

Gospel of John Sermons - Brian Bill

John 1:1-13 When The Infinite Became An Infant

Brian Bill on Apr 15, 2003

Summary: As the living Word, Jesus was with God in the beginning. He created all things and is the light of the world, and yet was not received warmly by those who should have welcomed Him with open arms. During this Christmas season, why don't you receive the gre

When the Infinite Became an Infant

I thought it would be a good idea for us to take a "Christmas Quiz" this morning to see how well we know the facts about the first Christmas.

1. When Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, how did they get there?

- a. They walked
- b. Joseph walked; Mary rode a donkey
- c. They took a chariot
- d. We don't really know

The correct answer is "D." The Bible gives no record of their means of travel.

2. How many angels spoke to the shepherds?

- a. A multitude
- b. Two Gabriel and Michael
- c. One
- d. Not sure

The right response is "C." Luke 2:10: "The angel said to them..."

3. What song did the angels sing?

- a. "O Little Town of Bethlehem"
- b. "Joy to the World"
- c. "Glory to God in the Highest"
- d. None of the above

This is a trick question. The correct choice is "D." According to Luke 2:13, they were: "...praising God and saying..." There's no mention of them singing anything.

4. What animals were present at Jesus' birth?

- a. Cows, sheep and camels
- b. Horses, sheep and donkeys
- c. Lions and tigers and bears
- d. None of the above

There is no mention in the Bible about any animals being present. The answer is "D."

5. In what books of the Bible can you find the Christmas story?

- a. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
- b. Matthew and Luke
- c. Mark and Matthew
- d. Matthew, Mark and Luke

The right choice is “B” -- Matthew and Luke. These two gospels give us insight into the birth of Jesus and provide much of what we know about the first Christmas. Let me read from Luke 2:4-7. While the Gospel of Mark picks up the life of Jesus when He is a grown man, the Gospel of John actually begins much earlier than even the accounts of Matthew and Luke. John tells us what Jesus did before He ended up in the manger as He takes us back to the beginning, to show us that He had no beginning. John’s report goes behind creation to show that the baby in the feeding trough was the Creator of the world.

My goal this morning is to help answer the question to the song we just heard, “What Child Is This?” John’s gospel begins with a prologue that will give us some clues about the identity of the baby in the manger. We’ll focus on the first part this morning and pick up the final section tomorrow night at our Christmas Eve service.

Please turn in your Bible to John 1 and follow along as I read: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

- The reality of Jesus is found in John 1:1-9:
- The Infant is Infinite (John 1:1-2)
- Christ is the Creator (John 1:3)
- The Lord is Life and Light (John 1:4-9)
- The reaction to Jesus is described in John 1:10-13
- Immanuel is Ignored (John 1:10)
- The Revealer is Rejected (John 1:11)
- The Redeemer must be Received (John 1:12-13)

The Reality of Jesus

1. The Infant is Infinite. For many years I thought that Jesus got his start when He was born. The fact of the matter is that Jesus Christ has always existed according to John 1:1-2: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” Jesus is before the beginning of time as He said in John 8:58: “Before Abraham was born, I am.” He is eternal, or infinite because He has always existed. This passage immediately reminds us of the opening words of Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God...”

The word “word” is the Greek “logos,” which refers to Jesus Christ, the second member of the Trinity. In Greek culture, logos, was that which gave meaning to all things. The philosopher Philo saw the logos as a bridge between a transcendent God and the material universe. John is using a term that everyone would be familiar with and yet he expands and transcends its meaning. Since a word is an audible or visible expression of a thought, Jesus perfectly revealed what was going on in the mind of God. He’s the bridge between God and us.

I am trying my best to convey to you today the thoughts that are on my mind, and the only medium I can use are my words. Likewise, Jesus is God’s Word to us. In Revelation 1:8, Jesus declares that He is the “Alpha and Omega,” which is like saying He is the A through the Z, the beginning and the end. He is God’s alphabet, the one who spells out deity for us. As the final Word, Jesus makes the incomprehensible God intelligible.

The “Word was with God,” indicates that Jesus Christ existed in a face-to-face relationship with the Father. Jesus was not only in the closest possible fellowship with God, the “Word was God.” We don’t have time this morning to explore the majestic intricacies of the

doctrine of the Trinity, but suffice it to say that Jesus is not a creation of God, but is God Himself. John 1:2 summarizes and repeats verse 1 in order to make sure we grasp the magnitude of this truth: "He was with God in the beginning." The Infant is Infinite.

2. Christ is the Creator. We see in John 1:3 that Christ is also the Creator: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." This verse brings back the truth we learned in Colossians 1:16-17: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Jesus is both the creator and sustainer of all things.

3. The Lord is Life and Light. The infant is infinite, Christ is the Creator, and thirdly, the Lord is life and light. Look at John 1:4-5: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." The story of the Bible begins with physical darkness in Genesis 1. To correct this darkness God said, "let there be light."

Spiritual darkness spilled into our world in Genesis 3 and can only be removed by the Lord who is life and light. As the light, Jesus shines into the darkness, and those who have not yet received Him are still in the dark and cannot understand Him. Many people today do not comprehend the real meaning of Christmas. It's because the world in general has no place for Christ.

The word, "understood" means "to lay hold of, to seize or grasp." Something can be seized either for hostile purposes, or in order to possess it. It can refer to resistance or refusal. The darkness cannot ultimately put out the light because light is more powerful than darkness. Darkness by its very nature refuses to come into the light because darkness and light are mutually exclusive. If you have one, you do not have the other. Those in darkness cannot readily understand the Lord who is life and light.

In John 1:6-8 we read about the role of John the Baptist. He was the forerunner to Jesus and helped prepare the way for people to see Jesus for who He really was. He was the conduit, if you will, to bring the power of the light to those blinded by darkness. He wanted people to know that the King was about to appear and that His coming demanded a moral renewal.

He urged people to repent and his primary responsibility was to be a witness to the light. John 1:9 reveals that Jesus Himself is the true light that gives light to every person. Unfortunately, for many of us, we'd rather live in the dark. Jesus put it this way in John 3:19-20: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."

Light and darkness are recurring themes in the Gospel of John. People love one or the other, but not both.

Max Lucado tells the story about a tribe of people who lived in a dark, cold cave. The cave dwellers would huddle together and cry against the chill. Loud and long they wailed. It was all they did. It was all they knew to do. The sounds in the cave were mournful, but the people didn't know it, for they had never known joy. The spirit in the cave was death, but the people didn't know it, for they had never known life.

But one day they heard a different voice. "I have heard your cries," it announced. "I have felt your chill and seen your darkness. I have come to help you." The cave people grew quiet. They had never heard this voice. Hope sounded strange to their ears. "How can we know you have come to help?"

"Trust me," he answered. "I have what you need." The cave people peered through the darkness at the figure of the stranger. He was stacking something, then stooping and stacking more. "What are you doing?" one cried, nervously. The stranger didn't answer. "What are you making?" another shouted even louder. There was still no response. "Tell us!" demanded a third.

The visitor stood and spoke in the direction of the voices. "I have what you need." With that he turned to the pile at his feet and lit it. Wood ignited, flames erupted, and light filled the cavern. The people turned away in fear. "Put it out!" they cried. "It hurts to see it."

"Light always hurts before it helps," he answered. "Step closer. The pain will soon pass."

"Not I," declared a voice. "Nor I," agreed a second. "Only a fool would risk exposing his eyes to such light," said another. The stranger stood next to the fire. "Would you prefer the darkness? Would you prefer the cold? Don't consult your fears. Take a step of faith." For a long time no one spoke. The people hovered in groups covering their eyes. The fire builder stood next to the fire. "It's warm here," he invited.

"He's right," one from behind him announced. "It is warmer." The stranger turned to see a figure slowly stepping toward the fire. "I can open my eyes now," she proclaimed. "I can see." "Come closer," invited the fire builder. She did. She stepped into the ring of light. "It's so warm!" She extended her hands and sighed as her chill began to pass. "Come everyone! Feel the warmth," she invited.

"Silence woman!" cried one of the cave dwellers. "Dare you lead us into your folly? Leave us. Leave us and take your light with you." She turned to the stranger. "Why won't they come?"

"They choose the chill, for though it's cold, it's what they know. They'd rather be cold than to change."

"And live in the dark?" she asked. "And live in the dark," he replied.

The Response to Jesus

Let's look now at three responses to Jesus.

1. Immanuel is ignored. The infant is infinite, Christ is the creator, and the Lord is life and light. Unfortunately, verse 10 reveals that Immanuel is often ignored: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him." With all the tinsel of Christmas, it's easy to blow right past the birth of Immanuel, which means, "God with us." Everything starts with this truth: Jesus Christ was in the world. And He was here for more than a fleeting visit, having walked on this planet for 33 years. He was one of us and lived among us. J.B. Phillips put it this way, "We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet."

There has always been a great divide in the human race. The majority has never recognized Jesus for who He really is. When He came the first time, Herod hated him, the scribes ignored Him, and there was no room for Him in the inn. Only the shepherds and the wise men, the poor and the foreigners, welcomed him to earth.

Not much has changed today as we see the birth of Jesus slipping from our cultural discourse. He came to the world He created, and the "the world did not recognize him."

In 1932, Robert McGimsey attended a Christmas Eve service in New York City and then headed back to his one-room apartment. As he walked the final blocks, he passed by the open doors of private clubs where people were partying with all their might. They didn't seem to have a clue that it was Christmas Eve, and if they did, they didn't seem to care. As he stepped over people who had passed out on the sidewalk, he thought to himself, "What a strange way to celebrate the birth of the most perfect Person who ever lived on this earth. People are missing the whole significance of His life."

When he finally arrived home, he scribbled some more thoughts on the back of an envelope. His words formed the basis of the song that Kent is going to sing right now: "Sweet little Jesus Boy, they made you be born in a manger. Sweet little holy Child didn't know who you was. Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord, to take our sins away. Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see, we didn't know who you was."

Have you been ignoring Jesus this year? Don't let this Christmas pass by without figuring out why Jesus came.

2. The Revealer is rejected. While some are apathetic and ignore the Christ of Christmas, others reject Him outright. Look at verse 11: "He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him." The idiom "came to his own" means "to come home." It's been said, "Home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in." Jesus came to the people who should have known Him best, but they wanted nothing to do with Him. Jesus came "home" to his own people and they wouldn't take Him in.

They should have known better because they knew He was coming. Every book in the Old Testament testifies to this one great truth: He's coming. One day God would send His Messiah to deliver His people Israel. And when Jesus finally arrived, they didn't receive Him because they didn't want to. To not receive means, "to reject." Instead of welcoming Him home they drove Him away.

This is not just an historical observation; it's a profound theological statement. Humans in general reject God. And the reason we reject Him is because we want to. While some people seem to be sincere seekers of Christ, the Bible says that most of us are looking to be rid of Him. People are blind because it's their very nature to reject the light. We can't come to Christ on our own. Jesus said it this way in John 6:44: "No man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

3. The redeemer must be received. While it is true that the world ignored Him and His own people rejected Him, there have always been some who will receive Him. John 1:12 is one of the greatest verses in the entire Bible because it explains clearly how someone can become a Christian: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

Notice the three key words.

