

Jesus First

We're going to start a new series of messages today called "The Code." And I've wanted to do this for a long time, and over the last few months, as the church so to speak has scattered – in other words from March until now, when everything changed and we stopped meeting in person and we met online on for 18 weeks and a lot of churches still haven't been able to come back together, different places in the country, and even now we're being extra careful. So. A lot of folks can't be here now. So with all of that, it's very easy to get off track. To understand our theology is good, but maybe our mission, we begin to lose sight, lose focus on things. So we've talked a lot among Grace Hills leadership, pastors, and staff about who we are, what we value, what matters to us, what drives us, what are our guard rails, how do we make decisions, who are we?

And I think there's something unifying for the global church about all of us that everybody that names the name of Christ, we have that in common. So there are people on the other side of the world from different cultures that I may not understand personally, but we can come into the same room and name the name of Jesus together, and that's pretty awesome and pretty special. But then when it comes to this expression, when it comes to Grace Hills Church, this church, how do we express, how do we carry out the mission as one local outpost of the kingdom of God? There are 300,000 churches in America, roughly 300,000 churches. One particular statestician estimates based on trends that because of everything happening when the economy, with the coronavirus, that over the next 18 months, up to 60,000 of those churches could close. So America could look different losing 60,000 of its churches – a lot that maybe are barely hanging on now and things are tough, maybe their area is really hard hit by the economy – all kinds of reasons that might come at the church. So we've talked about we has given us.

So we're gonna take the next 10 weeks and just walk through the ten core values that make us who we are, every one of them rooted in Scripture and we're going to look at the different aspects of how the Bible informs us about these values, and we'll just take them one week at a time for 10 weeks going all the way up to Thanksgiving, and see where it goes from there. But I want us to just know who we are.

Before I get into the message, I want to tell you about something that's happening today in this room. Right after the service, we'll take about a five or ten minute break, let people get whatever they need, and then we'll come back in here and if you are interested in leading or hosting a small group in your home, on your back porch – we're doing ours mostly outdoors right now. And if you are interested in gathering a few other people, even if it's one or two other families, maybe your neighbors or friends or somebody else you know here at Grace Hills that's not in a group – If you would host a group, we provide all of the study material and it goes right along with the message series. You can go on our website and download a study guide that goes off of today's message and you can either do the simple little three question version, or there's a lengthy Bible study. And your group chooses that, and we just want people to get together and talk about these things more in depth. So if you're interested in leading or

hosting a group, hang around today and we'll give you some instruction and some help and some inspiration, and I just – I think that's where it's at right now. We gather here once a week, but we are scattered, and probably 70 or 80 percent of Grace Hills Church are watching online right now. And so with that in mind, we just want to get community wherever we can and stay close to people. So hang around today for that, okay?

I wanted to do this a little bit differently today, and read through, very quickly, the ten core values of Grace Hills Church. And then today I want to talk about the first one, but I want to do this over ten weeks just so that we're familiar. Some of you might be new and you're kind of checking out Grace Hills and you want to know what we're all about, this is a good time to learn that and understand that. Some of you might be new to the faith. You're not even sure what Christianity is, and we're going to talk about that over the next few weeks. And some of you have been here a long time. And maybe you just need a refresher course in why are we here, what are we doing, so we're going to talk about that today and over these next ten weeks.

But I want to read through these really quickly – They're found on our website, but here they are. The first core value for Grace Hills: We say Jesus First. Jesus is first in everything. We trust his word as truth, we listen to his Holy Spirit, we follow his lead and honor him in all that we do. So core value number one that we're going to talk about in a few minutes is Jesus first. He's why we're here. Second core value, I'll go through these quickly – Messy ministry. We're here for the broken. We do what we do to reach people who are far from God, we get our hands messy in ministry. We're not worried about things being convenient, clean, and easy, we're willing to get messy.

Purpose driven, we're driven by purpose, not by programs, personalities, buildings, or budgets. We keep things simple. And I know what you're thinking: But Brandon, you're such a Rockstar. I'm just kidding. But we avoid building on personalities. Authentic community. We keep it real, we fight against fake because that's our default in humanity, and we carry each other's burdens with love and grace. We commit to each other. The fifth one is: Everybody belongs. We all bear God's image and the gospel is for everyone. We welcome people of every ethnicity, every kind of story at Grace Hills. Everybody belongs.

