

# Jesus-Centered

Well **hey, everybody.** Y'all doing alright? Great to see you. My name is Kent, if we haven't met before. And **believe it or not, I'm the teaching pastor** here at City Church. I say "believe it or not," because I have *not* been up here teaching at all over the past seven weeks. **In fact, we've had people start coming around our church and stick around our church, all while I haven't been teaching.** Jeff, one of our other pastors, was asking someone the other day if they had met me. He said "have y'all met Kent?" and they said "oh is he the announcement guy?" Which I think is awesome. I'm actively seeing if we can change my title on our website to "Kent, the announcement guy."

But **the reason I haven't been up here** *teaching* lately is because our church was kind enough to give me what we called a "teaching sabbatical" over the past seven weeks. Basically, for seven weeks, I just had nothing to do with preparing or giving teachings on Sundays. Which is crazy, because teaching is somewhere around a *half* of my job here at City Church. But as I mentioned to a lot of you back in April, teaching up here can be a *hazardous* job: when you do this for a living, it's easy to start focusing more on teaching things to *others* than listening to what God wants to say to *you* individually. So I've been spending the past seven weeks making sure I don't have those priorities out of whack.

And **I'll be real** with y'all—the past seven weeks have been really **good and really weird.** **Good**, because it's helped a lot to remove the rolling Sunday deadline from the picture so I don't use that as a cop-out to avoid sitting with God, hearing *from* God and resting. Always good to take excuses away from doing those things. But it's also been **weird**, because as many of y'all know, I *love* being productive. I'm a fairly driven person, type 1 on the Enneagram if you know what that is. So I love improving things, perfecting things, working on things and making them better. I get *energy* from all of that. So not *having* as much to work on the past seven weeks has been pretty bizarre at times.

I **specifically remember going for a walk** one of the first mornings of my sabbatical. I heard someone say once that walking is a good way to slow your pace of life down and be more present, so I figured I'd try it. But the first day I went for a walk, I was about five minutes in, and I looked down and I was *speed walking*. And I was like "what in the world am I in a hurry for?" Like I literally have nowhere to go, nothing I have to get done today—my only goal is to be with Jesus, and I'm apparently on a time crunch. "Gotta hurry up and get this relaxing walk out of the way so I can get some stuff done!" Anyway, I'm a weird person.

So it's definitely **taken some getting used to**, but it's been really good. I'm looking forward to sharing some things with y'all over the coming months that I learned during my break, but mostly just wanted to say thank you for allowing me that time to do it. I'm really grateful. I'm also really grateful for **our incredible team** who took on additional teaching responsibilities while I was gone. Jeff, Marcus, and Eric did a fantastic job with this David series, and they all did that on top of full-time jobs and responsibilities. So I'm really indebted to them for all the work they put in over the past seven weeks—can we recognize and thank them together? **Times like this make me really thankful that our church isn't built around me or my giftset, but rather that we have a team of people loving and serving and equipping all of us together.**

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But all that said, I'm also **pumped to be back** and jumping into a new series with you this morning that we're just calling our *Vision Series*. (I'm telling you, I really tried to not work on anything teaching-related for the past seven weeks: I didn't even come up with a name for our next series. Just *Vision Series*.) But it's called that because **we're going to spend the next three weeks just talking through the basics of who we are as a church**. What are the core things that make us, *us* here at City Church—who do we feel like God has called us to be from day one? That's what we're going to dive into over the next few weeks together.

**Which means if you've just started coming around** our church super *recently*, you've **picked a great time** to join us, because you're about to hear us shoot straight for the next three weeks about who we are. So you'll be able to find out really quickly whether or not you're buying what we're selling around here. Whether or not you want to be a part of who we feel called to be. **If you've been around a little longer**—maybe a couple months—I think this series will go a long way towards explaining *why* we do some of the things that we do. There may be things you've noticed about us that stand out, but you're not super clear on *why* they stand out, or why we do them that way. This series should help explain some of that.

And lastly, **if you've been a part of our church for quite a while**, no doubt parts of this series will feel like *review* to you. And that's fine—nothing wrong with a little review. But we're also gonna be sharing some stuff each week about where we feel like God is calling us to press in and grow over the coming year or so. So that'll be really important for all of us. But **for the next three weeks, we're going to talk about our vision here at City Church**. Maybe not the most *provocative* series we've ever done, but I think a really *important* one nonetheless. Make sense?