Received. This is an active word with a deep meaning. It literally means, "to take, or to seize." Those who receive Christ are those who welcome or accept Him into their lives. Jesus is God's gift to us at Christmas. We can choose to ignore Him, or reject Him, or we can take what has been freely offered to us. Have you taken hold of Him? Have you received Him into your life?

Believed. To believe means to engage our total being so that we put our trust completely in Christ by committing our lives to Him. It involves more than just intellectual assent or an emotional response. Biblical belief always involves receiving, or responding to what God in Christ has done for us.

Right. This word means “honor” or “privilege.” The moment you receive Christ into your life, God gives you the honor of becoming a member of His family. We are given permission to become a child of God when we believe and receive.

Believe, Receive, and Become. We must first believe that Jesus is the only way to a relationship with God the Father. Then we must actually receive what He has done by personally appropriating the gift of salvation. Then, we become children of God.

John 1:13 makes it clear that salvation doesn’t run automatically from one generation to another. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, “You will never go to heaven in a crowd.” It’s true there will be crowds in heaven, but we only go there one at a time. God saves individuals, not masses or groups.

The whole gospel is in the little phrase “born of God.” Salvation is of the Lord. It’s a free gift—totally free and totally of grace. It’s not a cooperative venture where you do your part and God does his. We may ask, “Don’t I have a part to play in salvation?” We do indeed have a part. Our part is to be hopelessly lost in sin and God’s part is to save us. That way God alone gets the credit. Salvation is a work of God from first to last and is wrapped up in the birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Christmas is a great reminder that we’ve not been forgotten. We live on a visited planet. In her book “The Whisper Test,” Mary Ann Bird writes:

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, “What happened to your lip?” I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored -- Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy -- a sparkling lady.

Annually we had a hearing test...Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back--things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?” I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”

Friend, do you hear the whisper of Jesus this Christmas? The infant is infinite, Christ is the creator, and the Lord is life and light. Don’t ignore or reject Him. He’s whispering in your ear right now. Do you hear Him? “I wish you were my little girl. I wish you were my little boy. I want you to be my son or daughter. I wish you were in my family.”

The good news this Christmas is that you can be...if you will receive Him into your life.

When it comes to great spiritual issues there can be no neutrality. No one “drifts” or stumbles into Christianity by accident. God has no natural-born children. At some point you must consciously believe and receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior. In order to fully understand the reason for Christmas, we must respond to the reality of Christ and be born again.

The real Christmas quiz is not focused on what you know, but on whom you know. The key is not information, but life transformation. Most of us have enough data; we just need to make a decision.

William Willimon, the chaplain at Duke University, has some good insight when he says, “We are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud...the Christmas story...is not about how blessed it is to be givers but how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers” (The Christian Century).

I want to conclude this morning by giving you an opportunity to be a receiver by accepting the greatest Christmas gift of all time. His name is Jesus. He’s whispering your name and knocking at the door of your life. Will you let Him in? Will you receive Him? The Bible says that if you don’t receive Him, you’ve actually rejected Him. If you’re ready to believe and receive, I invite you to pray this prayer with me.

Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept you out of my life. I confess that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. No longer will I close the door when I hear you knocking. By faith I gratefully receive your gift of salvation. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. I acknowledge that you are infinite; that you’re the creator, and that you’re life and light itself. With all my heart I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe and now I receive so that I can become your child. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and be my Savior. Amen.

John 1:12-14

A Gift Ready To Be Recieved

Brian Bill Mar 19, 2003

Summary: I'd like to suggest tonight that the all-time best gift that has ever been given is Jesus Christ. And, once you open this gift, you will never want to return it, and you will never be the same!

A Gift Ready to Be Received

A little girl is sitting on her grandpa's lap rattling off her long Christmas list. The grandfather recognized that this was "a teachable moment," and so he said, "Honey, it's more blessed to give than it is to receive." To which the granddaughter replied, "I know that, Grandpa, but receiving is good enough for me."

What are you hoping to receive this Christmas? American Express did a survey recently and found that 31% of people said that receiving a "fruitcake" would be the worst gift of all. In fact, more people indicated that given a choice between a fruitcake and receiving nothing at all, they would choose "nothing." The survey then went on to find out how people get rid of a gift that they don't want.

30% hide it in a closet

21% return it

19% give it to someone else

One of the best ways to get rid of a gift you don't want is to have a white elephant exchange. That's what we did at our staff Christmas party for PBC and PCS. Gifts ranged from a broken toilet seat to casserole dishes that had never been used. People were often speechless when they opened their gifts. It was fun to be able to give away the junk that we had stored in our basement. The only problem is that we went home with other people's trash!

I'd like to suggest tonight that the all-time best gift that has ever been given is Jesus Christ. And, once you open this gift, you will never want to return it, and you will never be the same! The Apostle Paul, when gazing at the gift that was given to him, said in 2 Corinthians 9:15: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" Paul, who was never at a loss for words as one of the best communicators of all time, when pondering the present he had received, could only say, "I can't describe Him. All I can do is fall on my knees and thank God for His inexpressible gift."

Some of you have received this gift and like Paul, you can't even put into words how much He means to you. Some of you have come close to opening the gift of Christ. Maybe you've accepted Him but have been trying to hide Him somewhere.

As we've learned the last two weeks, God came near in the person of His Son. The baby in Mary's womb is Immanuel, God incarnate, born to be with us. He revealed His plan to Mary and she responded with, "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). Joseph struggled to figure out his part in God's drama, but eventually "...did what the Lord had commanded Him and took Mary home as his wife" (Matthew 1:24). Christmas always comes with a choice. Mary and Joseph chose to respond and receive the greatest gift of all time. Will you do the same this Christmas?

Let's go back right now and see how this gift of grace was both given and received as I read Luke 2:1-20 from the New Living Translation.

[Read Luke 2:1-20]

In commenting on the crux of Christmas, Max Lucado captures the indescribable incarnation in his book, *God Came Near*, when he wrote this: "That particular moment was like none other. For through that segment of time a spectacular thing occurred. God became a man. While the creatures of earth walked unaware, divinity arrived. Heaven opened herself up and placed her most precious one in a human womb. The omnipotent, in one instant, made Himself breakable. He, who had been a spirit, now was pierce able. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And He who sustains the world with a word, chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl. God as a fetus. Holiness sleeping in a womb. The creator of life being created. God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys and a spleen. He stretched against the walls and floated in the amniotic fluids of His mother. God had come near."

The Greatest Presence of All

I hope many of you read the excellent article that Pastor Jeff wrote in last Saturday's Daily Leader. I really liked how he ended it

when he referred to Jesus as the greatest “presence” of all. That sums up what Immanuel really means. The greatest present is the presence of Christ. This involves three things.

1. The gift is Jesus Christ Himself With all the other trappings of the season, we must never forget the Christ of Christmas. While it's become a cliché, Jesus is the reason for the season.

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...”

John 4:10: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

Romans 5:15: “For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!”

2. This gift has great value. Alan Perkins puts it this way: “Although there is truly nothing more desirable than knowing Christ, many people just can't see it. Their eyes haven't been opened. They look into the manger, and they don't see a king. They don't see the Savior of the World. They don't see “the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace...” All they can see is an ordinary human being. And so, they pass by the child in the manger and instead seek after the presents. Which do you value more, the toys and trinkets of this life that will all eventually crumble into dust, or a relationship with Jesus Christ that will last forever?”

For some reason, many people refuse to accept God's gift. We gain insight into this from Mary as she contemplated the baby swaddled in her arms. She was so filled with thankfulness that she burst into a psalm of praise in Luke 1:46-48: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.” As she praised God, she also recognized that not everyone would be so thankful for the gift. She opened her arms and her hands to accept what God wanted to give her. Sadly, there are others, maybe even some of you here tonight, who have their hands closed, refusing to receive the gift with their name on it.

Dr. Bruce Emmert suggests three types of people who close themselves off from the Christ of Christmas:

- The proud. In verse 51, we read, “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.” Imagine if you will, the proud who have their arms folded across their chests, their hearts closed to anything that God wants to give them [Demonstrate].
- The powerful. There are others who consider themselves too self-sufficient to need a Savior. In verse 52, Mary sang, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” The powerful raise their hands in a fist of independence, refusing to surrender [Demonstrate].
- The pacified. This third group has a difficult time receiving the gift of God because they are too comfortable to need Him. Mary's song continues in verse 53: “He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” If you're full, food doesn't look very good. If you're warm, you don't need a coat. If you feel like you have everything you need, then God's love will mean very little. If your hands are busy patting your tummy, then your hands can't reach out and accept the bread of heaven [Demonstrate].

Do any of these categories describe you tonight? You won't accept God's gift if your hands are folded across your chest in pride. You can't receive God's mercy if your hands are clenched in power. And you certainly won't want God's grace if your hands are rubbing your stomach.

You can only receive a gift when your hands are open. If you're proud tonight, get rid of your pompousness. If you think you're powerful, it's time to lose all pretenses. If you're pacified, maybe you need to lose some of your perks.

That leads to the third truth.

1. The greatest gift is Jesus.

2. This gift has great value.

3. This gift must be received. Friend, you can only receive God's love when you reach out to Him with arms and hands open wide. While this seems easy to understand, there are at least two ways some of us get sidetracked.

- We can't earn this gift. No matter how many times we may hear that the gift of salvation is free, some of us continue to try to perform or earn our way to heaven. Remember, if you have to somehow earn something, it's not a gift; it's a wage. The Bible says that the only thing we can earn as a result of our efforts is death. Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death...” I'm thankful that this verse doesn't end there. Our salary may be separation from God, “... but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Ephesians

2:8-9 is a wonderful passage that God can use to release us from the tyranny of trying to trot on the treadmill of good works: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast."

· We can't buy this gift. Not only can we never earn God's gift, we can't buy it either. Salvation is not for sale because the price has already been paid. During the Spanish-American War, Clara Barton was overseeing the work of the Red Cross in Cuba. One day Colonel Theodore Roosevelt came to her, wanting to buy food for his wounded soldiers. But she refused to sell him any. Roosevelt was perplexed and a bit angry. His men needed the help and he was prepared to pay for it out of his own funds. When he asked someone why he couldn't buy what he needed, he was told, "Colonel, just ask for it!" A smile broke over his face as he suddenly realized that the provisions were not for sale. All he had to do was simply ask and they would be given freely to him.

Friend, have you ever received Jesus Christ? He is all the provision you will ever need. Jesus is offering Himself to you as a gift. You've done nothing to deserve Him and you certainly could never afford Him. He offers Himself to you because He loves you. Christmas ultimately comes down to a choice. Will you receive Him? Will you accept what He did for you on the Cross, when He died in your place, paying the full penalty for your sins as He exchanged His life for yours? Or, are you too prideful or too powerful, or too pacified?

The gift of Christmas is free but it's not cheap. It cost God the death of his one-and-only Son. Salvation is available to anyone and everyone who wants it. John 1:12 sums up the ultimate Christmas choice: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

To "receive" means to welcome a visitor into your home. It's what happens when someone knocks at your door and you open the door and invite him or her to come in. To "receive" Christ means to welcome him as an honored guest and to have him make your heart his home. In a real sense, if you have never invited Jesus into your life, He is still on the outside. Though Revelation 3:20 is written to believers who are out of fellowship with Christ, the image is helpful for anyone who has not yet opened the door of their life to Him: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

John 1:13 teaches us that salvation does not run automatically from one generation to another: "Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." You aren't a Christian just because your parents are. And you won't get brownie points with God just because you come from a good family and have a fine education. You can't save yourself by human effort so don't bother trying. The heart of the gospel is in the short phrase "born of God." Salvation is of the Lord and it's a free gift.