Number 6: Anyone can make a difference. We grow from consumers into contributors, we bring out the best in people, we refuse to use people. Number 7: Servant leadership. We empower men and women to influence their culture with the gospel and change their world for good. Number 8: the common good. We engage the world with a gospel that cares for the poor, seeks freedom for the oppressed, and speaks for the marginalized. In other words, the gospel is not just get out of hell and go to heaven someday. It has an effect in our culture, in our lives, in our neighborhoods all around us for the common good of other people. Number nine: Strong families. We strengthen marriages, partner with parents, pour energy into raising up a generation for Christ. And number 10, Bold faith. We think and give big, we plant churches, we partner with the community, we go to the ends of the earth with the gospel.

launching an organization called For the Love Northwest Arkansas. It's a food truck, it's a feeding ministry, it gathers people, it addressed food insecurity, but it gets believers together to serve other people, and since we mentioned that, about \$12,000 has been raised toward purchasing the food truck. We only need \$18,000 more. So if you walked in and you go, I just happen to have \$18,000 in my pocket and didn't know what I was going to spend it on, just go to forthelovenwa.com and just drop that and no big deal. But seriously – a dollar counts, five dollars counts. All of that counts. So just keep praying for that ministry to take off and to launch, and we want to see it do big things in Northwest Arkansas to address some needs here.

With all of that, let me come back to today. Today's value: Jesus First. When we sat down ten years ago, Angie and I, and started thinking about the kind of church that God would want us to plant, and we're praying and we're seeking the Scriptures and we're asking God what his vision is, one of the things that has always been our top priority is to know that we are not here for what I want, or what you want, or what any of us wants. We're not just here for our comfort, we're not just here to be cool, we're not just here to grow an organization or an institution called the church, we're not just here to create some kind of movement that's human, we're here for Jesus.

I gotta be really clear theologically: Without Christ, there's no Christianity. Without a living King Jesus, the church does not need to exist. If it isn't for the risen King Jesus, we are wasting time and we are wasting resources gathering together. But because God, his big story for humanity, because God centers his whole story on the coming of the Redeemer, of Jesus coming from God's side to earth, walking through our pain and our temptation and our mess, and taking on our sin and going to the cross and dying for our sin, rising again and being enthroned over a kingdom that is not of this world. The church, the local church serves as an outpost of that kingdom under King Jesus. In other words it's not about what I want, what we want, it's not about what makes me feel good or makes us happy – At the end of the day, this is Jesus's church. We're here because of him, we're here for him, and everything we do needs to relate back to Jesus's will and desire for us and for this community – Jesus is king. Amen?

Let me read a passage of Scripture to you from Colossians chapter 1 verse 18 which kind of – it's sort of lofty and deep and theological, and yet it also gets really practical for how we do church week in and week out. But in Colossians 1:18 the Bible says,

“The Son 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; all things have been created through him and for him. 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. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Now the big point of that passage of Scripture is that if you want to know who God is and what God is like and what his being is all about, if you want to know what God is, look at Jesus. The fullness of God, his love, his truth, his patience, his grace, everything that we know about God –

his being all powerful and all knowing, his being sovereign and ruling over all, ALL of that, we see by looking at Jesus. He came to earth to be the fullest expression, the image of God among us, to show us what God is all about. And so the greatest reputation of God, the greatest revelation of God that's ever been witnessed by man is the person named Jesus Christ who died and rose and now rules and reigns over all. That's the point of the passage.

I do want to clarify something about the passage that I wrestled with years ago. It says in the first part of that that he's the firstborn over all of Creation. And a recent study came out that just looked at where Americans are in their theology. And 53 or 54 percent of Americans believe that theology is just a matter of opinion. It's just up to you, what do you think about God and that's fine, what do you think about God and that's fine. So over half of Americans don't really trust that there is an absolute truth. And so we as a church come back to, no, there change, and so in that, we know something about Jesus.

But one of the things that somewhere around 70% of Americans believe that Jesus was God's first created being. And I want to just explain one of the things that maybe throws people is where he says he's the firstborn over all of Creation, but he actually uses that word twice. It says first he's the firstborn over all of Creation, but then it also says he's the firstborn from among the dead. Now if that's about him being created, it doesn't make any sense in the second instance. How are you the first one created from the dead? That's kind of strange. So the point here is not that he's the firstborn like a child in a family. The first one created. The word "firstborn" literally means preeminent. He is first in order. He is over all. So we believe that Jesus is eternal. That he came and became Jesus, but that Christ, the Son of God, has always been. That the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit are coequally God and have always just been, which makes for some of the most fun bedtime conversations with kids that you can possibly imagine. Where did God come from? Well he's always been? No, like, when did he start? He's always been. How is that possible? I don't know, he's just always been. But we trust that God is, and he's always been, and he always will be, and he never changes, and that the father, the son, and the holy spirit are eternal in nature.