Alright. So we'll **start here**. If you go to our website, and click *About*, and then *Vision*, at the top of that page in big block letters, you'll read that **"We are a Jesus-centered**

**family on mission.”** From the day we set foot here in Knoxville to start our church, that is who we’ve always felt called to be. **And that statement isn’t unique to us—not at all. We stole it from the church we came from in South Carolina, they probably stole it from somebody else, and then all of us pretty much stole it from the bible. So it’s nothing new.** But we think that statement does a pretty good job *summarizing*, at a glance, who we want to be together: *a Jesus-centered family on mission*. So each week during this series, we’ll take one aspect of that statement and drill down into what it means. What it looks like in practice to be *Jesus-centered*, to be *family*, and to be *on mission*.

So **this week**, we’ll talk about what it means to be *Jesus-centered*. What does it mean for us to be a *Jesus-centered* church? How does that shape many of the things we do, don’t do, and the things we want to become? I’ve got three things I want to lay out for you from the Scriptures, and then we’ll get really personal with it at the end. But these are at least three of the things it means for us to be *Jesus-centered*. And I want to **start with one that may feel really specific** and almost *technical* in nature, but it’s really important to how we function. *First*, being *Jesus-centered* means...

## **Jesus is our lead pastor.**

I get this from a passage in **1 Peter 5**. You can turn there, or just look along with me on the screen. There in 1 Peter it says this:

**To the elders (in other words, the appointed leaders over an entire church)** (to the *elders*) **among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the (notice this language specifically) Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.**<sup>1</sup>

**That word “shepherd”** there is the same Greek word as the word “pastor.” *Pastor* and *shepherd* are synonyms in the bible. And here it calls Jesus the “Chief Shepherd.” In other words, he’s the *lead pastor*. **Now here’s why I bring that up. If you go to the leadership page on our website,** you might notice that **no one on that page has the title “lead pastor.”** That’s intentional. None of us are the lead pastor because *Jesus is*. And that might sound cheesy to you, or like it’s just a semantics thing. But it’s really not. Functionally, there is *no one person* on our staff that gets to call all the shots for our church. There’s no one who gets to tell everybody else what to do and *isn’t* accountable

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-4

to anybody else. **We have no singular lead or senior pastor.** We all have areas of ministry that we're responsible for—but no one person sits above everybody else. We don't function that way. **The only person that gets final say and gets to sit in authority above everybody else is Jesus, and the things *he* says about how a church should function.**

Now, **that's not to say** that any church who *does* have a lead pastor is **automatically wrong or evil or unhealthy, just like we aren't automatically a *healthy* church just because we *don't* have a lead pastor.** Health and unhealth is more complicated than that. A lot of my good friends serve as lead pastors at their churches. But I do think words *matter*. And we know that if we were to call one of us the *lead* pastor, it would at least give *credence* to the idea that *they* get the final say on everything else. And we don't think *that's* a healthy way to lead a church. **And more than that, in the Scriptures, you'll notice that you never see a lead pastor or senior pastor mentioned at any of the churches.** Anytime you see the word "elder" (the name for leaders of a local church), it's *plural*: not *elder*, but *elders*. To us, that's a biblical pattern we want to follow.

**So here, we have *multiple* leaders** that serve and make decisions *together* for the good of our church. We have *three*, going on *four* elders. We have a *staff* made up of men *and* women. **We even have *additional* teams that help our elders oversee various aspects of our church.** When we make hiring or fiscal decisions, we have a Financial Advisory Team that speaks in and votes on those decisions. When we make decisions to train and equip our LifeGroups, we have a *Groups* Team that speaks into that. When we craft teachings to deliver here on Sunday, we have a *Teaching* Team that reviews and comments on every teaching. **We think God designed leaders to function in *plurality*: *multiple* leaders, serving the church *together*.**

Now, all of this **matters a lot to us for *several* reasons.** One, as we just mentioned, we believe it's a biblical *pattern*. Two, it's just *wise*. There are so many places in the book of Proverbs that basically say if you make decisions on your own without consulting other people, you're a fool and your plans will often fail.<sup>2</sup> Proverbs is a very *blunt* book, if you've never read it. But, it says, there is *wisdom* in the abundance of counselors—multiple people who speak into a decision *together*. **Three, I don't think it's a coincidence that every other month there is a story in the news about a lead or senior pastor who abused or misused their power to *horrendous* ends.** Again, not saying a lead pastor *automatically* does those types of things, but it certainly can create an environment where those things can happen more easily.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Proverbs 11:14, Proverbs 12:15, and Proverbs 15:22.