In John 1:14, we see that God's final word was Jesus: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Michael Card masterfully captured this verse in a song called, "The Final Word." Listen to these words as Pastor Jeff comes to sing it for us:

He spoke the Incarnation and then so was born the Son.

His final word was Jesus, He needed no other one.

Spoke flesh and blood so He could bleed and make a way Divine.

And so was born the baby who would die to make it mine.

A Gift With Your Name On It

That person in the front row has a present for me. It's got my name on it. It's been wrapped for me. What do I have to do to make it mine? I have to take it. I have to put my arms out and receive it. And then I must open it.

· If I have arms crossed on my chest in a posture of pride, I'll never commit to Christ.

· If my fist is up in the air reflecting a powerful persona, I'll snub the Savior.

· And, if I'm rubbing my gut, with all my needs pacified, I won't even notice God's gift.

I can tell you this. You will never truly enjoy Christmas, and experience all that life is intended to be, until you can look in the Father's face and tell him that you have received his Christmas gift to you.

There's nothing I can do to earn this gift, and there's nothing I can do to pay for it. If you're trying to earn it, you haven't received it. If you're trying to buy it, you haven't received it. The only choice you have is to refuse it and lose it, or to choose it and find what you've been searching for.

If you've never received Christ, don't leave the gift of God's grace unopened. And if you're a believer, don't relegate Him to the far recesses of your life like Christmas decorations to be pulled out only once a year.

I'd like to close by giving you an invitation to a birthday party.

You are cordially invited to A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION!

Guest of Honor: Jesus Christ

Date: Traditionally, December 25th, but He's always around, so the date is flexible...

Time: Whenever you're ready.

Place: In your heart...He'll meet you there. (You'll hear Him knock.)

Attire: Come as you are...

Tickets: Admission is free. He's already paid for everyone. He says you wouldn't be able to afford it anyway. It cost Him everything He had.

Gift Suggestions: Your life.

R.S.V.P: If you want what He has to offer, you must respond. Do it soon...before it's too late.

We'd like to end our service tonight by singing the song, "Silent Night, Holy Night." As we sing together, I encourage you to receive what Jesus has for you by putting your full faith and total trust in Him.

John 1:12, 1 Peter 3:18

Telling His Story

Brian Bill 3/18/01

I want to begin this morning by reading part of an article written by Bob Greene, a nationally syndicated columnist.

"In the hours after the carnage at the school near San Diego—as the sick, too familiar, pit-of-the-stomach feelings returned—the nation once again began to search for answers. Maybe it's finally time to just admit it: We don't have the answers. Look around this country. School administrators don't have the answers, and teachers don't have the answers, and mothers and fathers don't have the answers, and police departments don't have the answers. The president of the United States doesn't have the answers and the Congress doesn't have the answers...

"But even if we, as a society, were able to prevent every student from having a firearm, we would still be left with the harder question: Why? Why has it come to this? Why do students murder? One theory...is that there is a growing soullessness in the land, a vacuum inside some young people: a vacuum whose utter emptiness is beyond our comprehending. The reason we as a society are struggling as we throw stopgap measures at the schools is that if we really knew—if we genuinely understood how to stop this—then we would have done it already...

"What we are dealing with is something so profound that it belongs as much to the area of theology as it does to education or law enforcement. Our attempts to construct barriers of safety around our schools—however well-intentioned the efforts—are just bandages over a wound that is growing too big..." (Pontiac Daily Leader, 3/13/01, "Terribly, The News Was No Surprise")

We readily admit that our country has some problems, don't we? This morning, I want to argue that the answer, like Bob Greene suggests, is theological. Are you aware that since the Columbine tragedy, there have been twenty-two shootings in American schools? Amidst the cries for tougher gun laws, we're faced with a much bigger issue. The root problem is what the Bible calls sin.

My message this morning is based in large part, on a book written by my friend Ray Pritchard called, "An Anchor for the Soul." I had the privilege of editing his manuscript and Ray gave me permission to use some of it this morning (Moody Press, 2000).

When God first created the world, Genesis 1:26 says that He made Adam and Eve "in his image" and "after his likeness." We were made in God's image, which means there is something in us that reflects who God is. You and I were made with the ability to know God personally. We can illustrate it this way:

But we have a problem. Even though we were made by God to know God, we generally pull back from Him. And, when we want to

find Him, we can't locate Him on our own, and so we end up searching in all the wrong places. Here's an important truth to remember: We can never know God unless He reveals Himself to us. Thankfully, God has not left us to live in darkness forever. He has revealed Himself to us. Acts 17:27 says that God is "not far from each one of us."

God is holy, which means He is utterly pure, free from all evil, totally without blame or error. Holiness is what makes God God. He never lowers His standards, never compromises, and makes no "deals." He Himself is the final standard of right and wrong. As a result, everything He says about you and me is true.

Knowing the God who made you is the most important thing in life. It gives meaning and purpose to everything else. If you don't know God, nothing else matters.

The Truth About You

A quarter-century ago psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a landmark book titled "Whatever Became of Sin?" When you think about it, nothing has happened to sin but something has happened to us. We simply don't want to talk about sin anymore. It isn't a polite topic, in a politically correct world. Try mentioning the word "sin" the next time you go to a party and see how long it takes for someone to change the subject.

I heard a story about a painter who was contracted to paint the outside of a local church white. The deacons negotiated a price with the painter and he went to work. As he worked he decided that if he thinned the paint with some water, he could make even more money on the job. When he was done, he was already thinking about how he could spend his extra cash. But then it started to rain. And it rained. And it rained. As the paint ran off the sides of the church and into the gutter, the painter fell to his knees and cried out, "Why me, God? I'm sorry. What should I do?" Suddenly a voice was heard from heaven, "Repaint, and thin no more!"

Some of us need to do some repainting, don't we? If we're honest we must agree with G. K. Chesterton: "This one thing is certain—man is not what he was meant to be." Something has gone wrong with the human race. Something evil lurks inside the heart of every person. No one is immune, no one is exempt, and no one is truly innocent – me included.

Call it what you will—a twist, a taint, a bent to do wrong. Somehow, somewhere, someone injected poison into the human bloodstream. That's why, even when we know the right thing to do, we go ahead and choose to do wrong. Deliberately. Repeatedly. Defiantly.

The world is a mess—we all know that. But, it's a mess because we ourselves are messed up. The problem is not "out there." It's "in us."

Romans 3:12-16 paints an accurate, though unflattering picture of each one of us: "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways."

The Bible traces sin back to the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of one particular tree. The serpent deceived Eve who ate the fruit and then offered some to Adam. It was through that deliberate choice that sin entered the world.

Theologians call this event "The Fall." It means that when Adam ate the fruit he fell from a state of innocence into a state of guilt. He fell from grace to judgment. He fell from life to death.

What does all this have to do with you and me? In some mysterious way, we were there when Adam sinned. When Adam sinned, you sinned. When Adam disobeyed, you disobeyed. When Adam fell, you fell. When he died, you died. Adam was the driver of the bus of humanity. When he drove the bus over the cliff, we went down with him. When he crashed, we all went up in flames. As a result, we're separated from God.

Many people think God has some kind of divine voltmeter that registers Good, Neutral, and Evil. Most of us think that we're doing OK – Not too bad, not too good, but right in the middle somewhere. We aren't the best, but we aren't the worst either. The Bible tells us that because of Adam's sin we come into the world with the needle stuck firmly on "Evil."

Sin has infected every part of your being—your mind, your emotions, your will, your intellect, your moral reasoning, your decision-making, your words and your deeds. No part of your life is exempt from the debilitating effects of sin.

The other night at AWANA, one of my daughters was given a big blue sucker. It was all over her mouth by the time we got home. It was very obvious that she had had a sucker. Sin is kind of like that. It's all over our face – and every other part of our life. As someone has said, "If sin were blue, we'd be blue all over."

Romans 3:10 solemnly states, "There is no one righteous, not even one." How can God look down at nearly six billion people and

not see even one person whose life pleases Him? Is this not an overly harsh judgment? The answer is that God judges according to a different standard than the one we use. Most of us grade on the curve. That is, we look to our neighbor and say, "I'm not as bad as he is." But God doesn't judge that way. Compared with God's standard of perfection, there is no one, not even one person, who comes even close to being righteous in His eyes.

A couple months ago, a member of this church gave me this fluorescent orange t-shirt. I was very moved when he told me he just had to buy it for me when he saw it. I started to thank him and pulled the shirt out of the bag. Right before I opened it up, my friend said, "This is the perfect shirt for you. It made me think of you." Can you see what it says on the front? It says, "Luzer!" I was just about to slug him when he showed me the back of the shirt: "...whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39)

Friends, in God's eyes we are all spiritual losers and moral mess-ups. This doesn't sound very good, does it? Let's be honest – there's something in us that resists this harsh conclusion. God says that we are like a basket of fruit that has gone rotten in the hot summer sun. We have all "gone bad" in His eyes.

What is sin? It is any violation of God's righteous character. It is anything we say or do or think or imagine or plan that does not meet God's standard of perfection. It doesn't matter if you recognize it or not because it's the truth.

About a month ago, I pulled into the church parking lot early in the morning. There was about an inch of snow on the ground and it was dark so I couldn't see the parking spaces. As I drove to my normal spot, I realized that I couldn't tell where the yellow lines were so I just parked where I thought I should. I knew there was a handicapped spot somewhere but since I couldn't tell where it was I didn't worry about it. A couple hours later, when I looked out the window, I realized that I was parked in the reserved spot. What do you think I did? Did I go out and move my car? No way. I just left it there.

That's a good picture of sin. I was outside the limits. And, even when I recognized my transgression I did nothing to fix it. That's what sin is. The word itself means, "to miss the mark." Picture an archer shooting an arrow and missing so badly that not only does he not hit the bull's eye; he doesn't even hit the target. Sin causes us to aim our lives in the wrong direction and to miss the mark of what God wants us to do and to be.

The Consequences of Sin

Where does all this leave us? The Bible says, that because of sin, we are:

- Lost
- Separated from God
- Blind
- Dead
- Enslaved
- Helpless

We're dying physically and we're dead spiritually. We're in big trouble. Unless Someone intervenes to help us, we can never be saved. The gospel is good news. But until we see how bad the bad news is, we will never understand why the good news is so good.

As long as I think I'm better than other people, I'm not ready to be saved from my sin because I have not yet considered how great my sin really is. Jesus did not come to save "semi" sinners or people who don't think they're all that bad.

Why do we need God's grace? Because all of us by nature are spiritually dead. When God looks down from heaven, the whole world looks like a cemetery to Him. All He sees are dead people. Because of sin we are separated from Him. We are unable to know God personally and we can't do anything about our condition.

Grace Given

Check this out. When we were completely and totally and absolutely dead in our sins, God decided to do something to rescue us. Let's take a look at Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast." Salvation comes through faith, not by works, and not by religion. Grace saves us through faith. Something in us always wants to add to God's free gift. It's humbling to admit that we can do nothing to earn our deliverance from sin. And anytime we try to add anything to grace, we subtract from its meaning. Grace must be free or else it is not grace at all.

