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## Thanking God for the Church

Pastor Ted Cunningham

We always start the new year as a church with a message of vision for the church. I have to be honest with you; this one comes from a place of pain and joy. Doesn't anybody know what I'm talking about? Have you ever had one of those years where there were highs and there were lows and you kind of put them altogether and it's this thing we call life. It happens and one of the things I know God is working on in me is not allowing the haters or those who just want to be critics or those who are negative to take us down from what God is doing among his people. We want to remain thankful for what God is doing in your life, but not just in your life, but among his people.

Today, we are going to look at what it means to be thankful for and what it means to pray for your church as we look at the vision moving forward.

A couple of weeks ago, I went into a restaurant and I met the manager. I introduced myself and after I said, "Hey, I'm Ted Cunningham," he responded with, "Yeah, I know who you are." This is why we have security now. I don't travel with them throughout Branson, but they are here at the church. After 20 years of ministry, I'm used to meeting people that are frustrated and people that are worked up and all of that.

It's interesting now... When that happened, I was with my 11-year-old son. He's now picking up on it and he's like, "Wow, Dad, what did you do?" I said, "Son, you probably noticed that I didn't follow up with 'So, you used to go to...'" and I just kind of left the conversation there and moved on." I used to really follow up and ask what happened and all of that and it was just too painful, so I stopped doing that altogether. I did dig a little bit deeper and found out it was something that happened over ten years ago. It was something I wasn't involved with, which I always rejoice a little bit in, right? But, things like that harbor and sit there in the soul of an individual.

We always have a lot of guests. In January, we don't have as many tourists and guests as we do throughout the year, but we have a lot of folks that watch online from around the country. I just want to say this; this is so important. If you are coming here from another church... If you just left a church and your frustrated with that church or your frustrated with the pastor or the leadership and there is bitterness, resentment, and unresolved anger, before you make this place your home... I just want to say this as a pastor at Woodland Hills. Go back and make every opportunity, take every opportunity to make peace at that church.

This is true in business. This is true in the shows here in Branson. If you're struggling with theater management... I'm always shocked at people leaving one theater mad, going to another theater and realizing they have management too. They have rules too. They want to make money too. This is true of your marriage. This is true of your relationships and your job and your church. I said it last week. Before you go looking for a new job, a new spouse, a new church, start by taking personal responsibility for what's in your heart. That's because you'll come here and you'll love what's going on here and be excited about what's going on here and do you know why? It's because you don't know us yet. Let's just be real honest with you. This is where we are starting this morning.

**Every church has challenges, struggles, and room for growth.** And all God's people said... Amen. I have to pause here for just a second. It's been an emotional morning for me because I don't care what the size of the church is, where it is in the country, or the demonization; every single church I've ever visited, no matter how awesome you think it may be, has challenges, struggles, and room for growth.

Here's the struggle people have. "I got mad at that guy for what he said or what he did" or "I asked for help and they didn't give me the help that I needed. They talk about being generous in their community in benevolence, but they didn't pay my rent for 14 months." They go into all of this. "I'm leaving that church and I'm coming over here." And then they come over here and guess what's here? People. There are people here.

Pastors do this. They get tired of congregations. You know that happens around the country every now and then. A pastor needs a break so, "In order to fix what's in my heart, I'm going to leave these people and go over here," and it's going to be awesome for six, twelve, eighteen, twenty-four months, but these people are just like those people. They're people, and people and relationships are messy and meandering and like a journey; it takes time and you have to work through them. We all have challenges, struggles, and room for growth.

We know that about this church. We know that about every church. Here's the challenge today, as we look at the struggles a church can face, that you would ask the Holy Spirit to call you by name that you, no matter what the struggles are that we're going through, would remain grateful for and continue to pray for what God is doing among his people. Most people leave a church, not over what's happening among a group of people, but it's just what's going on in their heart. The same is true of a job. The same is true of relationships and careers and all of that.

This week, I read the first chapter of all the Epistles. If you're brand new to the church, when you read the book of Acts, you see all of these missionary journeys that Paul, Barnabas took. They take these journeys and churches are planted along the way. Believers come together and there is a local church. There are some where there is one local church in a town or there are multiple churches in a region. These churches are planted and because Paul was continuing his journey. He planted more churches, but he always wrote back to these churches. We call them the Epistles, but they are letters from Paul to these churches. They are letters back to them, encouraging them.

