is a great nation, wise in understanding, with statutes as righteous as these."

Paul's logic of the function of the church in Ephesians flows from this great declaration in Ephesians chapters 4, 5, and 6 to describe a transformed life. In Ephesians 4:1, he says:

*"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."*

You and I are called by faith to display the wisdom of God to one another and all the way up to the universe. Walk worthy of the calling you have received, he says. He says to use the gifts that God has given you in service. Not only are we to walk positively in the ways of God, but this also means in Ephesians 4:17 a rejection of a former way of life where the image of God was not reflected or displayed. In Ephesians 4:17, he says:

*"You must no longer walk as the Gentiles [or nations] do."*

In Ephesians 4:22-24, he says:

*"Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, . . . and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*

There is a real transformation that begins to happen, and we learned last Sunday that this process of sanctification and perseverance happens over time. It doesn't happen overnight,

probably because people close to us wouldn't even recognize us. Can you imagine that if you became a Christian and God just compressed your sanctification into 24 hours and your life was totally renewed and you reflected God perfectly in your life? People would be blinded by the reflection of Christ in you and be overwhelmed. Thankfully, God works over time renewing us. Look at the renewal that is happening in Ephesians 4. He says we used to be liars, but now speak the truth; we used to be thieves, but now work hard; we used to tear people down with our words, but now are building them up; we used to be bitter and filled with anger, but now are kind and tenderhearted to one another. He flows right into Ephesians 5:1-2 and says:

*“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love.”*

The life of Christ is to be lived out within this sacred assembly. The rest of Ephesians describes that in the very practical areas of our lives, in our marriages, in our relationships with one another, children to their parents, workers to their bosses, bosses to their workers, the wisdom of God is to be on display. We are supposed to look at the church, the gathered assembly of God's people, and say: “That's the life of Jesus Christ being lived out.” It's an astonishing assignment.

Those who would say the church is a building, they are right without realizing it. It is a building made of living stones. Those who would say the church is like a secret society, they are right in a way they just don't realize. We do have a secret, God's mystery, and we are just telling everyone. They are right when they say the church has a cause, but it's not a political cause or a social issue. It is nothing less than the complete transformation of individual people, their families, their neighborhoods, their society, their cities, their culture, and renewing them to reflect the glory of Jesus Christ. That's our mission, and when that happens, God is on display around us. Markus Barth, son of Karl Barth, wrote this about Ephesians 3;10. It's amazing. He said:

“The church is given an assignment among intangible powers that make their spiritual dominion felt from their ‘heavenly’ places. She is to be an example to all creation. She is to be a sign and proof of a change that affects the institutions and structures, patterns and spans of the bodily and spiritual, social and individual existence of all men. The function of demonstrating God’s dominion and love is entrusted to the church. She is appointed and equipped to be a public exponent of grace and [racial] unity. Political and social, cultural and religious forces, also all other institutions, traditions, majorities, and minorities are exposed to her testimony. Barbarous dictatorships and nations that enjoy orderly democratic processes; rampant prejudices and heroic fighters for civil rights; savage and tender expressions of man’s sexuality; devastating effects of civilization and highest achievements of culture alike--all these and other powers are given a unique chance by God: they are entitled to see in their midst the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth. To let God’s

light shine—this is the servant task ascribed to the church.”

Is that what you thought you were participating in when you came this morning? That’s why we need the Scriptures.

What God has in view for us is higher than we could ask or imagine. The church is a building; it is just made of living people. The church is a society; yet it is a family of faith to publicize God's will to all peoples. The church does have a cause; it is the cause of Christ, real transformation. What a privilege to be part of it. Did you notice Paul's introduction to this lofty statement of the church in Ephesians 3:8? He says:

*“Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: underserved grace to belong to Christ.”*

It’s a sacred privilege; it’s not a right. It's a privilege to be here; it's a privilege to be entrusted with these things; it's a privilege to walk around in a neighborhood community and ask people if they be interested to fill out a spiritual interest survey; it's really a privilege to paint the faces of kids. Our face painters know just how much time to keep the kids sitting there so that the rest of us can ask questions of their parents and invite them to be part of God's Kingdom. It's a privilege to serve in a booth selling soda or checking tickets. It's a privilege to be part of God's people.

This mystery is to be announced to all. In the last two nights we have been in the park, we have had countless conversations with people, some whom we know, some that we don't. I had the deepest conversation I've ever had in all these years with the same person over the last two nights. I can't wait to see this person again today. Would you believe that of all the surveys that we've gotten back, 35% of those surveyed checked: “Yes, I would be interested in participating in a study to learn more about Jesus this fall.” Can we, going forward as Kenwood Baptist Church, be deeply committed to being a sacred assembly, announcing God's mystery and embracing His Spirit and power transformation in our lives and embrace this high calling to display God's wisdom to the cosmos? That is why we are here.

Amen.