This view of grace is hard for good people to accept because it means we must give up our "goodness" in order to be saved. We must admit that nothing we've done matters in the least when it comes to being forgiven by God. Do you want to go to heaven? You

either go by the grace of God or you won't go at all. Here are two truths to keep in mind:

1. No one is too bad to be saved. God specializes in saving people who live outside the lines of His perfection. Do you have some things in your background that you would be ashamed to talk about in public? Don't worry. God knows all about it, and His grace is greater than your sin.
2. Some may be too good to be saved. That is, they may have such a high opinion of themselves that they think they don't need God's grace. God's grace cannot help you until you are desperate enough to receive it.

No one is so good that they can save themselves and none are so bad that God cannot save them!

Paid in Full

There's a lot of confusion today about who Jesus really is. That's why we're kicking off a new series in April called, The Case For Christ. To be almost right about Jesus is to be totally wrong.

If Jesus is who He said He is, there is no truth more worthy of your time, and there is no person more important to know. The Christian church is made up of men and women who confess one revolutionary truth—that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of the living God.

Until you believe that, and confess that, you cannot be called a Christian. It matters not that you may have positive feelings about Jesus Christ, or that you think he was a very good man. You are not a Christian until you confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and put your faith in Him alone for your salvation.

Right before Jesus died, He shouted out, "It is finished." This literally means, "to bring to an end, to complete, to accomplish." Jesus did exactly what He set out to do. When He died, he left no unfinished business behind. In the Greek, this phrase also means, "Paid in full." It's an accounting term that means all debts have been paid.

This is truly good news: God's holiness demands that sin be punished. God's grace provides the sacrifice. What God demands, he supplies. Our sins have been paid for. Your pardon has been secured – if you'll but ask for it. Jesus is the bridge that makes it possible for us to have a relationship with God. We can picture what Jesus did like this:

1 Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God..." Let me give you the best news you've ever heard. It doesn't matter how many sins you've accumulated on the ledger sheet of your life. It doesn't matter how guilty you think you are. It doesn't matter what you've been doing this week. It doesn't matter how bad you've been. It doesn't matter how many skeletons are rattling around in your closet.

God is not trying to sell you a presidential pardon. He's not offering salvation at half-price or on an installment plan because it's free of charge. Jesus paid your debt in full so you don't have to pay anything. Jesus left no unfinished business behind. He completed what he came to do. When you come to Christ, your sins are stamped with the blood of Christ: Paid in full.

Why Working Won't Work

Salvation is not a do-it-yourself kit. If you want to go to heaven, the first step is to stop trying to earn your way there. You have to "stop trying" and "start trusting" if you want to be saved. Write it in big letters. When it comes to saving your soul, WORKS DON'T WORK! BEING GOOD IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!

There is no place in heaven for "good" sinners. As long as you cling to a shred of your "goodness," you cannot be saved. But if you are willing to call yourself what you are—a sinner—you can be saved right now.

If God doesn't want our "works," what does he want from us? He wants us to trust Him. That's all. In the New Testament, faith, trust, and belief all come from the same general root word meaning "to lean wholly upon," as when you lie down on a bed, resting your whole weight upon it.

The Bible says that God justifies the wicked. This is hard for many of us to accept because we think God wants good people in heaven. As a result, we spend our lives trying to be good enough to go there when we die. But here's the rub. No one can ever be good enough to go to heaven. We think God is saying, "Clean up your act and then I'll save you." God says something shockingly different: "I'll save you while you are still dirty and then I'll help you clean up your act." Mark it down. God saves the ungodly while they are still ungodly.

The verdict is just in from heaven and the bad news is, you are guilty. The good news is that Christ is entirely righteous. If you will accept those two rulings from God's supreme court, an amazing miracle will take place. Christ will take your guilt and you will receive his righteousness.

DO vs. DONE

In this we see the simplicity of Christianity when compared with the religions of the world. Religion is spelled with two letters: “D-O.” Religion is a list of things people think they have to do in order to be accepted by God—go to church, give money, keep the Ten Commandments, be baptized, pray every day. The list is endless. It’s always Do . . . Do . . . Do.

Christianity is spelled with four letters—“D-O-N-E.” Salvation is not based on what we do but upon what Jesus Christ has already done. If you want to go to heaven, you don’t have to do anything; you just have trust in what Jesus Christ has already done for you.

That’s the whole difference—Do versus Done. Either you try to do it yourself and never make it, or you believe that Jesus Christ has already done it for you.

That raises a key question: If salvation is predicated on believing in Christ, how do you know when you have truly believed? True saving faith involves the intellect, the emotions, and the will.

Let me demonstrate by showing this brief video clip. You’ll see what’s going on inside a man as He contemplates the gospel message.

Faith begins with knowledge, which is where the intellect is involved. Then it moves to the emotions where convictions are developed. Saving faith must then move to the will, where a commitment is made.

1. Knowledge

This refers to the factual basis of Christianity. Faith is based on knowledge and knowledge is based on truth. Truth must be proclaimed before saving faith can be exercised. Saving faith is intelligent faith. You aren’t saved by information but you can’t be saved without it.

Imagine that you’re in a burning building and cannot find your way out. “Where is the exit?” you cry out. Through the smoke and haze comes the answer: “Go down the hallway, turn left, go down one flight of stairs, the exit is on the right.” Are you saved because you know where the exit is? No, you still have to make the journey yourself. But if you don’t know how to get there, or if you have some wrong information, you’re going to burn to death. Knowing the truth intellectually doesn’t save you but you can’t be saved without it.

2. Conviction

Conviction means to know something and then to be persuaded that it is true. The most common word for “believe” means “to have confidence in, to regard as completely reliable.” The word “Amen,” which is a Hebrew word that we use in English, literally means, “Yes, it is true.” Saving faith involves saying “Amen” to the facts of the gospel. Conviction is essential because you must be personally convinced of the truth, but that alone is not enough either.

3. Commitment

Commitment speaks to the action part of faith. We might use the word “trust” in the sense of “relying fully upon.” True saving faith always ends in personal commitment. Sales people understand this principle. After the presentation is made, at some point people have to sign on the dotted line. If they say, “I know that’s a good product,” you haven’t made a sale. If they say, “I believe I need that,” they are closer but you still haven’t sold anything. But when they say, “Where do I sign?” you’ve just closed the deal.

In the 19th century the greatest tightrope walker in the world was a man named Charles Blondin. He was the first man in history to walk on a tightrope across Niagara Falls. One time he took a chair and a stove with him and sat down midway across, cooked an omelet and ate it. Another time he asked the cheering spectators if they thought he could carry a man across sitting in a wheelbarrow. A mighty roar of approval rose from the crowd. Spying a man cheering loudly, he asked, “Sir, do you think I could safely carry you to the other side in this wheelbarrow?” The man boldly shouted out, “Yes, of course.” To which the Great Blondin responded with a smile, “Then, get in!” The man turned and walked away.

That makes it clear, doesn’t it? It’s one thing to believe someone can walk across by himself. It’s another thing to believe he could safely carry you to the other side. But it’s something else entirely to get into the wheelbarrow yourself. That’s the difference between knowledge, conviction, and commitment.

Christ Standing at the Door

In the last book of the Bible we find the image of Christ standing at the door and knocking. The picture comes from Revelation 3:20 where Jesus offers to enter a lukewarm, lethargic church and have a restored relationship with those who will let Him in. While this passage refers to Christians, it has application to those of you who have never opened the door of your heart to Christ: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

The three elements of faith are made clear in this verse.

- I hear the knock—That's knowledge, where the intellect is satisfied.
- I go to the door—That's conviction, where the emotions are engaged.
- I open the door—That's commitment, where the will makes a decision.

God's offer is now on the table. The wheelbarrow waits. What are you going to do?

Salvation Made Simple

When it comes to great spiritual issues there can be no neutrality. No one "drifts" into Christianity by accident. At some point you must consciously trust Christ as Lord and Savior.

John 1:12-13 offers a simple outline of what it means to come to Christ for salvation: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

1. A Simple Step—Receiving Him

The way of salvation begins with a simple step: Receiving Christ as Lord and Savior. To "receive" Christ means to welcome Him as an honored guest and to have him make your heart His home. It's what you do when someone gives you a gift – you take it, or receive it. Once you do, then it's yours. Before you receive it, it doesn't really belong to you. Salvation is not something we achieve, but something we receive.

2. A Wonderful Result—Child of God

The word "right" means "honor" or "privilege." The moment you receive Christ into your life, God gives you the honor of becoming a member of His family. This verse teaches us that not everyone is a child of God. Sometimes people carelessly say, "We're all God's children," but only those who receive Jesus as Savior are true sons and daughters.

3. A Mysterious Truth—Born of God

Salvation doesn't run automatically from one generation to another. You aren't a Christian just because your parents are or because you've been going to church for a while. Some of you have been inoculated with small doses of Christianity, which has kept you from catching the real thing.

The entire gospel is wrapped up in this short phrase: "born of God." Salvation is from the Lord. It's a free gift, not a cooperative venture where you do your part and God does His. But someone may object, "Don't I have a part to play in salvation?" You do indeed have a part. Your part is to be hopelessly lost in sin and God's part is to save you. God alone gets all the credit.

That brings us to the moment of decision. I've used this illustration before but it bears repeating. Imagine three frogs sitting on a log. Two decide to jump off. How many are left? That's not a hard question. Three minus two equals one. But one is not the right answer. The right answer is three. You haven't jumped off the log because you decided to jump. The frog is still on the log until he actually jumps off. A person who is almost persuaded is still completely lost. To decide to receive Christ is good. But receiving him by faith is the only way to be saved.

That is what it means to be a Christian. It means trusting in Christ so much that you risk your eternity on what Jesus did on the cross. Trusting Jesus for salvation means to trust Him so completely that if He can't take you to heaven, you aren't going to go there. Are you willing and ready to do that?

Christ has opened the door to heaven and paid the price of admission with His own blood. Will you not trust Him and make Him your own? He's knocking at the door of your heart. Will you open yourself to Him right now? Here are two words to remember: Admit and Accept. Admit that you are a sinner who is separated from God. Accept Jesus as your sin substitute by receiving Him into your life.

After the recent shootings at Santana High School in Santee, California, several people have come forward and admitted that they wish they would have said something to the authorities about the shooter beforehand. Apparently he had been making threats several days earlier. They had information they didn't share and now they feel really bad for keeping it to themselves.

Friends, I would feel terrible if I didn't share some information that will radically redirect your life and determine where you spend eternity. If you want to become a Christian, then you must receive Jesus into your life. If you want to be saved, then you must have the Savior.

If you're up for it, you can pray this prayer with me. But only do it if your mind, your emotions, and your will are ready.

“Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept you out of my life. I admit that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I’ve been living. I don’t want to be a spiritual loser anymore. No longer will I close the door when I hear you knocking. By faith I gratefully receive your gift of salvation. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe your words are true. I accept you into my heart. Be my Savior and Lord. I surrender to your leadership in my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. Amen.”

John 1:14

“Home for Christmas”

Brian Bill 12/21/08

On December 17th, 1903, after four attempts, the Wright Brothers flew their “flying machine” for the first time. Wilbur rushed to the local telegraph office and sent the following message: “We have flown for 12 seconds – will be home for Christmas!” Upon receiving the telegram, their sister Katherine went to the newspaper office and told them the news. Two days later, the local paper placed the following headline on page six: “Wright brothers home for Christmas.”