So it doesn't mean Christ was born by God or created at some point, it means he's preeminent. And when we talk about preeminence, that's where we get this sort of practical side of this passage of Scripture. Because the point is, if Jesus is the ultimate expression of who God is, and he died for the church, and he rose for the church, and he is alive to save people and to call people to himself and to gather this nation of people, then that means that we recognize him at first in charge. So from day one, we've asked the question, "Who is the head, who is the boss, of Grace Hills Church?" And it's not me. And it's not any one of our staff members. It's not an outside body, it's not a denomination, it's not a committee, it's not a presbytery, it is Jesus.

Now, we have to listen to him and interpret his word and discern his will, and so there's a sense in which we come together as leaders with integrity and discern that and lead in some direction, but at the end of the day, we have to be sensitive what Jesus calls and directs because he is the head of the church. And when the Bible uses the word "head," it speaks of

the source. So not just like the boss. He's not just the boss of the church, he's the source of life for the church.

I have a friend who lives up in Colorado, he lives up in the mountains, he's a counselor, and he's got this crazy story. He's ridden his bicycle across the United States three times. And the other day he shared a picture playing around in the headwaters of the Arkansas River. And it looked like just little pools and puddles, and begins to collect up there in the mountains in Colorado, and it becomes a stream, and the stream as it collects more and more runoff and rainwater, it becomes a flowing river, and then you and I can go to world-renowned places like Toadsuck Park in Conway and see this mighty flowing river. But it all starts off with those headwaters, and that's the kind of image that the New Testament gives, that Christ is the head of the church. Does that mean he's in charge? Well, yes. But it also means he's the source of life for the church. He's the source of who we are. Our identity flows out of the identity of Jesus. So when you ask what is Grace Hills Church all about, we're all about Jesus. He comes first.

I want to just share with you for a minute how Jesus relates to the church. And these are ideas and truths that are found throughout the New Testament and I'm kind of collecting them together and very rapidly running through them, but these are things that the New Testament talks about. It talks about the fact that Jesus planned the church from the Creation of the world. In other words, nothing takes him by surprise. He didn't not know that the church was going to be. We didn't surprise him. The church didn't form and Jesus goes, OH, this is a good idea, I'll use this. No, it was his plan all along to call together a people who would become his church, his body, his nation of people, and so he planned the church. He started the church during his ministry on earth. We read in the first chapter of John where Jesus interacts with the disciples of John the Baptist, and John the Baptist kind of elbows them and points and goes, "there goes the lamb of God." They start walking behind Jesus and Jesus goes, what do you want? Well, we want to know what you're all about. Who's the lamb of God? He says, Come follow me.

That's the birth of the church. There's these earliest followers and he chooses them, calls them, begins to name them, and begins to organize them, train them, and disciple them. They were a clueless bunch of people all the way until the day when they finally saw Jesus alive from the dead. They were thick-headed, they were difficult to teach, they were kind of all over the map – kind of like most of us are most days. But Jesus in his patience calls them together and he births the church, he starts the church.

He died for the church. Ephesians 5 says he died for the church. He died to make the church possible. He offered himself in order to offer up redemption and forgiveness and all who embrace that become part of his church. He died for the church.

He rose from the dead for the church. In other words, he rose again to rule and to reign. He didn't stay dead, he came out of the tomb on that Sunday morning, that first Easter Sunday morning, he came alive and he instructed the church after that. He commissioned the church. That is, he gave them direction. He says go everywhere and teach everybody about me. Start in

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, , the uttermost parts of the earth, go and tell everybody the good news, baptize them, integrate them into the life of the body.

He fills the church with his Holy Spirit. He told them, if I go away, and he did go away, he did ascend back to heaven, he said if I do that I'm going to send the teacher, the counselor, and he's going to remind you what I've said. He's going to guide you in the truth. He's going to fill you with power and that's exactly what happened from the day of Pentecost until now. He has been filling us with his Spirit and his power and his enabling.