Even **in our 1 Peter passage**, it draws a straight line from the idea of Jesus being our Chief Shepherd, to his encouragement to the elders about not “lording” authority “...over others.” Not *misusing* their authority. I don’t think that’s a coincidence at all. **A team leadership structure at least helps prevent that sort of thing.** And **lastly**, we lead together and submit to one another because we want to model that posture for our whole church family. **One of the most dangerous places a leader can put themselves in is when they tell the whole church to submit to them, but the leader doesn’t submit to anybody.** That’s a disaster waiting to happen. **So here at City Church, Jesus is our senior pastor, and no one else is.** That’s one way that we seek to be “Jesus-centered.”

**Second**, Jesus-centered means that...

## Jesus is our authority.

We could obviously draw this one out from **a lot of different places** in the bible, but we’ll just do **Colossians 1**. It says this:

*The Son (that’s Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him **all things were created**: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities ~~(that’s a lot of things, if you missed it)~~; **all things have been created through him and for him.** He is **before all things, and in him all things hold together.** (Notice this language especially...) **And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.**<sup>3</sup>*

There’s obviously **a lot in there**, and a lot we could *draw* out. But **one clear implication is that Jesus rightly has the preeminence, supremacy, and authority over everything—but especially over his people, the Church.** At City Church, Jesus is our *authority*. Which means *he* is the one we appeal to. **What he thinks ultimately matters more than what I think, you think, Twitter thinks, CNN thinks, FOXNews thinks, what the government thinks.** You name it. Whoever it is, Jesus’ opinion matters *more*, and it matters *most*. So **practically speaking**, this means that when there is confusion or disagreement or frustration or conflict, we ask the question, “what does *Jesus* say we should do here?” “How does *he* say life works best?” “How does *he* say we should respond?” That’s how we navigate those situations.

And seeing things this way helps a ton when there is disagreement over less significant things. **I remember in the early days of our church**, there were two people specifically

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<sup>3</sup> Colossians 1:15-18

who were about **as far apart on the political spectrum** as two people could possibly be. Night and day. And *yet*, they were really, *really* good friends. Like thoroughly enjoyed one another's company. Now, they didn't sit around and hash through the upcoming election every day. They approached it with wisdom because they knew there would be some disagreement there. But they genuinely loved and cared for one another, despite *significant* differences.

And that's **what can happen when Jesus is our authority**. **If we're all centered around Jesus, we can disagree with each other over secondary things (even important secondary things)**. We might come across somebody else in our LifeGroup or in our church who is *very* different from us. Who sees certain issues or holds certain convictions that we *radically* disagree with. But we can look at that other person and go "well I don't know about *that*, but I can clearly see that they love Jesus. It doesn't appear that this one belief is keeping them from loving and following him, and I don't see anything in the bible that says it's clearly wrong, so I'll trust the Holy Spirit to work on their heart just like I trust him to work on mine." **This is what the bible calls unity. Not a bunch of people that all look and act and talk and vote the same. But a group of people who have centered their lives on Jesus, and therefore can let secondary things be secondary.** Make sense?

Okay, **last up**, being Jesus-centered means that...

## Jesus is our mantra.

Take a look with me **just a little further down** in **Colossians chapter 1**, where Paul says this:

***He*** (which in context there, is still talking about **Jesus. He...**) ***is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.***<sup>4</sup>

So I'm **going to give you a spoiler** about what you're gonna hear up here on Sundays pretty much every single week. In pretty much everything we say up here, we're trying to get one, very basic message across to you. You ready for it? Here it is: ***Sin is the problem; Jesus is the solution.*** That's it. That's the secret sauce to every single teaching we give. That's the one message we're trying to get out. We're like a band with one hit song. ***We're like Vanilla Ice in the 90s. Ice, Ice, Baby is all we've got. I'd like to think that the gospel is a little better than that song, but still. That's it.*** That's our bread