Amazingly, being home for Christmas trumped their flight feat. Sure, they were the first to fly, but it was even more important that they were coming home. I’ve been asked “Are you going home for Christmas” repeatedly this week. And I’ve asked others the same question. Why is that? There’s something deep within each of us that longs to belong to a place called home.

This past Wednesday I was the chaperone for four eighth grade girls from Pontiac Christian School while they rang the Salvation Army bell outside a local business. Not surprisingly, there were no “Happy Holiday” greetings coming from them; only “Merry Christmas.”

This particular store was playing Christmas music and I noticed that even secular songs speak of a yuletide yearning.

* “I’ll Be Home For Christmas,” written during World War II, captures that longing to be home, especially for soldiers serving overseas. Even if they couldn’t come home, they would be there in their dreams. [Go up to stage set where couple is missing their son]

* “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas” also speaks of a time long ago when our expectations of a white and wonderful Christmas were met...or were they?

Our songs and sentiments speak of a yearning for what we have yet to experience or as one person said, “The longing for things that have never happened.” It’s no secret that not everyone is merry about Christmas. While most shoppers smiled at the students and put their shekels in the kettle, one man told them to stop ringing those “bleepity bleep bells.” Later on, a weary woman walked by with a big frown on her face and said to the cheery teens, “Bah, Humbug!” She muttered something about shopping and trudged off to her car.

Barbara Brown Taylor catches the flavor of our tendency to romanticize Christmas: “Every Christmas Eve functions like a kind of time machine for us, taking us back to every other Christmas Eve we’ve spent on this earth. For some...it’s the smell of pine...and... the taste of roast turkey...it is mom and dad sitting around in their bathrobes sipping coffee while the kids chase the new puppy through a sea of wrapping paper. For others, this night is a reminder of the way life should have been but never was – those who have looked all their lives through other people’s windows at such scenes of domestic bliss, but...never as an insider.”

Some of you can’t wait to go home for Christmas and others of you, like the college student in our drama, are afraid to be with your family because home is not a happy place. Some of you are dreading the day because a loved one will be gone from the table. I know this will be the first Christmas in our family where cancer has made an unwelcome appearance.

Some of you even feel “homeless” this holiday season as you worry and wonder about the status of the Pontiac Correctional Center. You might be happy or you might feel horrible. Christmas might be warm or just plain weird. Your home might be beautiful or it may be broken; you may be filled with delight or you’re already getting ready to be disappointed. John Ortberg suggests that there’s the home we long for and the home we have – and there’s always a gap between them.

We all know that Joseph and Mary were away from home that first Christmas. In Matthew 1:20, Joseph is told to “take Mary home as his wife” but that didn’t last long because they had to bounce down to Bethlehem. The shepherds, because of the nature of their work, were far from home. As we learned last week, the wise men had wandered away from home so they could worship King

Jesus. The family of Jesus set up their home in Bethlehem for awhile and then fled to Egypt and then back to Judea and finally ended up in Nazareth. Later Jesus made Capernaum his home base, but during his ministry, the Bible says that Jesus had no “place to lay his head.” And Jesus was literally far from home when He was here because he came all the way from heaven.

Because we all long to belong, we will be homeless until we find our home with God. There’s a longing for home inside each of us that no human home can satisfy. This week I discovered that the word “home” is used 186 times in the Bible. As I studied this further I saw that one can make a distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Let’s look first at a few passages from the Old Testament where we learn that...

1. We are homesick for God. Ever since Adam and Eve were thrown out of their home in Eden, there’s been a deep homesickness inside each of our souls, a deep longing for belonging that can be traced through the entire Old Testament. In Genesis 8:9 we read about Noah setting a dove free after the 40-day flood: “But the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth...” The phrase “set its feet” in Hebrew literally means “home.” That’s a cool description of home. We’re looking for security – not just a place for our feet but a place of safety for our souls.

The psalmist observes the sparrows and swallows finding homes and longs for that same sense of security in Psalm 84:3. It’s almost as if he’s jealous that they have unlimited access to the home of the Holy One: “Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young -- a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.”

In Psalm 90:1, Moses, who spent most of his life wandering in the wilderness, declares that home is where God is: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.” Psalm 91:1 echoes this sentiment: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.’” And the very last verse of the Old Testament in Malachi 4:6 pictures a day in which houses are transformed into homes, when the hearts of fathers are turned toward their children “and the hearts of the children to their fathers...”

Martin Copenhaver argues that because we’re homesick for God, our Christmas celebrations are often incomplete. Even if we could return to a place where everything seemed complete, we would find that someone is always missing: “We are homesick, not for some home of our past, but for a home we have never seen and cannot readily imagine...This is something more than nostalgia, and more profound as well, because what we long for is not merely a Christmas from our past, but a gathering up of our past, present and future into a harmony that is not achieved in the days of our lives...What we long for is to have the broken and scattered pieces brought together in ways that we are unable to do. And that is why I have concluded that our homesickness is, in some way, a yearning for God.”

2. God is homesick for us. If the Old Testament shows our homesickness for God, a case could be made that the New Testament depicts God as homesick for us. At its core that’s what Christmas is all about. John 1:14 is one of the most startling verses in the Bible: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

A grandfather was visiting his grandson one Christmas when he walked into the family room and saw the toddler standing up in his playpen, crying. His face was red and tear-stained. When little Jeffy saw his granddad, his face lit up and his hands reached out for help as he pleaded, “Out, papa, out!” What grandfather could resist this plea? And so he walked over to the playpen and reached down to lift his little buddy out of captivity. Just then, however, “Law and Order” stepped into the room with a dishtowel in her hand and spoke sternly, “Jeffy, you know better. You’re being punished. Leave him right there, dad.” And she marched back out of the room. The grandfather didn’t know what to do. Jeffy’s tears and outstretched hands tugged at his heart, but he didn’t want to interfere with a mother’s discipline either. He couldn’t stand being in the same room and not being able to do anything but he couldn’t leave without feeling like a traitor. Grandpa then had an idea. Since he couldn’t take Jeffy out of the playpen, he decided to climb in with him. That’s a pretty good picture of what Jesus did for us...He climbed in with us.

The first part of verse 14 says that the “Word became flesh...” This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. The Message paraphrase puts it this way: “The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” The NIV says that Jesus “made his dwelling among us,” which literally means, “to make one’s tent.” When we would camp at campsites growing up, we would always get to know the other campers around us. In fact, it’s difficult to be private when you’re camping. Everyone can see what you’re doing. To say that Jesus pitched a tent implies that He wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction. “Dwelling” is the same word used for “tabernacle” in the Old Testament. The tabernacle was a portable tent where the glory of God dwelt in the days before the Temple was built in Jerusalem.

After spending three years with Jesus His disciples had finally found a home in Him. Being with Him gave them a sense of belonging, an identity, and a purpose. Then, in John 14 Jesus announces that He is leaving them. This really shakes them up and

so He says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." He then tells them about a home that He is going to prepare for them.

Let me pause here to give a little background about homes in that culture. Many lived in what was called an insula, which was a housing arrangement. In the center would be a courtyard where animals would walk around and where one would find common fire pits for cooking. On the outer edge of the courtyard were homes, or dwelling places. When a young man wanted to get married, the parents would arrange a contract and negotiate the bridal price. Incidentally, that's where the phrase, "Bought with a price" comes from.

The couple was betrothed but no wedding date was set because the father and groom-to-be had to get to work building an addition on to the father's house. He was highly motivated to work quickly because when it was complete, the father would say, "Now it's finished...go get your bride!" The bride would have to be ready at any time because she never knew when he was coming to get her. The groom would show up with his friends to get his bride and there would be a parade back to their new room.

Friends, that's what Jesus is talking about in John 14:2-4: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." These are wedding words! Jesus is the groom who has the room ready for us. We are the bride that has been bought with a price. When the time is right He will take us to that home where we will be with Him forever – that's the promise that the family in the third drama was holding on to.

And there's only one way to get there, and that's to move from the cradle of Christmas to the cross of Calvary. Jesus said it like this in verse 6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus went to the cross so you could come home for Christmas. Later in this same chapter, Jesus spoke these stunning words in John 14:23: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." When we believe and receive Him, He will come and make His home in our hearts. I wonder, is He at home in you today?

It's an interesting irony, isn't it, that Jesus has prepared a room for us even though there was no room for Him when He was born? Despite the fact that we kicked Jesus out of our world, Jesus invites us into His home. Jesus said that there is a place for those who believe in Him. In fact, he left the disciples in order to get some rooms ready for them.

We're all searching for home. Part of our problem is that most of us are too tied to this place. We often think that this is the land of the living, and that when we die we go to the land of the dead. The opposite is really true – this is the land of homelessness, when our life here is over, we are transferred to another abode – either to a home of eternal joy or to a place of terrible torment. There are really only two possible destinations. The Apostle Paul understood where home really is in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 when he wrote: "...as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord...we are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

Robert Frost has written a poem where a husband and wife argue about whether to take an old and troublesome acquaintance into their home because he is dying and has no where else to go. The husband doesn't really want him in his home and says, "Home is that place where, when you go there, they have to take you in." But his wife disagrees: "I would say, rather, home is what you don't have to deserve." That's good. We don't deserve our destiny because there's no way we can earn our way to a home in heaven.

Let me go back to the joyful bell ringers. One of the ways the girls tried to express glad tidings of great joy was to hand out free cookies. One lady said, "I can't give you anything because my hands are full." One of the bell ringers said, "That's OK. Would you like a free cookie?" The lady responded, "Sure" as she rearranged the bags in her hands and held out her hand.

I have good news for you today. You don't have to give anything to God; He wants to give to you this Christmas. But some of you have your hands so full of stuff that you don't have room for what He wants to give you. He wants to meet your deep longing for home. The Apostle John wrote down these words in Revelation 21:3-4 that show God's homesickness for us: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling [home] of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" God's home is now among His people. The entire Bible is pointing to this very moment. Even if things are good for you on Christmas there will be a fleeting sense that the best is yet to come. Will you come home to Him right now?

My youngest sister got really angry one day when she was about 8 years old and threatened to run away. I was very compassionate to her crisis...and told her I would help her pack! I'll never forget her walking across the back yard with her little Barbie suitcase...she turned around and came back a few minutes later.

We're all runaways, aren't we? And God is calling us home right now. I picture the prodigal son who was so far from home that he didn't think the father would ever take him back. He had drifted so much and had sinned so much that the only hope he had was to

not come back as a son but to come back as a servant – if he could just work for the Father maybe everything would be alright. He wanted to go on the “good works” plan, but no one can earn their way back home. Jesus can do what I cannot do – He’s already paid the price.

What the son doesn’t know is that the Father has never stopped looking for his drifting son. When the Father sees him, he runs to meet him and welcomes him home. Friend, the Father is always ready to receive runaways! Because we all long to belong, we will be homeless until we find our home with God.

Christmas is all about God’s homecoming. We couldn’t get to God, so God got to us. Jesus is Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Creator of the universe came home to creation. God chose to be with us, to live in our neighborhood so that one day we can live with Him in our heavenly home.

