

## 08 The Church Visible & Invisible

### Introduction

I remember going to the opening class my first day of college. The professor told us to look to our left and to our right. There was a good chance that these people would not be here by the time you graduate. Everybody who was there fully intended on graduating, I am sure. Perhaps some schools have people who attend but do not intend on ever graduating. That was not the case at my school; it was rather nerdy. All of us intended on graduating, so it was weird to think that 2/3 of the people we started with would still be there at the end.

There was a very real chance that I would be one of those people. In high school I use to be a fish in a small pond. How would I fair in this academic setting? I was sitting with all the people who graduated in the top 10 percent of their class. What are the odds that I could survive in such a group? When 2/3 of this top 10% will drop out, what are the odds that I will be in the graduating number? It was a rather sobering thought for me. I pray that this sermon will serve a similar kind of function for you.

We have been examining the doctrine of the church. Last week we examined the church as it is manifest locally and universally. This week are are going to be looking at the church visible and invisible. They are not different churches. They are just different aspects of the same church.

### Definitions

When we speak of the visible church, it is quite simple. Look around you. Those whom you see are part of the visible church. You may walk down the street and poke your head into another church. The people that you see there are part of the visible church.

The invisible church, however, is the church as God sees it. Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart. When we look around this room we see people who are outwardly professing Christ. But God looks on the heart and knows who are his. We may see some young kid with his hair all disheveled, body piercings all over, and rather rough looking clothes. Unkempt, unclean, unimpressive. But God looks on the heart. God can see what we cannot. For good or for ill, God sees the true condition of our heart. It is not as though true believers are like ghosts that we cannot see. They are real people too, but what we cannot see is their heart. It is hard for us to discern their true condition.

The visible church is all the people in all the local churches in the world. The invisible church are the real believers whose hearts only God can see.

### The Fact of a Mixed Body

A classic text for the church being a mixed body of people is:

**Matthew 13:24-30** “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, 25 but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds

among the wheat and went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. 27 And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Jesus here describes the kingdom of God. As we learned about a few weeks ago, the kingdom of God is slightly different from the church, but they are very closely related. The kingdom of God may be likened unto a man who sowed in his field. Notice that the kingdom references first to the king, or the owner of the field. The field, or that over which the owner exercises dominion, is the kingdom, or that over which the King exercises dominion. The plants, that which populates the field, is the church. So in this kingdom there will be both weeds and wheat. In this kingdom will be those whom God has regenerated, and those whom the Satan has planted. Believers and unbelievers.

Jesus goes on to give another example in Matthew 13:47-49:

**Mt 13:47-49** "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. 48 When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. 49 So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

A more subtle example occurs in Jn 2:23-25:

**Jn 2:23-25** Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

These people followed Jesus and even "believed" in him. But they were not real. A case example continues in chapter 3 when Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Nicodemus believes in Jesus in some vague way, but he is not resting in him for the forgiveness of his sins. Jesus cuts to the quick and says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The apostle John, speaking about false teachers says in 1 John 2:19-20:

**1 John 2:19-20** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. 20 But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.

Paul echos this notion in his dealing with Israel in Romans 9:

**Romans 9:6** But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel

All of these passages teach about the visible and invisible church. Not everyone who is part of the church visible is part of the true church.

**2 Timothy 2:19** But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his,"

## Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Not only is the visible church a mixed body of believers and unbelievers, but sometimes these unbelievers are very dangerous. In Matthew 7 Jesus warns:

**Mt 7:15** "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Here are wolves, dressed up as sheep. Outwardly they look the same. They appear to be good church going folk. In fact, they even teach. These could be small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, or pastors. Not only do they come to church, but they are in teaching positions!

**2 Peter 2:1-3** But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. 2 And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. 3 And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.

**Jude 1:1-4, 8, 11** Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. . . .8 Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. . . .11 For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. 12 These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves

This is another reason to excel in theology and doctrine. The better we understand God and the teachings of Christ the less likely that we will be led astray by false teachers.

**Eph 4:11-14** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Do you see that? We need to have good instruction to attain unity in the faith, that is the content of scripture. When we have a good grasp on good doctrine we will not be led astray by human cunning. Thus a major point of application is that we must understand doctrine well to avoid being taken by these wolves.

## The Judgment

We observed that Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a field where weeds and wheat grow side by side. But listen now to the conclusion.

**Matthew 13:29-30** "But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell

the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

We also noted observed that Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a net that catches all kinds of fish. But now listen to the ending.

**Mt 13:49-50** So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In yet another example, John the Baptist compares the church to a threshing floor. Speaking of Jesus he says in Matthew 3:12:

**Matt. 3:12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

In Matthew 7 Jesus says the following.

**Mt 7:21-23** “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

We saw how Jesus warned of false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing. He goes on in Matthew 7 to say that we can know these false teachers by their fruit. But how too does this analogy end?

**Matthew 7:16** You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

This is just a sampling of the passages that speak to this issue. Do you get the feeling that Jesus is trying to convey a point here? In the kingdom of God, in the church, sitting in pews right along with everyone else will be false professors. Some of them may boast that they cast out demons and prophecy in his name, but God never knew them. At the end of of the age there will be a gathering and a sorting. The wheat will be separated from the tares, the sheep will be separated from the goats, the good fish will be separated from the bad fish, the foolish virgins will be left out, the good steward will be given more, and the wicked steward will be cast into the outer darkness, the wheat will be separated from the chaff, the fruit bearing trees will be separated from the non-fruitful trees.

And in each of these instances, there will be blessings and punishment. The unquenchable fire, the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, that is the end of those who are part of the visible church but who are not part of the invisible church.

Dear church attender, I urge you not to look to your right or to your left. I urge you to look at yourself. You may not make it. You may be deceiving yourself. You may have come to church all your life and you know the stories, and you tithe, and you serve on every committee there is, but if you have not come to the point of repenting of your sins and resting in Jesus alone for the salvation of your sins, then you are not saved.

Do not disconnect yourself from these passages. This is not about some group of people in 1st century Palestine. Jesus spoke about you. You are in these verses. It may seem a strange thing that you were in the mind of God when these verses were penned, but it is true. The only question is which group do you belong to? Are you the wheat or are you the tare that will be

thrown into the fire? Are you the wheat or the chaff that will be burned? What more can I say to convince you to examine yourself?

How can any of us sit here and not be affected by this? How can any of us sit here and not be moved to a sober self-examination? Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that we are all up in an airplane. It is a large cargo airplane and we are in the cargo bay. We are cruising at 25,000'. It is cold as it almost always is at that altitude. There is the roar of the engines that is deafening, and yet we have almost grown accustomed to it by now. Now at the back of the plane the cargo hatch opens. We are, none of us, buckled in. As we stand before this ever widening hole to the atmosphere we get butterflies at the thought of losing our footing. We get butterflies in anticipation because we know that soon enough we will all tumble out the cargo ramp into the atmosphere with nothing but the pack strapped to our backs. We were told that some of the packs had parachutes in them, and others only had laundry. Who among us would not check to make sure that our pack had a chute?

It is unthinkable to not take such a warning seriously. Why do we do it here when the stakes are so much higher? I tell you that none of the people who are currently in torment in the flames would tell you that they planned to go there. Each of them would have thought that they could have made things right before they died. They comforted themselves with the false hopes of having come to church so many times. I tell you that these people are now in torment wishing they had the opportunity that is now before you. They wish that they had just one more chance to examine their lives and get it right. That is my exhortation to you, examine yourself! The doctrine of the church invisible should push us to examine ourselves to make sure we are in the faith.