He teaches the church through his word. The New Testament became this collection of letters and books and documents that were written over 40 or 50 years after the time of Jesus and then gathered together and eventually bound for us today in a nice imitation leather copy – two tone if you really get fancy. And so we have it here in English language, either sitting in our laps or on our phone – in hundreds and hundreds of languages around the world. And so it's been preserved and it's here for us and it's this amazing thing that Jesus said we would learn about him through.

And then, finally, he will return for the church. He birthed it. He thought of it. It was his idea. It's his body, his organization, his organism, if you will. It's his outpost. He's in charge. He paid for us. He died for us. He rose for us. He rules and reigns over us today. And he's returning for us. He has spoken to us through his word. And so we don't get to decide just who we are, or what Testament, Christian people, is a matter of following Jesus. And so if I have an opinion, or a viewpoint, or a standard, or a rule, or a belief, and it does not line up with who Jesus is or what Jesus said or what Jesus did, or what the Bible teaches us about Jesus – if it doesn't line up with that, then as a Christian, I submit that to his lordship and I weed it out of my life. And over the course of my lifetime, I get to become more like Jesus Christ. The ultimate example, the ultimate model, the risen living Savior.

If nothing else today, I really hope and pray that in this message, that Jesus would just be more elevated for you and for me than he's ever been before. That we walk out of here with a bigger and brighter picture of Jesus every day of our lives. That he increases in the glory that we see about him as we live throughout our lives. That Jesus is first. He is foremost. He is preeminent. He is in charge, we are here for him. He is, as that verse said in Colossians 1, he is the head of the body of the church, he is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything, he might have the preeminence. That's how he relates to the church.

Now how do we relate to him as a church, as a body, as groups, as individuals, as followers of Jesus Christ? How do we relate to him? And let me just stop and make a comment about where we are culturally. I think that growing up in America, and within American Christianity, sometimes gives us some trouble in interpreting and understanding Jesus's intentions. Because in our culture, we're very individualistic. Since the birth of America, it's been all men are created equal, and we have these rights. And we're thinking all the time about our rights and there's nothing wrong with that except, in the New Testament, much of what we want to Now I

get to live it out individually, but a lot of what Jesus said is intended to be lived out by a people, not just each person. Does that make sense?

So I believe that these core values that we're walking through, the verses that we're looking at, the way that we relate to Jesus, we need to do this on a church-wide level, not just Grace Hills Church, but globally speaking, all of Christ's followers can live this out together and we do that as I as an individual live these things out. But I do it in community, I do it in connection with other people who can help me know how to do that, who can help me know how not to stumble, who can pray for me when I'm tempted or I'm suffering, who can stand arm-in-arm with me, that we can study and interpret together the life of Jesus, and we put all these things into practice. And it's not just about me going out and going out, but we together are figuring these things out.

So just keeping that in mind – the Church, this church, my group, and me – How do we relate back to Jesus knowing how he's related to us? Well, let me run through six things very fast. We trust his teachings, we follow his example, we receive his Spirit, we submit to his leadership, we grow until he returns, and we do everything for his honor.

When it comes to this issue of preeminence, I grew up in a culture, and really early ministry spent in a culture that had a great reverence and respect for the Bible as God's Word. And one thing I can look back on and go, I think sometimes what we accidentally slipped into was deciding that the Bible – in fact I remember this being said a lot – that Scripture, that the Bible is the centerpiece of Christianity. And you would say something like, well isn't it Jesus? Yeah, but we only know about Jesus through the Bible so it's all about the Bible. OR, you may have grown up in a tradition that's all about the church. The institution of the church, the leader of the church, meaning the guy at the top that wears the funny hat, and the committee of people that wear red around him, which doesn't look strange at all in our culture but, we think the church somehow is the authority over my life and so it's the centerpiece. Whatever the church says, that's what I'm going with.

But as New Testament Christians, the most Biblical thing we can do is to come back and say, no – The Bible isn't the centerpiece, it points us toward the centerpiece. It teaches us about the centerpiece. And the church is not the centerpiece, it has lots of flaws. Grace Hills Church – we tell everybody that comes and visits, we're not perfect. When you find a perfect church let us know and we'll all come and join you and we'll ruin that one too. So the church is the source of all authority in my life. Jesus Christ is preeminent, he comes first.