They all start off the same way. They all have this gratefulness and prayer for what God is doing, but what you have to understand is all of these letters are unique to the churches and the regions, to the

believers in a particular part of the country that he is speaking to. Now, I don't have time to share with you all of the struggles and challenges of the first century churches, but I just listed about ten of them.

**National and Cultural Differences** – This is right off the bat when you read the Book of Romans. You can imagine nationalities and cultures coming together now under the name of Jesus and reminding the believers that their primary identity is in Jesus. No matter what country you come from, no matter what people group you are a part of, Jesus is now the primary identity over your life. So, the language barrier and the cultural barrier and the nationalities present there were not just a difference, but they were clashing. Paul would come in and start by saying, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I think of you and I pray for you. I'm constantly remembering you in our prayers even with the differences."

**Sexual Immorality** - When you get to Corinthians, you see sexual immorality. Paul has to come in and teach sexual ethics. Sex is not to be for a man and a woman; it's to be for a husband and a wife. Keep the marriage bed pure. Yet, no matter what challenges they are facing, he says, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ."

**Abuse of Spiritual Gifts** – You read this in Corinthians. You see abuse of the Lord's table.

**False Teachers** – So, the church was planted, there were new believers who accepted the gospel of Jesus, there's great energy and movement going forward, but now the false teachers are coming in and trying to move people away from the Gospel of Jesus.

### **Slanderous Accusations Against the Apostles**

**Opposition to the Gospel** – This meant some of the believers... And you read this when Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia abandoning the gospel. I love that one and we studied that book together. A casual reading of the Bible will give you the words and the details, but if you want to pick up on tone, if you really want to understand what's going on, you have to study it. What I love about Galatians is it's a short introduction compared to many of the other letters. Paul moves quickly from "Grace and peace from God our Father and Lord Jesus Christ" to "I am astonished!"

I love this because every parent in here understands it. It's grabbing our child after they have done something and looking at them and starting with validation of love and commitment towards your child. You get down right in their face and you're like, "Son, you know how much I love you and I am committed to you as your dad. I love you. What were you thinking?" I didn't pick son there accidentally, right? You don't have to have that conversation with your daughters as often as you do your sons. "When did jumping off the roof sound like a good idea to you? Who planted that in your head? "Why did holding onto the back of a moving car on a skateboard... When was that a good idea for you?" "No, you can't come home on the hood of someone's car!" Those are the moments where you're like, "My love for you is so overwhelming; I am committed to you, but until your frontal lobe develops, we have to keep you in pads!"

Paul does the exact same thing. He starts off by sharing his love and commitment and gratefulness, with them, but then he has to say, “What were you thinking? I’m astonished because you’ve abandoned the gospel so quickly, the gospel of Jesus that you received and that has changed your life. Why are you running away from it?”

**Lack of Discernment** – Again, I’m sharing these struggles and challenges of the first century church. Jesus has died and he has been resurrected. He has ascended. We read in Acts 2 that the first church gets started. We are talking about the first century church with all histories. They are just not fully grasping it.

**Legalism** - We begin to elevate our traditions and our personal preferences over the Gospel of Jesus. Paul said if you replace any of this gospel with traditions or personal preferences, you make the gospel null and void.

### **New Believers with Lots of Questions**

That’s a short list. We honestly could spend a year going through the struggles and the challenges of the first century church.

**When I focus on the struggles of our church, I forget about the wins.** As a church leader and as a church member, you have to look at the struggles. We don’t act like those don’t exist. Part of being a church is we confront one another. We believe in discipline. We believe if someone is living outside of God’s plan and they call themselves a follower of Jesus, it’s the responsibility of the church to come alongside them and rebuke them and correct them. Not a lot of churches are doing that anymore, but it’s still part of what we are supposed to do.

Isn’t it something how quickly we move from the wins and what God is doing among his people and stay focused on the struggles. I’m looking at some hotel managers and owners and entertainers who you can go out and minister to 500 or 1,000 people in a night, using what God has called you to do, the gifts he has placed in you. It can be fantastic, you can see the Lord working through you, we believe this with all of us. Whatever you do, (Colossians 3:23) do your work as unto the Lord. It only takes one trip advisor review or a one star Facebook review to get you so fast off the wins and onto the struggles. You will wake up at 1:00 am, wanting to go back onto Facebook and just let them have it. It happens. You don’t even pay attention to the people who were blessed by what you were doing because that one person takes you down.