This quote from Tim Keller is spot on: “Christmas is the end of thinking you are better than someone else, because Christmas is telling you that you could never get to heaven on your own. God had to come to you.” Do you want to be home for Christmas? Then come home to Christ. You will remain unfulfilled and restless and homesick until God becomes your dwelling place and you find your home in Him. It’s time to come home right now. The good news is that we don’t have to find our way home – Immanuel has found His way to us.

I want to give you a chance to come home right now. If you’re already at home with Him, just say thanks. Maybe there’s someone you can pray for who is a long way from home. Perhaps you don’t know if you’re home with God or if He is home with you. You can be sure by praying this prayer: “Father, I want to come home. I confess that I’ve drifted far from you. I’ve sinned big time and I’m ready to turn around. Thank you that through the death of Jesus I have been bought with a price. I’m coming home right now. I ask you to forgive me and to make your home in my heart so one day I’ll be home with you forever.”

John 1:14-18

The Christmas Collision

Brian Bill on Apr 15, 2003

Summary: I don’t know what kind of calamity you’ve experienced but I do know the words “Christmas” and “collision” go together.

The Christmas Collision

During the summer of 1977 I was in the front seat of my friend’s car as we were out for a drive, listening to some music at a pretty high volume. My job was to keep the tunes coming and his job was to drive. As I was bending over to search for another 8-track tape (I told you it was the 70s!), the car jumped the curb and collided with a telephone pole. I woke up with a very fat lip, a couple loose teeth, and 18 stitches in my chin. It was a collision I will never forget.

Some of you have experienced some crashes in your life, perhaps even this year. I recognize that Christmas can be a difficult time for those of you who are going through this season without a loved one. I don’t know what kind of calamity you’ve experienced but I do know the words “Christmas” and “collision” go together.

Mary wasn’t planning to have her life interrupted by the announcement that she was going to be pregnant with the Light of the world. Her dreams were of a nice wedding with Joseph and now they were in serious jeopardy as people wondered how a virgin could be expecting a child. She needed a breath from heaven. I love the words to the song we just heard: “I’m frightened by the load I bear, in a world as cold as stone. Must I walk this path alone? Be with me now. Hold me together and lighten my darkness. Pour over me your holiness, for you are holy.”

We pick up the narrative in Luke 1:26-35: “In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’

‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’”

Joseph also had a collision that first Christmas. Listen to Matthew 1:18-25: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' -which means, 'God with us.'

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

I want us to focus on just one verse tonight from the Gospel of John. At first glance you may wonder why I've chosen this particular passage instead of the more traditional Christmas message from Luke or Matthew. While the Gospels of Luke and Matthew give the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, John provides us with the meaning, or explanation. John does not use a narrative but instead gives us the theology behind the nativity.

John 1:14 is one of the most startling verses in the Bible because it describes another Christmas collision. Word for word, I can't think of a better explanation of what happened "Away in the Manger" in the "Little Town of Bethlehem": "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

The Collision of Deity and Humanity

A grandfather was visiting his grandson one Christmas when he walked into the family room and saw the toddler standing up in his playpen, crying. His face was red and tear-stained. When little Jeffy saw his granddad, his face lit up and his hands reached out for help as he pleaded, "Out, papa, out!" What grandfather could resist this plea? And so he walked over to the playpen and reached down to lift his little buddy out of captivity.

Just then, however, "Law and Order" stepped into the room with a dishtowel in her hand and spoke sternly, "Jeffy, you know better. You're being punished. Leave him right there, dad." And she marched back out of the room.

The grandfather didn't know what to do. Jeffy's tears and outstretched hands tugged at his heart, but he didn't want to interfere with a mother's discipline either. He couldn't stand being in the same room and not being able to do anything but he couldn't leave without feeling like a traitor.

Grandpa then had an idea. Since he couldn't take Jeffy out of the playpen, he decided to climb in with him. That's a pretty good picture of what Jesus did for us...He climbed in with us.

The first part of verse 14 says that the "Word became flesh..." This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. Jesus is the visible word of God. Theologians call this truth the Incarnation. The infinite second person of the Trinity, who created all things according to John 1:1, became a soft baby. That's a staggering thought. The Son did not cease to be God when He became a man. He added manhood but He did not subtract deity. He was fully God and fully man. He was the God-man. The collision of deity and humanity had its full expression in Jesus.

Do you remember the movie "O God!" starring George Burns and John Denver? The movie was theologically distorted and irreverent in parts. But there's one section that stood out to me. In the scene, George Burns makes an appearance to the supermarket manager, dressed as an old man, wearing tennis shoes and a fishing hat. When asked why he looks the way he does, Burns answers, "I picked a look you could understand." That's a pretty good description of the birth at Bethlehem. God picked a look we could understand by having His Son born as a human being.

While Jesus probably didn't wear a fishing cap, he hung around a group of men that may have. He no doubt smelled of fish. His hands were calloused from years of handling rough lumber. His skin was tanned from the Middle Eastern sun. He was human in every way we are and yet was without sin. The Incarnation not only means that we can understand God better but God understands us, because He became one of us.

The Message translation renders the first part of John 1:14 this way: "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." For 33 years God moved into our neighborhood. The NIV says that Jesus "made his dwelling among us," which literally means, "to make one's tent." When we would camp at campsites growing up, we would always get to know the other

campers around us. In fact, it's difficult to be private when you're camping. Everyone can see what you're doing. To say that Jesus pitched a tent implies that He wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction.

"Dwelling" is the same word used for "tabernacle" in the Old Testament. The tabernacle was a portable tent where the glory of God dwelt in the days before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. The tabernacle was called the tent of meeting in Exodus 33:7: "Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting.'"

There are at least three ways that the tent of meeting corresponds to Jesus "dwelling among us."

1. The tabernacle was God's dwelling place. God lived in the midst of Israel's camp, making His throne between the cherubim on the mercy seat. Likewise, God had his dwelling place in the body of Jesus.
2. The tabernacle was the place where God met with His people. In the same way, but in a much deeper sense, Jesus is the place where we meet God today.
3. The tabernacle was the place where sacrifice was made. The animals were killed and their blood became atonement for sin. So it is with Jesus. His cross became the altar where Mary's little lamb was slain, where His blood was shed, and where complete atonement was made for sin.

The Collision of Grace and Truth

The first collision is between deity and humanity and is expressed precisely in Jesus. The second collision is between grace and truth and is exhibited perfectly in Jesus. Take a look at the last part of John 1:14: "...who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The apostle John knew Jesus just about as well as anyone. When groping for words to describe Him, John said, "I'll tell you this, He's full of grace and truth." One translation puts it this way: "He is generous inside and out, true from start to finish."

Grace and truth are two concepts that don't often appear together. As humans we tend to err on one side or the other. If we stress grace, we can be too quick to forgive and cut slack. If we judge too harshly, we make forgiveness impossible. Jesus was...

1. Full of grace. Jesus dealt graciously with people He met, especially those who were reeling from moral or physical train wrecks. Grace is overwhelming kindness, good will and favor. It's a special kind of tenderness. Parents brought children to Him and He blessed them. The leper came wanting to be healed and Jesus made him clean. The woman caught in adultery was not condemned but was instead given grace as she was told to "go and sin no more." The disabled, the discouraged, the disenfranchised, and the down-and-outers grabbed every chance to be near Him.

2. Full of truth. Jesus was truth personified because He fully permeated perfection, knowledge, wisdom and excellence. All that He spoke was truth. All that He did was truth. All that He thought was truth. He is the way, the truth and the life. And, because He is full of truth, He spoke truth to those who needed to hear it. To the religious people who reacted angrily to His grace, there was nothing left but hard truth in Matthew 23:33: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" He delivered truth to those who had turned His father's house into a den of thieves, overturning their tables and benches.

Listen carefully. With Jesus you can always count on both truth and grace. He tells the truth about your life and your situation, and then His grace causes Him to stick with you all the way. Jesus loves me enough to spell out my sinfulness. I love what Max Lucado says: "God loves me just the way I am (that's grace), but He loves me too much to let me stay that way (that's truth)."

Through no merit of my own, He offers His incomparable kindness and forgiveness by sacrificing Himself as the penalty for my rebellion. Because He was full of grace, He died for you and me while we were yet sinners. Because He was full of truth, He was able to pay for our sins completely.

Larry Libby puts it this way: "He is truth. He is grace. In His truth, Jesus tells me the real story about my life and where I stand. He tells me I am spiritually dead, booked on a one-way flight to hell, incapable of achieving heaven on my own power, incapable of lifting myself out of the despair of an empty life or releasing myself from the iron chains of habitual sin. In His grace, Jesus loves me, seeks me, calls me, redeems me, walks with me through the hours of the day, and stands guard over my slumbers at night." (Discipleship Journal, Issue 126, 2001)

At Christmas we're reminded of the Word that became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Jesus has the perfect ability to tell us the awful truth about ourselves while holding us up by His grace. The manger is filled with the awesomeness of God's grace but we're also reminded of a terrible truth: because of our sin, Jesus Christ came to die for us. Because He is full of grace, you can come to Him just as you are, without having to clean up your act first. And because He is full of truth, you can come in complete confidence knowing that He will keep His promise to forgive you and grant you eternal life.

That's grace and that's truth. Without both working together, we would have neither. Because He's God in the flesh, there's no conflict in this collision.

The Collision Between Self and the Savior

The final collision is found in the middle section of John 1:14: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only." John is here using the third person pronoun, "we" to show that the disciples had the privilege of seeing the glory of God as exhibited in Jesus. The word "seen" is a rich word, which means, "to carefully scrutinize." It's the idea of scanning, or examining, in order to understand.

On this Christmas Eve 2001, you're invited to consider the Christ of Christmas, to study the Savior of the world, to deliberate about the Deity, and to come to some conclusions. You can only learn by looking. John became a witness because he allowed himself to be wowed by the incarnation.

No one ever met the Savior and stayed the same. This Christmas you're faced with a collision. It's the collision between yourself and the Savior. What do you see when you look at the Christmas cradle? Do you see His glory? Do you see tenderness and truth? Do you see the deity in diapers?

The real conflict is one that is deeply personal. Some of you have been hit with some pretty bad stuff this year and you're still reeling. Maybe you've been keeping Christ at arm's length. Others of you know what you need to do, but you don't want to surrender yourself to the Savior. You're still trying to do it all by yourself. The message of Christmas is that you don't have to any longer. Jesus is here. He's God in flesh. He's pitched His tent among us so that we can get to know Him and forever be changed by Him.

The events of September 11, 2001 have taught us that we better not presume that we will even see tomorrow. As such, we should live differently. Jim Cymbala, in his recent book about the World Trade Center disaster, puts it this way: "The only day we really have is today. Yesterday is gone, and we have no guarantee of a tomorrow...but today is the day of salvation. Today is the only day when a person can trust Christ to be his or her Savior and Lord" ("God's Grace From Ground Zero," 55-57).

There are some differences between this Christmas and last Christmas, aren't there?

Last Christmas we thought it was enough to celebrate the holidays; this Christmas we know that we must also find ways to consecrate them.

Last year we were thinking about the madness of Christmas; this year we're thinking about its meaning.

Last Christmas we were getting on each other's nerves; this Christmas we're getting on our knees.

When the pressures of life, health, family, or your job come crashing in on you, where will you turn? When you collide into life's telephone poles, what will you come away with?

My collision in 1977 slowed me down a bit. In 1978, one of my friends drowned in front of my eyes. That sobered me up a bit. The next year I collided with the Cross of Christ and became a Christian.