Now here's where this relates to us practically. When we make decisions as a church – Are we going to buy a piece of land and move into a new building and remodel it? We have to ask ourselves – would that honor Jesus? Will that enable us to carry out his mission? Because if we're not careful, the question we'll ask is, will that attract more people? Will that build a better crowd? If we do things that way, will that get more people to come? Will that make us more popular within the culture and within the community? And those are not entirely bad questions, they're just not the first questions. The first question is: Does this honor Christ? Does

this fulfill his mission? And if yes, then we can ask – well, how do we do it the best we can? How can we do it to serve the most people we can? But we check first: Does this honor Christ? Does this line up with who he is? Does this really reflect to our community what Jesus is all about?

In my life, in my individual life, Jesus comes first. He is to be my first priority – that my day wraps around Jesus. That doesn't mean that I don't spend time with family and friends and doing work and being productive. It just means that none of those things are first. They're second. The priority is Jesus. Now, how many of you have told your children, you better get your priorities straight? Anyone ever said that phrase before? If you haven't said it, you've heard it. Someone, mom or dad or boss or teacher has said you gotta get your priorities straight. That's an American concept. The idea of priorities, plural, like I just come up with a list and start numbering them off – I remember being taught this when I became a believer, was God come what number? Yes, God comes first. Second comes, and this is just the way I was taught, second comes your marriage. Third comes your kids. Fourth comes.... And that's where we begin to diverge a little bit. Some of you would say the second amendment. Or some would say my flag, or my nation, or we come up with all kinds of other things, but we order these priorities. Some of you would say it's my job that comes after my kids. All of that is an American concept, as though I can go "I've got my number 1, number 2, number 3, number 4..."

By the time you get to number 48 – Who's stressed out now? About juggling all of these priorities. The word "priority" means "first." Only one thing can be first. And Jesus said, Seek my kingdom first and all of those other things – they will fall into their proper place. If I'm seeking Jesus and his kingdom first, my marriage gets healthier. If I'm seeking Jesus and his kingdom first, I'm a better parent. If I'm seeking Jesus and his kingdom first – if his standards and his ideas and his philosophy, if that is what governs me in my life, then everything else begins to fall into its proper place. I don't want to challenge you to get your priorities straight, I would challenge you to ask what is my priority in life? Is it Jesus and his kingdom? Because that's the source, that's the head of life as I need to live it following Jesus Christ.

Let me just say, and wrap this up by saying, a lot of times – you know, we might ask each other, "Are you a Christian?" Or you might – in your Facebook or Instagram or Twitter – if you've got a biography and a certain number of characters you're allowed to fill in, and this is who I am, and so we'll put "Christian." Or we'll put something else, maybe about our work or our family, or political leaning, or something like that. We'll throw those things in there. But when I think of who we are today, I don't usually use the word "Christian." There's nothing wrong with it, it's a great word, but in America we've turned it into an adjective that kind of divides things up. Like you've got Christian movies and then you've got good quality, well-made movies – I'm just kidding. You've got Christian movies, non-Christian. You've got Christian music, non-Christian. And we kind of take a lot of God's creation and decide it's somehow non-Christian because it doesn't look Christian. It's an adjective.

I don't use that word. Instead, when people say who are you religiously, what do you believe, I say "I follow Jesus." Who is the church? It's the people that follow Jesus. Who were those earliest disciples? They were the people that Jesus said "Come and follow me." They followed

Jesus. Following Jesus is not the same as following a celebrity on Twitter. It's not from a distance. Following Jesus means getting up as close as possible and emulating his teachings, following his example, following his person. Following in the sense of "I'm going to model my life after him." That's who we are as a church. But when he's the priority, when he is first, I model my life after him.

So I want to just ask you a very serious and very purpose-filled question: Is Jesus first for you? Now if you're not a Christian yet, if you're not a believer yet, then this is not a question about are you willing today to say, I know that I can't keep my life the way it needs to be and manage it on my own. I'm broken, the pieces are shattered, I can't fix myself, I can't forgive myself, I can't pay back the debt I've racked up from my sins, I can't heal any brokenness in me, I certainly can't get myself into heaven, I want to follow Jesus because he died for my sins to forgive me and he rose again and gave me his Word and his Spirit so I can know every day how to live more like him. So if you've never followed Jesus before, I want to invite you today to say, "I will follow King Jesus." He will be my king from now on. I'm in his kingdom, I'm in his family, I'm following Jesus today.