I see the nods. “Yes. This is so healing in January. The tourists are gone, Ted, we can talk about them now.” I would like to suspend the cameras for just a moment while we talk about the tourists. This is part of real life. I do this. I have to be honest with you. I have a lot of friends... I’m not a stalker on Facebook; you need to understand that. Every now and then, I can’t help it because it’s just so intriguing. But, a lot of my friends got rid of Facebook reviews at their churches; they don’t even allow you to rate their church. That’s refreshing, but, for some reason, we’ve left ours. We have a solid 4.8, but it’s the .2 that kills, isn’t it?

I just had this moment this week where I'm wondering... I want to know what the first century churches would have been rated at on Facebook. Wouldn't that have been something? I would have loved to have seen Facebook reviews after the Sermon on the Mount. "Came off a little strong." "Guy has a messiah complex." "All this holy talk."

I have to admit that we got one in November. I don't ever respond to them and I don't ever look at them until one of you emails me, telling me it's on there. Thank you for that. I always love that Monday morning encouragement. It always picks my spirit up whenever you show me something that somebody said on Facebook.

I could tell she was a nice lady, but she gave us a two-star review. We're trying everything to get to 4.9, people. We're trying everything. But, she gives us a two-start review because she came in 30 minutes early for our service. She praised our greeters. I hate sharing these illustrations because look how many of you have your phones out, looking for the review. She said, "I came and I sat down and I tried to make eye contact with people, but no one would engage me in conversation." She was basically saying we were not a friendly church... I didn't let it bother me but for like three weeks. It wasn't that long; I don't hold things forever; I try to get them out of my soul.

Then I decided to respond. I had never responded to a Facebook review of our church, but this one... I sat down ready to go and I went at it. Her post was that long and mine was about this long. Then I started hitting the delete key, because it was not of the Lord. "But this next one will be. Here we go; watch this one," and I went at it again. The Holy Spirit wasn't in that one either.

Finally, on the 12<sup>th</sup> revision, the Holy Spirit and Amy allowed me to send it out. It's amazing how those two conspire against me every day. Here's what I said. I'm going to paraphrase it, so don't quote me on this. I said, "That's not our church. I'm sorry you experienced that." I said, "I just want to make sure you know a couple of things. One, you visited on Thanksgiving weekend." I remember that weekend and asking people raise their hands if they were visiting from out of town and there were hundreds of people in each service. I said, "You've got to remember not everyone you locked eyes with is a part of Woodland Hills Family Church. They were a guest like you, but for you to now think that's everybody at Woodland Hills..."

This is the other thing. I didn't put this in there, but I also want you to keep in mind that maybe the person you locked eyes with has been a believer for three months. When you become a Christian, it's not altogether there. Paul deals with it with that list. That's why we call this discipleship. You have to learn to become like Jesus, take on the life and behavior of Jesus. I don't want to live anymore in the church where the priority of my day is thinking through all the struggles and all the challenges, although that is the majority of my job, it's the majority of what we do as a church, but I want to be reminded of the wins. We don't have time to go through all of them, but I want to walk through the Epistles, these letters and I want to show you these apostolic greetings, these wonderful "I am thinking about you. I am grateful for you. I am praying for you and what God is doing among you," greetings.

Romans 1:8 - ***First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. 9 God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you 10 in my prayers at all times...*** My commitment to each one of you, going into 2017, is that I will pray for this body every day, as I have. As specific requests from within this body comes to the service, from illness to those with lost loved ones, it's added to my prayers. And in my prayers... Here's what my prayers have been missing lately: gratefulness, joy, sitting down with a list of the struggles and challenges and that which we are praying over and being reminded of. We can pray over all of this hardship, we can pray over all of this difficulty, and we can do it with gratefulness and joy because God is working among his people. He is working here in this church. ***...and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.***

To the church at Corinth: (1 Corinthians 1) ***4 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.***

In Ephesus: (Ephesians 1) ***16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*** The prayer and thanksgiving go together.