On this "Silent Night, Holy Night," let's remember that Jesus is always ready for us to receive Him. What are you running into today? What have you been hitting that you can't move? Jesus is deity and humanity wrapped into one; in Him grace and truth are fully synthesized so that you and I can respond and submit to Him this Christmas.

What are you waiting for?

John 2:1-22 His Life

Brian Bill

Summary: Jesus came to reveal God to us. He was gentle and kind, and yet there were some things that really set Him off! At the same time, He loved a good party and was constantly looking to bring healing to lives of people. He is the revealer, the confronter,

The Case For Christ: His Life

It's still early but has anyone already been a victim of an April Fool's joke? Some of you have been if you forgot to turn your clocks ahead last night!

The history of April Fool's Day is fascinating. In the 16th Century, the New Year was celebrated on April 1st. When the calendar was revised, New Year's Day was moved to January 1st but many people did not receive the news for several years (that was before email!). Still others, even though they heard about the change, refused to accept the new calendar and continued to celebrate the New Year on the 1st of April. The general populace labeled these backward folk "fools". They were made fun of and people began to

play pranks on them.

April Fool's Day has developed into an international funfest. The French fool people by taping a paper fish to their friends' backs as they yell out, "April Fish!" In England, if a joke is played on you, you're called a "noodle." In Portugal, the traditional trick is to throw flour at your friends. I love what Mark Twain said about April Fool's Day: "The first of April is the day we remember what we are the other 364 days of the year."

Here are some of the more popular pranks that kids like to play in our country:

- Fill the sugar bowl with salt. Then wait until your brother eats his cereal!
- Put a fake mouse on the floor.
- Pour the shampoo out of the bottle and replace it with honey!
- Put a fake ice cube with a fake fly in your dad's coke.
- Go to the bathroom and hide all the toilet paper.
- Put fake bugs in your mom's bed.

This morning we're beginning a new series called, "A Case For Christ." It's my prayer that we'll see Jesus in a fresh way this Easter season. Each of us have a portrait in our mind of what He looked like and how He lived His life.

A new documentary will be aired this week in England called, "Jesus: The Complete Story." It will run here in the States on Easter Sunday. From what I've read, it will contain liberal and incorrect information but I was fascinated by their depiction of what Jesus may have looked like. By analyzing excavated skulls of 1st century Jews and 6th century images of Christ, they put together this computer reconstruction:

Friends, no matter what Jesus really looked like, the picture many of us have of Him is anemic and inadequate. Although the name of Jesus is familiar to everyone -- so familiar that it has become a casually used expletive -- Jesus Himself remains a cloudy figure. I know some of you think of Him as just a frail, gentle kind of man who did some neat things and provided some good teaching.

This morning we're going to focus on two images of Jesus from John 2 that will help us form a composite picture of who He really is. If you want a more complete picture, you'll need to read the eyewitness accounts contained in the 4 Gospels. Even then, there's more to say about Him. John recognizes this in John 21:25: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."

The Joyful Jesus

My guess is that if you've been going to church for a while, you don't really think of Jesus as someone who liked to have a good time. The picture in many of our minds is of someone who avoided such normal human pleasures as social activities and parties. That's exactly what the religious people thought 2000 years ago.

When we read through the gospels, we discover that Jesus loved to go to banquets, parties, and receptions -- He was a much sought-after dinner guest. Even the religious leaders disdainfully referred to Jesus as an overeater and a lover of wine. Matthew 11:19 says, "The son of man came eating and drinking..." Jesus always chose to spend time with ordinary people rather than mixing it up with the religious crowd.

Our reporter John writes about an event that happened when Jesus and His disciples were guests at a wedding in John 2:1-11. Here's some important background information:

1. Weddings were a big deal in the Jewish culture and a certain protocol was followed. If the bride was a virgin, the wedding would be on Wednesday. If the bride was a widow, the wedding started on Thursday.
2. In our culture the bride is the main attraction. In Eastern weddings, the groom is the "man in the middle." The bride merely shows up.
3. The wedding festivities lasted seven days, and hosts invited as many people as possible, especially distinguished guests like prominent teachers. It was a time of great celebration.
4. The wedding ceremony would take place late in the evening after a time of feasting. The father of the bride would take his daughter on his arm, and with the wedding party in tow, would parade through the streets of the village so that everyone could come out and congratulate her. Finally the wedding party would arrive at the home of the groom, where the actual wedding took place.
5. There was no such thing as a honeymoon because the couple was expected to host a weeklong open

house. And it was the groom's family who was expected to provide all the food and refreshments for this protracted party.

6. To run out of wine at a wedding was worse than an April Fool's joke. Since new guests constantly arrived, the groom was obligated to provide food and drink. It would be embarrassing to run out of either one. In fact, a family could even be sued for a breach of hospitality if they didn't plan accordingly.

7. To the Jewish people wine symbolized joy. The rabbis had a saying, "Without wine there is no joy." When the fruit of the vine ran out, the delight dried up.

Let's read John 2:1-11.

While Jesus is at this reception, His mother, who may have been helping with the banquet, came up to Him and reported that they were all out of wine. The fact that Jesus works to remedy this situation reminds us that He is concerned with the everyday things in life that we face.

I wonder what was going through Mary's mind. Jesus was her son, and yet He had greater loyalty to His heavenly Father's will. She no doubt remembered what He said to her when he was twelve in Luke 2:49: "...Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?"

I think that's what was behind His answer to Mary in verse 4: "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come." He's not being rude to His mom but is instead emphasizing that she should no longer think of Him as merely her son. By calling her, "Dear woman," He is establishing some polite distance. He was giving her a gentle hint that everything was subject to the divine will of His Father. She could no longer approach Him on an "inside track."

The phrase translated, "My time has not yet come" refers to the Cross in the Gospel of John. Friends, we can't understand the life of Jesus apart from His death and resurrection. The Scriptures don't tell us what He looked like, but they do tell us very clearly what He came to do. What Jesus is saying is that once He starts doing miracles, He will begin the road to the cross. He is living according to a "heavenly timetable." When Jesus sensed the time was right He would act, not before.

I love Mary's reaction in verse 5 as she says to the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." Though mildly rebuked, she recognized that the reply of Jesus implied His readiness to work when the hour was right. She hoped that time was right now as she submissively and confidently tells the waiters to do whatever Jesus says. She somehow knew that Jesus would take care of the problem and gave the servers a "heads-up" so that they would listen to the Savior's instructions.

In verse 6 John sets the stage by describing six stone water jars. These pots were used for hand washing. When the guests arrived someone would pour this water over their hands to symbolically purify them. To eat with unwashed hands would have been a defilement. Mark 7:3 give us some insight into this practice: "The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders." The rabbis had a saying that went like this: "He who uses much water in washing will gain much wealth in this world." Each of these jars held twenty to thirty gallons, which means the total capacity was between 120 and 180 gallons!

These water pots represented the old order of the Law that Jesus would replace with something better. They were symbols of the elaborate system of outward cleansing that could neither clean the conscience nor satisfy the deep yearnings of the soul. The time for religious ritual has passed; the time for joyful celebration had come!

The servants are told to fill the jars with water in verse 7. They didn't question Jesus by saying, "We need wine, not water." They immediately obeyed and filled them to the brim. This emphasizes that there was only water in the jars and that nothing else could be added because they were full to the top.

They're then told in verse 8, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." The "master of the banquet" was the guy who was in charge of everything that happened at the wedding. One of his primary duties was to regulate the flow of wine so that people didn't get drunk and crash their chariots. People at the party would hold this "wedding planner" responsible for the empty bottles of wine.

When the banquet manager tasted the water that had been turned into wine, he was shocked. He called the groom over to the corner of the room and said in verse 10: "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." It was customary to bring out the Mogan David cheap stuff after the party got going. This wine was anything but inferior! It was the best the manager had ever tasted!

I went on the Internet this week and looked up the winemaking process (don't worry, I don't have any grapes fermenting in our basement!). The whole process can take six months to a year. And the best wines take even longer. This is significant because this

miracle was instantaneous. Jesus turned the water into wine immediately!

Verse 11 tells us that this was the first of His miraculous signs. By the way, this verse declares as false the stories about Jesus performing miracles when He was a young child. This first miracle revealed His glory to the disciples and they put their faith in Him. That's always the case. Jesus reveals His power and glory so that we can put our faith and trust in Him. A "sign" is something that points beyond itself to something greater. That's why Jesus often preached a sermon after performing a miracle. He didn't do it here, but if He had, I think He would have made at least three points:

- My first miracle took place at a wedding, not at a funeral; in a home, not in church. Please invite me into your relationships and into your families. I value social interaction and friendships and have sanctified marriage by my presence. Don't compartmentalize me by thinking of me only when you're in church.
- I am the bridegroom and those of you who know me are my bride. Please keep yourself pure and be ready when I come for you so that we can sit down together at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and experience never-ending joy.
- If your joy has run out, let me give you the kind of joy that is new every day and let me satisfy you completely. Give me the ordinary and let me do the extraordinary. Put your faith in me just like my disciples did. When you do, I'll transform your life from the inside out. I'll change you just like I did the water.

Jesus liked to be around people -- and He thoroughly enjoyed himself at parties. Sounds pretty radical, doesn't it? But, it's an important part of the portrait that the Gospel reporters present. Once you process this picture of Jesus, I think you'll be even more attracted to Him.

Now, let me say at this point that Jesus is not saying that it's OK to go out and get wasted. Not at all. Wine was the common beverage at meals in that culture because the drinking water was often impure. The Bible cautions us against getting drunk. Proverbs 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise." And Ephesians 5:18 challenges us, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit."

While the Bible does not teach that drinking alcohol is wrong in itself, I personally think you're better off if you avoid it altogether. But don't miss the point of this passage. Jesus was very much at home at a party and loves to take that which is ordinary and turn it into something special.

The Zealous Jesus

As we continue putting together our composite sketch of Jesus, another picture arises from John's reporting. While there is no doubt that Jesus was joyful and loving toward people, there were some things that really set Him off. Not only had the wine of the old law run out, the glory had departed from the Temple. Both the story of the wedding and the cleansing of the Temple point to the deficiencies of religious activity apart from a transformed life.

Let's take a look at John 2:12-25. Jesus and his disciples had traveled to the capital city of Jerusalem for the annual spring feast called Passover. The festivities centered around the Temple, which was the place where those who believed in God went to worship, pray, and make sacrifices.

Some background information will help us understand this passage better.

1. When the Temple was constructed, a special area outside the main building was designated for those who were investigating spiritual matters. They could ask questions about the Scriptures, discover how to pray and worship, and seek advice for the problems in their life.
2. During the celebration of Passover, worshipers came from all over to Jerusalem. Because many traveled long distances, it was inconvenient to bring their sacrificial animals with them. Opportunistic merchants, seeing a chance to provide a service and make some shekels, set up stands in the outer courts of the temple in order for travelers to buy animals. I'm told that a pair of doves brought a price of \$4, even though they were only worth a nickel.
3. The moneychangers were needed because the annual temple tax had to be paid with Jewish coins. Those coming from foreign lands would need to exchange their currency and were charged a high fee by the moneychangers.

Now, with that as background, Jesus and his team approach this outside court of the Temple and discover that something is terribly wrong. Instead of a safe haven for seekers of God, the area had been turned into a flea market. Look at verse 14: "In the temple court He found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money."

