

## **We've Heard about You!**

**July 10, 2022**

**Pastor John Mars**

Good morning, Church! It's good to be back among the living! I want to begin by thanking Pastor Aaron. It's got to be a little bit scary when it's your first church and you get a call from the senior pastor that says, "You're preaching tomorrow morning!" I want to thank him for such a wonderful job. Aaron, thank you so very much! I want you to know that it is such a blessing to pastor in a church where we have a number of individuals that I can call at a moment's notice to come and do such a fine job. It's a great blessing. I want to read a passage of scripture now that comes to us from the book of Colossians, chapter 1, verses 1 through 14. Paul is writing to the church at Colosse.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints--the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of His Son, the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far, far away, I was called to my second Baptist Church. Now, in the Southern Baptist Church, they are congregational in their polity, meaning that when they want a pastor or they need a pastor, they hire their own pastor. The way that generally works is they send people out to listen to different preachers and if somebody likes one, they come back and tell the rest of the group and then the whole group goes and listens to that person. If they all like him, then they invite that person to come and to preach and they get to know him. Anyway, so one Sunday a couple shows up at my church. I didn't know them. Nobody knew them. And that's a little suspicious, but that's good. Well, the next Sunday, there was five couples that showed up. And that's not a big deal in a church this size, but this was a church of about 35. If you've got 10 extra people that nobody knows, then something's up. And sometimes, search committees aren't treated that well by the host church. And sometimes they're welcomed with open arms. They say, "You want the pastor? Take him!" Well, I talked to

the folks after the service was over and, a couple of weeks later, I interviewed with them. And then I preached for them and they hired me on the spot. Well, when you're trying to attract a pastor to your congregation, you might not tell them everything. And after I accepted the position there, there were a few things that I learned. When they were inviting me to come, they said, "Well, we have a congregation of 1200 people. We have a membership of 1200 people." And I thought, "Great, that's a good-sized church." Well, when I went to preach there, there was only about 100 of them present. And so I was a little suspicious, but you know... Then I looked at the membership books and, come to find out, nobody had done anything with the membership records in over 20 years. And when I went through the membership with some of the old-timers, we found that we had at least three dozen people on the rolls who were deceased. We had another couple hundred who had moved. We had another couple hundred who had moved to other churches. And when we finally whittled it down, we had a membership of about 300, about one third of which were active. Surprise number one!

Surprise number two came in that everywhere I went, when I said that I was pastor of thus-and-such church, I got a unique response. It was, "Oh." And that was about it. And finally one day I asked the postmaster why people reacted like that and he said, "Well, preacher, here's the truth. Your church is known as the boiling pot of the community." I said, "Boiling pot? What do you mean?" He said, "Well, there are more fights there than there are at the local tavern." It wasn't long after that, I got to experience that. I was part of a Ministerial Association, the Baptist Ministerial Association, and those of you who have not traveled in the Deep South will kind of scoff at this, but it's the absolute truth. In the county where I lived, there were between 50 and 60 Baptist churches. In the county! And so we had that size of a Ministerial Association. I got to be good friends with the guy that was closest to me, about five miles down the road. He was a young guy and I was a young guy at that time. He had just finished seminary and I was just starting seminary, and he and I got to be good friends and he was having a revival. I said, "Well, we ought to come over and support you guys in your revival. And so, what I'll do is I'll dismiss my services on Wednesday night and the whole church will come over to support you and your revival." That was great. So, Sunday morning, I get up. I'm looking down at my notes. I'd written it all out and I said, "So-and-so Baptist Church is having a revival. I think we should support them, so go over there at this time every night this coming week. And Wednesday night I am canceling our services, so that we can all go over and support them." And I looked up and I happened look over on this side and there's one of my dear sweet, elderly ladies, 80-ish, sweet, kind, gentle, and her eyes were bugging out and the veins were standing up in her neck and she was just beet red. And I looked out at the rest of the congregation and there were 15 or 20 people that looked that way. And I realized I had done something wrong. After the service was over, I grabbed one of my deacons. I said, "What did I do?" He said, "Well, Preacher, 15 years ago we had a big fight here and half of our congregation went over and started that church." Well, in my defense, I'm all of 23-24 years old, and 15 years ago is ancient history to me. But what I came to realize, for some of my elderly folks, they had undergarments older than that. And in 15 to 20 years their pain had not healed and it was really bad for them.