Colossians 1: ***3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people...*** We've heard what's going on among you, we've heard that you have a love for what God is doing. When you get focused on you and forget about other people, that's when you move away from gratefulness and joy. When you leave somewhere mad, you're probably focused on yourself and not other people.

There have been plenty of times that I've been ready to go do something else. "Amy, let's buy a boat and sail off into the Atlantic Ocean and whatever country we come to first, we'll just set up a tent there." But that's when I'm thinking about me, not all of God's people. This is bigger than you. You're part of it, but it's not all about you. If you can't find the gratefulness and joy in your prayers, it's more than likely because you're focused on you. The greatest antidote to selfishness is others, thinking about them, praying for them, being grateful for them. ***9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God...***

To the Philippians: (Philippians 1) ***3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy... I want to add that to my prayers in 2017. 5 ...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.***

Now, just one more. I hope you make this part of your studying in 2017 and I hope maybe now when you read... These are parts of the Epistles or the letters in the New Testament that we breeze by in our devotional reading. I hope you take time and understand this tone and how important this is to

understanding the heart and the tone that Paul is going to take as he addresses the challenges and the struggles of the church.

1 Thessalonians 1: ***2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***

In all of those introductions... I don't know if you saw it as we went through it, maybe some of you picked up on and others didn't. I'm going to read Acts 2: 42-47, which shares the five purposes of the church that we believe and we follow here at Woodland Hills. All five of these purposes were in those greetings. In Acts 2: 42-47, we read of the first church and what their priorities were. There priorities were found in five purposes and we'll look at them in a second, but I'll read this text.

Speaking of the first church, ***42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*** So, there's discipleship, fellowship, worship. ***43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.*** ***44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.*** There's fellowship again. ***45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.*** There is ministry. ***46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes... Fellowship again. ...and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...*** They enjoyed being together. ***47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number... There is evangelism, sharing our faith in Jesus. ...daily those who were being saved.***

From that text, from the Great Commission and the Great Commandment found in Matthew 22 and Mathew 28, we believe there are five purposes of the church. I want to walk through them with you.

**Woodland Hills is centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus. (Worship)** I'm hoping that in 2017, many of you will move from observing to participating in worship. One of our prayers for you is that Jesus would be real in your life, that you would confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that you will become a Christian. We hope that as we talk about worship...

I have to be really honest with you. This is one of those pastoral admonishments for just a second. We meet once a week together, corporately. And it's about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes. I know the parking lot can be a hassle and I'm grateful for your patience with that. But, I'm just going to invite you, in 2017, to stay for our entire time together and worship with us completely. We want you to be someone who participates and not just observes.

**Woodland Hills is growing in love toward one another. (Fellowship)** I hope you see the word *growing* there. We don't stand before you today saying we've got it all figured out and we are perfect at this. Relationships are messy, meandering, and take time; we've got to work through things, confront one another, be reconciled when we go through difficult times together. That's part of the challenge and part of the struggle.

Last year, I had a pastor and his wife call me from another state. They wanted to come to Branson and meet with me. They said, "Our marriage is over and we've got to figure out what we can do about that and if we can piece that back together. We are obviously leading people in ministry and we don't know what to do." Their church is much larger than ours and knowing what was at stake, I told them I would be happy to meet with them.

When we sat down, I spent the first few hours just listening to their story, trying to get into how they got to that point. Then whatever wisdom the Lord could give me to share with them, I wanted to help them the best way I could. Here's what I discovered through our time together. They had met with counselor after counselor, year after year, and had gotten nowhere.

I believe it was of the Lord that I told them, "I think what's missing in your life is biblical community." Pastor to pastor I was talking to them. He knows the language. I said, "I personally believe biblical community, us fellowshiping together, us confessing our sin one to another, serving you and you serving me, loving you and you loving me, and celebrating with you and you celebrating with me. It's found in Romans. I mourn when you're mourning. I rejoice when you're rejoicing. My life is an open book to you and your life is an open book to me because under the name of Jesus, we can get through anything. As I'm painting this picture of biblical community, I was grateful for it here at Woodland Hills. After I painted this picture of biblical community, the pastor looked at me and said, "That's not available at our church."

I said, "What? That's not available at your church? You don't have someone that you can go and confess your struggle? People don't know you're going through this? How are you getting through this with just the two of you alone? You've got to be able to share that. you've got to be able to find healing."