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<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:28

and butter. We want everybody who comes around to know: *sin is the problem; Jesus is the solution.*

Now, **we do riff on that** one song, right? So sometimes we talk about how *rebellious* sin is the problem: running as hard and as fast away from Jesus as you can. Sometimes we talk about how *religious* sin is the problem: how we use self-righteousness and pride to *conceal* our brokenness. Sometimes we talk about how *individual* sin is the problem. Sometimes we talk about how societal, institutionalized sin is the problem—about how the sin of *individual* people sometimes becomes normalized and codified over time to create structures and systems that need to be addressed. But still, in *all* of that, what we're saying is that *sin* is the problem. So **when we say “sin is always the problem,” we're not trying to minimize any of the really big issues going on in our world—not at all. We're trying to show just how much of creation sin has impacted, and just how amazing it is that Jesus came to do something about all of that.**

And **when it comes to how Jesus is the solution,** there's a variety of different ways to articulate *that*, too. Sometimes we highlight that Jesus is the solution because he *forgives* our sin. Sometimes it's that he *cleanses* us from the shame of our sin. Sometimes it's that he intercepts the judgment and wrath *due* our sins. Sometimes it's that he sets us free from sin's *enslaving power over* us. Sometimes it's that he reconciles people to himself and gives them the ability to combat the systemic brokenness in our world. So **Jesus is the solution to sin in a whole lot of different ways. But Jesus is always the solution.**

So **some of the overtones vary** from week to week, but the core message is always the same: *sin is always the problem; Jesus is always the solution.* That's what we want you to know. **And the same is true in our LifeGroup settings. So the hope is that when you are struggling, having a hard time, hurting—whatever the situation might be—we are reminding you about Jesus.** We want the good news of Jesus to be our native language. Some of you might have heard people use the term “gospel fluency”—that's what we're talking about: we want to become *fluent* in speaking the good news of Jesus into any and every situation. So as we've said before, **our LifeGroups are not primarily friend groups, or bible studies, or interest-based groups, or group counseling sessions. They are settings to remember and be reminded of the gospel.**

**Which means—and hear me out** here—in our groups, when someone shares something, the most regular thing out of our mouths in response shouldn't be “oh you should see my counselor!” Or “oh you need to learn about the Enneagram.” Or “oh let me give you some really good advice about that,” or even “oh let me help you with that.” All those things can be great responses in certain settings. **But the most regular thing out of**

our mouths in those settings should be “let me remind you of who Jesus is, and why that is good news for you.” If sin is always the problem, *Jesus is always the solution. So we want to speak the good news of Jesus into people’s lives, more often than we speak anything else.* That’s what it means for us to be Jesus-centered.

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So **there we have it.** *Three important things it means for us as a church to be “Jesus-centered.” Jesus is our lead pastor. Jesus is our authority. And Jesus is our mantra.* I’m sure there are plenty more things than that to being Jesus-centered, but it’s *at least* that.

So **with all that unpacked, here’s where I want to land** the plane this morning before we’re done. Everything I’ve just told you is about who **we** want to be. *Collectively. Communally. We as a church family* want to be Jesus-centered in these specific ways. Which is great. And if I know us, I think at least the vast majority of us are very on-board with *becoming* that together. I don’t know that many of us are sitting there currently going “no thank you. Get out of here with that stuff about Jesus and good news.” I think probably *all* of us—at least those who have been around very long—are going “yes. I’m in. Let’s be that. Let’s become *that* kind of church together. Let’s *be* Jesus-centered.”

So knowing *that*, **here’s where I want to push us** just a little. Believe it or not, **it isn’t enough for us to be Jesus-centered, and for you to be a part of us.** That’s not enough. **We also need you, as an individual, to be centered on Jesus.** In fact, I would put it even stronger than that: **for us collectively to be Jesus-centered, you individually must be Jesus-centered. We can’t become something communally that each of us are not.**

So there’s this **weird thing that happens in church world**—especially here in America, where there are so many different types of churches and theological tribes. **And so people start to draw their identity and even their sense of righteousness from which tribe they’re a part of.** So people go “well I’m a part of a *Reformed* church, so obviously *I’m* in a good place.” Or “well, *I’m* at a church that actually *cares* about reaching the *lost*, so obviously *I’m* good.” Or “I’m at a church that *doesn’t hate* the LGBTQ community, so obviously *I’m* good.” **People will actually start to make judgment calls on their own maturity or standing with God, largely based on what church or theological tribe they belong to.**