Do you know how hard it is to live down a reputation of being the boiling pot of a community? And inviting folks to come to the boiling pot of the community? What reputation do you have personally in the community? What reputation do we have? As Jesus was ascending into heaven, He said to His disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. You will be my

witnesses. You're either going to be a good witness or a bad witness, but you're going to be a witness. You're going to be a witness to your family. You're going to be a witness to your friends. You're going to be a witness to your enemy and you're going to be a witness to everyone else. What type of a witness will you be? You will be a witness. You may be a bad one, but you're going to be a witness." When you claim the name of Jesus, you forever represent Him. And when you claim Central as your church home, you represent us. And if people don't know you and they know us, when they meet you and find out you are associated with us, what they think of us they're going to think of you. And if they don't know us but they know you, when they meet you, what they think of you they're going to think of us.

The church at Colosse had a reputation. Here's their story. Colosse was a city in decline. It was on a tributary of the Euphrates River in what is now modern-day Turkey. The trade routes had changed somewhat, so it was a city in decline. The church there was established by a guy named Epaphras, who was a convert to the faith under Paul's ministry when he was at Ephesus. The church there prospered, but heresies developed within the church. Some of them were Gnostic in nature, secret knowledge stuff, but most of the heresy that developed in Colosse came from what we now call Judaizers. These were Jewish people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but who believed that it was Jesus and you had to become Jewish. You had to follow Jewish practices and festivals and observances. If you were male, you had to be circumcised. It was Jesus plus Judaism. Paul, when he writes to the church at Colosse, says, "It's not Jesus plus, it's Jesus period." These heresies arose, so Epaphras goes to Rome to visit Paul in prison there. And Paul writes the letter we know as Colossians in response. He begins that letter by saying, "I've heard about you. I've heard about you." And he goes on to talk about their reputation, and I'm not going to try to unpack everything I just read, but let me point out a few things. Paul begins by saying, "To the church at Colosse in Christ Jesus." The Christian forever lives in two dimensions. We have our own physical locale where we live, but we are in Christ. No matter where we happen to be, the locale may change, but being in Christ does not, and that colors and determines our behavior wherever we happen to be. He says, "I recognize, I see and I have heard that you are in Christ. I've heard of your faith. I've heard of your love. I've heard of your hope. I've heard of your faith in Jesus Christ, your love for humanity that stems from your hope that you have in God, knowing that God's way is right." And, by the way, you cannot say that you love Jesus Christ, that you have faith in Jesus Christ, and not love those for whom he died. Those two go hand in hand. "I've heard of your faith. I've heard of your love. I've heard of your hope." Then Paul uses three Greek words that are very hard to translate, but they're most often translated "patience, long-suffering and joy." When we think of patience, most often we think of inactivity but that's not what that word means. It means an active pursuit in the midst of circumstances. It means that we will not allow the circumstances of life to conquer us. Patience. Long-suffering has to do with our relationship with other people. And I want to read this: "Long-suffering means never loses patience with, belief in, and hope for humanity." Let me read that again because I need to hear that. "Never loses patience with." You ever lose patience with humanity? How about "belief in"? How about "hope for"? Paul said, "I heard that about you." And the word that is translated "joy" in our Bible most often means radiance: radiance, a shine, a radiance that struggles with events and the actions of people cannot rob you of. Do you ever find that your countenance dropped because of the circumstances of your life or the actions of other people? I do. Paul says, "I've heard of your radiance, your joy, that the circumstances of life and the actions of people cannot rob." The church at

Colosse had a great reputation. "I've heard of your faith. I've heard of your love. I've heard of your patience. I've heard of your long-suffering. I've heard of your joy."

What's our reputation? And I'm asking that individually. I'm asking that also collectively. Do you have different reputations at different places? Would the people at your work recognize the person that we know, or do you have a different reputation? When I first moved out west, I was pastor of two little churches in two different communities outside of Portland. And the two funeral homes in the two communities were run by two brothers and I got to be good friends with them and I did a lot of funerals for the communities. When I say a lot of funerals, I did between 45 and 55 funerals a year. Most often I didn't know the people for whom I was doing a service and that could be an interesting experience. But one stands out in my mind. There were three daughters and the wife and I was doing the service for the gentleman. And the daughters lived out of town and I worked just with the spouse to do the service. And I remember after I did the service, one of the daughters pulled me aside and she said, "Can I come in and see you this week?" I said, "Of course," and I set up a time for her to come in. And she said, "I just wanted you to know that when you're working with my mother, who was going to be here, that the person that you described at the service, I never met." And she went on to tell me of the abuse that she and her two sisters had suffered at the hands of her father.