We want that for you at Woodland Hills. We met together as a worship team today. It was the worship team and band and tech crew. I told them I was grateful for all the work they have done in making this place a wonderful environment and experience for all of us as we gather. I reminded them that, even when we get so much going on and there is a lot happening, we are driven by reconciliation. If one member of the team or two members of the team decides they don't want to be reconciled and they just want to vent or be frustrated... I said it's about us being reconciled. We have to be together. We're serving together, we're leading people in worship together. It was one of the best meetings I feel we've ever had as a worship team. Everybody agreed that's what they want because it's under the name of Jesus that we have biblical community.

**Woodland Hills is learning to become more like Jesus. (Discipleship)** We want to know the words of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the behavior of Jesus. We want to take on the beliefs and behavior of our Lord. This is why we spend time not just reading, but studying. That's why we memorize, why we meditate upon the word of God.

**Woodland Hills is working to meet needs in love. (Ministry)** I've met folks around town, some of them folks that have left frustrated, bitter, hurt, posting stuff on Facebook. It was because we didn't meet needs in a way they wanted them met. Can I just encourage you to be grateful for your church? No one

here is out to get you. No one is after you for not doing something the right way or not saying the right thing. We believe fellowship and discipleship and reconciliation means we don't ever give up on a person. We don't ever give up on a relationship. We keep working towards that. I want those listening that are no longer here to hear that. The heart of this church is to be reconciled to you, not to be mad at you, not to be frustrated with you, not to vent to you; it's to be reconciled. That is the heart of everything we do.

**Woodland Hills is partnering to share the gospel around the world. (Evangelism)** We can't go to every place around the world, but, through offerings, through prayer, through training, through gifts, we can support the work of the gospel going all over the globe. You do that in Haiti, Tanzania, International Students, Inc. We are about partnering with the gospel.

**No matter what our struggles as a church may be, we can always remain grateful and pray for what God is doing among his people.** And all God's people said... Amen. I hope that's your heart.

We've been thinking through how we can do this where we can celebrate with an individual and celebrate as a church. For some... I love what I heard from somebody watching from Georgia in the first service, going through a difficult time in their church. Our goal is not to attract people from other churches in Branson. If anything, I love sending people back to churches to be reconciled. She said, "I needed to hear that."

So, today, to close out our service... Yeah, we've got plenty of struggles and challenges and we don't know what they all are ahead of us in 2017. That's what I love about what we talked about last week. Everything that happens in 2017 will go through the hands of God. And all God's people said... Amen. And no one knows what awaits them. That part I love. There will be struggles and there will be challenges.

This morning, we want to end by celebrating the wins. We want to be reminded what God is doing here. So, here's what we are going to ask. I'm going to be very specific in these instructions. As the band plays, we're going to ask that you simply answer this question: "How did God work in my life in 2016?" As the band plays, we're going to ask that you please remain seated. We're going to ask that you tell us about your next steps, the commitments you made in 2016. We're going to ask you to walk forward, grab a sign that represents the step you took, a commitment you made. Some of you will grab multiple signs. Grab the sign that represents your step and go back to your seat. We ask that no one leave during this part because after everyone has gathered to grab their signs, they are going to be seated and we're going to have a special time where we just see what God has been up to at Woodland Hills in 2016.

If you became a Christian in 2016, just come up and grab this sign: "I became a Christ follower in 2016." If you were baptized in 2016, grab this sign: "I was baptized in 2016." If you started attending Woodland Hills in 2016, grab this sign. After the first service, because this was a great moment in the first service, somebody said, "You needed a sign that says, 'I'm still attending Woodland Hills in 2017.'" "I committed to serve in 2016." "I found my sweet spot." You'll probably noticing that some of you are having to grab all four. Please do that. "I became a member of Woodland Hills in 2016." I love this one: "I found

biblical community, I joined a home group in 2016.” How about this one... I’ll hand this one to Brother Matt. “I had a child in 2016.” I’ve been wanting to say this. Here’s your sign. “I had my baby dedicated in 2016.” Did you get married. We’d love to celebrate the newlyweds. “I got married in 2016”

As the band plays and as we worship together, I’m going to just invite you to remain seated. We’re doing this at the Chapel as well. Grab the signs to celebrate what God is doing in our church.