And that **can happen all over the evangelical landscape.** It can happen from the right or the left. **Self-righteousness and self-justification knows no bounds: literally all of us can fall prey to it.** But **the problem with seeing ourselves that way is this: that’s not how God sees us.** *God doesn’t look out across creation and go “oh there’s Kent!*



I'm not sure where his heart's at right now, but he goes to a church that cares about the right things, so he must be good!" **God does not save theological tribes or denominations or church approaches. God saves *individuals*. And he walks in relationship with *individuals*. And he wants to *know individuals*. And he cares about the *hearts* of individuals. That's how God operates.**

So I want to show you this from **Matthew 3**. Look with me up on the screen:

*But when he* (this is John the Baptist) *saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees* (just FYI—two groups of people that took a lot of pride in their heritage and their theological tribes. *They were...*) *coming to where he was baptizing*, (and) *he said to them: "You brood of vipers!* (That's one way to start a conversation) *Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father* (nah—we're good because of our heritage and our theological tribe. We belong to the right *group*, so we're good!).' *I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*<sup>5</sup>

So **John the Baptist here is coming at us** with a strong word *against* ever thinking that the *group you're a part of* makes you right with God. "That's not how it works," he says. *God doesn't do righteousness by group association. You're not right with him just because the group you're a part of believes right things or affirms good beliefs. You're right with him if your heart is right with him. If you walk with him, day-by-day. Don't say to yourself, "well, I'm a part of a good church! Isn't that what matters?!" No. What matters is your heart. What God wants is your heart.* God is able from a clump of rocks to raise up good churches for himself. **The one thing only you can give God is your heart. Your life. Your all. And you're in luck because that's exactly what he wants from you.**

So if I can just plead with you for a second: **whatever you do, please do not outsource your spiritual vitality to us.** Please do not show up here on Sundays and maybe once a week to LifeGroup, and expect *that* to be all you *need* to walk in relationship with God. It will not work that way. We're here to *help*. We're here to *encourage*, to *resource* to help point you in the right direction. To use the cliché, **we can lead you to the water...but we can't make you drink.** And more importantly, **a living relationship with God is so much better than a loose association with a church.** Now, **a living relationship with**

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3:7-10

the true God will always lead you *towards* active involvement in a local church. But you can't replace God *with* church. You can't operate as if church attendance is all that is needed for spiritual vitality. It simply will not work.

So **let me just ask you** if I can: **if you took Gathering and LifeGroup attendance out of your life, would anything about your life look distinctly Christian?** Would anything about your life look different than the average non-Christian at your school or at your job? Aside from going to church things, are you pursuing and taking responsibility for an ongoing relationship with God? Because without each of us doing that *individually*, we don't stand much of a chance at being Jesus-centered *collectively*.

So listen: **lean in** to the grace of God. **Don't just be around Jesus-centered people; be a Jesus-centered person. Be a Jesus-centered PERSON. Ground yourself daily** in the realities of the good news Jesus came to offer. Preach to *yourself* the incredible things that Jesus has accomplished on your behalf. *Center your entire life* on knowing and following Jesus into whatever he's got for you. Ask *yourself*, "is Jesus *my* lead pastor?" Do I allow him to walk with me and speak to me and shepherd me through the best and worst parts of life? Ask *yourself*, "is Jesus *my* authority?" When he says something that I don't automatically agree with or asks something of me that I don't *naturally* want to give, who gets the final say: *me*, or *him*? Ask *yourself*, "is Jesus my *mantra*?" Is the first thing off my lips towards others the good news of Jesus? Or something far less than that? **Ask yourself those questions, at least as often as you ask yourself those questions about your church.**

**You see we can't be Jesus-centered, unless you are Jesus-centered.** For *us* to become that type of church, we need each of us to become that kind of *person*. So I want to just land with this passage from Colossians 2 that I think sums this up well, and then we'll pray. Same one we began with before I even got up here. Take a look with me on the screen at Colossians 2:

*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.<sup>6</sup>*

**May it be so,** church. Let's be *Jesus-Centered*. Let's pray together.

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<sup>6</sup> Colossians 2:6-7