Do you have different reputations at different places? When your name comes up, how do people respond? Do they go, "Ooh!" (I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be looking over at this side of the congregation!) Or do they do what you're doing right now? When your name comes up, do people smile? I think of the dear saints I have known through the years and when their name pops into my mind, I smile. Recently we lost a dear saint of this church, Vada McVicker. I didn't get to know Vada like you guys knew her. I've only been here for the last year and she didn't come that much because of COVID and because of health reasons. She was frail and dainty but she had a quiet strength about her, and a dignity in the way she carried herself, and a smile on her face always. And you could tell love oozed out of her. She has been a part of this congregation since 1968. And when I think of Vada, I smile. I smile. I often wonder what people think of me when my name comes up. You know what the most often served dish at Sunday lunch is? Roasted preacher. I sometimes wonder how people respond when they think of me. When people find out that you are a part of us, what they think of you they think of us, because you are our witnesses. And when the name Central comes up in our community, what comes into people's minds? Is it what we do? Is it what we stand for? Is it what we stand against? What do we want to be known for? In our community, what do we want to be known for?

Now what I'm about to say to you is not official. Is that clear? This does not come from the Pastoral Leadership Team. This does not come from the Executive Council. This comes from me. This is mine. This is not official. But it is my dream that Central be the spiritual center of our community. That's my dream for this congregation. When people think of Central Church, I want them to think, "That's where we go to see hear the musicals. That's where we go to hear the orchestra. That's where we go to experience this." Did you know that a couple of weeks ago we hosted a Vacation Bible School for another church? And I invited them back and I hope other churches that don't have the facilities that we have will come and do the same thing. I want us to be known as the spiritual center of this community. I want this church to be what it was in its heyday. Now hold on, don't go there! I'm not talking about going back to the past. You can't go back to the past. You can't do that. But, during its heyday, this church was created to be

a big-tent church. That's where Baptists were welcome here, Methodists were welcome here, Presbyterians were welcome here, Episcopalians were welcome here, liberals were welcome here, conservatives were welcome here, Democrats were welcome here, Republicans were welcome here. It was a big-tent church. It was a place where we celebrated our strengths, celebrated what we have in common, and we put our differences beside us and behind us. It's my dream that Husky fans and Cougar fans can worship together. It's my dream that Democrats and Republicans can cooperate. It's my dream that liberals not be bashed and conservatives not be praised, but we tolerate each other, and that people who believe differently than I do have the right to be wrong if they want to be!

That's my dream. That's my dream. What's yours? There's no secret in how to establish a reputation. You establish a reputation the same way Vada McVicker established her reputation: consistency and persistency, day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out. People know what to expect. You establish what is normative for the group. "This is who we are. And here at Central, this is how we behave." And by the way, that's how you do that. You establish what's normative for the group so that every one of us know what is normative for us. And when somebody is not behaving in a manner that is normative for us, we can say, "No, no, no. We don't do that here. We don't do that here. That's not who we are." We establish what is normative for the group. Would you like to be known as...well, in my last church we were known as the church of the warm heart. Would you like to be the church of the warm heart or the boiling pot of the community? That's up to us. We've done that, really. Our statement is: We are making disciples of Jesus Christ by loving people where they are, by teaching them about Jesus and giving them a place to live out their faith. Loving people where they are, wherever they are. We throw open our doors and we say, "Y'all come," and we love them.

What do you want to be known for? What reputation do you personally want? It takes consistency and persistency. That's hard work. What do we want? What do we want Central to be known for? It takes the same thing, consistency and persistency over the years. So, let's pray. During this time of reflection, I have two questions to pose to you. What do you want to be noted known for personally? And number two, this is your church. This is our church. What do we want to be known for? It's our choice. Let's pray.

Lord, thank You for loving us where we are. Lord, help us to be mindful of our reputations, individually and collectively, and to work to have a good one. In Christ's name. Amen.