What do you think Jesus did? Did He work His way through the crowds to get into the Temple so He could pray? Did He and His disciples turn around and leave in disgust? No. For thirty years Jesus had been to the Temple and watched these men pollute the house of God. He was furious at their disrespect and greed. He was disgusted that the floor was carpeted with manure and the smell of urine burned his nostrils. This was His Father's house!

His response may surprise you. Check out verses 15-16: "So He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; He scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves, He said, 'Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!' Jesus went bonkers! With a whip in His hand He cleaned house -- literally! This picture of Jesus may be shocking to some of you -- but it's true.

When the disciples saw Jesus confront these people, verse 17 says that they remembered what was written in Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for your house will consume me." This Psalm is filled with references to the coming Savior and is quoted several times in the New Testament. Psalm 69:21 speaks of vinegar being given to Jesus to drink when He was on the cross. This was fulfilled in John 19:29 where we read that they put some on His lips. Perhaps the disciples are beginning to see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies!

The King James Version translates verse 17 this way: "For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up." Zeal is passion, or love on fire. It's a consuming dedication to a purpose. Jesus was fervently focused on the Father. He was passionate about purity. He was pumped about the purposes of God. That's why He cleansed the Temple.

Jesus would not stand for anything getting in the way of people having an opportunity to be reconciled to God. That's why He was so upset with the religious leaders -- they should have been helping those who are seeking truth, not standing in their way. You've heard about the plague of foot and mouth disease in Europe. These people had heart and money disease! And Jesus wouldn't put up with it.

It makes perfect sense for the religious leaders to ask what right Jesus had to do this in verse 18: "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" At the same time, this was not a very smart question because Malachi 3:1-2 indicates that the temple cleansing was itself a sign that they should have recognized: "...Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple...but who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."

These leaders should also have been ashamed of all the graft and greed taking place within the courts of the temple. Instead of asking Jesus by what right He had cleansed the Temple, they should have confessed their sins and thanked Him for what He did.

When Jesus answers them in verse 19, they think He's telling an April Fool's joke: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days." Actually, Jesus is using a figure of speech called a *mashal*, or a riddle. It's a paradoxical saying.

A young boy told me a riddle on Friday night. There are 100 cats in a boat. One jumped out. How many are left? I answered incorrectly when I said, "99." The answer is actually "0" because they were "copy-cats."

Jesus is very cleverly using some riddles here. The word, "destroy" can mean to tear down a building or to destroy a life. The phrase, "This temple" could refer to the temple itself or to a human body. And the phrase, "I will raise it up" is an expression used with respect to both reconstruction of buildings and the resuscitation of individuals. But, instead of pondering these paradoxes, they misinterpreted the riddle and took it literally.

Check out verse 20: "It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" They couldn't believe the audacity of what Jesus had said. John adds an editorial comment in verse 21 to make sure that we understand that Jesus was referring to His bodily resurrection. Because this was all put into a riddle, verse 22 tells us that the disciples mulled it over for many months and eventually understood it more fully after Jesus was raised from the dead.

The point that Jesus is making is that He came to replace the old system of religion with a relationship. The Temple was no longer necessary because Jesus' body would become the final sacrifice and He would be resurrected on the third day.

Summary and Action Steps

I love this chapter because it provides us with a good summary of the life of Jesus. He came to bring abundant joy by turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. And, He came to speak the truth with passion and zeal because He was locked into His Father's purposes. He came to die and be raised to life again. We're going to focus on the details of His death next Sunday.

In Jesus, we see both grace and truth. John 1:14 provides us with a great synopsis of His life: "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

The first part of John 2 is filled with grace, the second half with truth. Joy and zeal. Love and holiness. He came to bring personal renewal and religious reformation.

I want to close with some application points.

1. Read the Gospel of John between now and Easter Sunday. If you read two chapters a day between tomorrow and Palm Sunday and then one chapter a day between Palm Sunday and Easter, you'll finish the entire book and be prepared for the reality of the resurrection like you've never been before.
2. What do you need to do as a result of hearing this message? Do you need more joy or more zeal? What "ordinary" thing can you give Him today? What truth do you need to hear? Is there something that you know Jesus wants to "clean-up" in your life, but you've been pushing Him away?
3. Whenever Jesus taught or performed a miracle, people were given an opportunity to put their faith in Him. We see in verse 11 and in verse 23 that in both the wine making and the temple clearing, people put their trust in Christ. It's not enough to just hear some things about Jesus, or try to imagine what He looked like. Jesus demands a response – and that's no April Fool's.

In fact, the Bible says that those who rely only on themselves are foolish. Proverbs 28:26: "He who trusts himself is a fool; but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe." And Luke 12:20 speaks to those of you who have been putting off a decision to follow Christ: "You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you."

If you're ready to make the wisest decision of your life by receiving Jesus as your Forgiver and Leader, as the one who can give you both joy and zeal, then join me as I pray...

John 3:1-18 The Search For Grace

Brian Bill on Apr 29, 2003

This past week I had the opportunity to lead chapel services at Evenglow Retirement Center. Since I was scheduled for every day this week, I decided to speak on the theme of grace. On Monday, when I was meeting with the piano player before the service to pick out some hymns, I told her that I'd like us to sing, "Amazing Grace." She said, "No, I don't think so. We've sung that one so much that we've worn it out."

I think I understand what she was saying, but it struck me that there is no way anyone can wear out God's Grace. None of us should become so familiar with God's grace that we stop searching for it or appreciating it so I'm glad we sang it this morning. I don't think I could ever wear that song out...

Being a father in the 90's is not easy. There's a lot of pressure on us dads to be in the Delivery Room when our babies are born. I think my dad had it easier in the 60s when he just paced the floor in the Waiting Room.

When Emily was born, I was totally into the Lamaze stuff. Beth and I took classes together, and I had my role down cold. I did pretty well in the delivery room but got a bit dizzy by the end and had to be helped to a chair. I don't understand why women say that they have the hard job in giving birth it's pretty tough on us dads, too.

When Beth was expecting Lydia, I took a much more laid-back approach. No birthing classes for me. I knew what to do. It was no big deal. When Beth went into labor I just called her a cab so I could go back to sleep...just kidding. When we got to the hospital, Beth settled into her comfortable bed while I sat next to her in a hard, uncomfortable chair. See, it's tough on us fathers, isn't it? I looked around for the remote control and started channel surfing. I finally settled on a good show but had to keep turning the volume up every couple minutes when Beth would get a contraction. Finally, Beth grabbed the remote and said, "Hello, I'm in labor here! Could you give me a hand?"

You know, there's nothing like the birth of a baby. I will forever remember the births of each of our girls though I hope Beth forgets how I acted in the delivery room.

Are You a Real Christian?

This morning we're going to take a look at what Jesus said about another kind of birth if you have your Bibles, please turn to John 3, where we will learn what it means to be born spiritually. I want to begin with a very personal question: Are you a real Christian or are you just a religious person? It's one thing to be religious, it's another thing to be a real Christian. I'd like to draw your attention to the

story of a man who came to Jesus one night. Take a look at John 3:1: Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

In order to understand this birthing class, we need to know two things about Nicodemus. First, he was a Pharisee. If you're a student of the Bible, you probably have a negative view of the Pharisees. You may think that they were legalistic hypocrites who hated Jesus. But that's not entirely true.

In the first century the Pharisees were widely respected for their intense piety and deep scholarship. They were men who devoted their lives to the study of the Torah and its application to daily life. They truly wanted to obey God's law. That meant studying the Bible diligently, praying two hours a day, giving a tithe of all they possessed, and in general, being scrupulously concerned about morality. There were only a few thousand Pharisees because not many men would make that kind of personal sacrifice. Those who did were held in high esteem and honored for their commitment.

Having said that, the Pharisees made a couple basic and very tragic errors they externalized their religion and they believed that if they just worked hard enough they could make their way to heaven. Some of you may be on that same path this morning.

Second, Nicodemus was a member of the 70-member Jewish ruling council. They adjudicated various disputes and settled legal matters so that the Romans wouldn't have to get involved. As you might expect, only the leading men were elected to such a prestigious position. In 20th century terms, he would be like a college professor, a judge on the Supreme Court, a United States Senator, and a bishop in the church all rolled into one.

Nic at Night

John 3:2 reads, He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.' Since he came to Jesus after dark, I was tempted to title this sermon, "Nic at Nite" but thought better of it. Why did Nick come at night? Perhaps because he knew that Jesus was controversial and he couldn't risk being seen publicly. Or maybe he wished to have time for a lengthy personal interview. I'm sure there were elements of curiosity mixed with a sense of duty. After all, this upstart rabbi had been gaining followers by the day. As a leader, he had an obligation to find out more about this man.

There's probably more to the story than that. The fact that he risked his own position to come to Jesus speaks of his own personal need. Notice what he said, "we know you are a teacher who has come from God." Nicodemus here admits that Jesus has been sent from God. He is no mere man; He's more than just a teacher from Galilee.

This leads me to an important conclusion: Being religious is never enough. If it were, Nicodemus wouldn't have had the time or the interest to meet Jesus. But he comes because, despite all his religious activity, there is still an aching void in his heart.

That brings us to the answer Jesus gives to this cultured, educated, well-respected religious leader: In reply, Jesus declared in verse 3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Let's focus on the key phrase "born again." In the original language it has a double meaning. The word can mean "again" or "above." In this case, both meanings apply. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the only way to find what he is looking for is to be born again from above. Despite all his learning, Nicodemus is utterly baffled by this thought.

Notice verse 4 we see that Nic is ready to head back to the Delivery Room. "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Nicodemus misses the point Jesus is not talking about a second physical birth, but about a completely different kind of birth a spiritual birth. You are born once physically. That physical birth introduces you to the physical world. But if you want to enter the kingdom of God (the world of spiritual reality), you need a spiritual birth. Nicodemus is expecting a negative answer to his question but he gets far more than he bargained for.

Jesus replies in verses 5-6 that unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Let me clarify that "born of water" does not mean baptism. Although Jesus commands His followers to be baptized, and we're going to have a baptism service on November 14, baptism has nothing to do with salvation. The water Jesus speaks of here symbolizes purification. This is how Nicodemus would have understood it from the Old Testament he would have been familiar with Ezekiel 36:25-26: "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you."

You Must Be Born Again

To make sure that Nic does not misunderstand this truth, Jesus adds an important fact in verse 7: "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'" Notice the tense of that statement. You must be born again. The new birth is not optional for any of us. Jesus didn't say, "I recommend that you be born again" or "You should be born again if after investigation it seems to meet

your personal need” or “I think it would be a good idea to be born again.” No! Jesus used the urgent language of forceful command: You must be born again.

Before we go on, let me remind you that Jesus spoke these words not to some immoral outcast, but to one of the most religious men of his day. By any human standard Nicodemus was a very good person and certainly a man we would admire for his intense devotion to God. Yet Jesus told him, “You must be born again.”

If he needed to be born again, what about you and me? Do any of you have the religious pedigree that Nicodemus had? I doubt it. The truth of the matter is that we are much less religious than Nicodemus was. If he needed to be born again, we surely do as well. Question: Have you ever been Born Again?

Just in case I haven’t made myself clear, I’m not asking about your church membership, your baptism, your giving record, your Sunday School attendance, or your personal morality. Nicodemus had all those things down cold, but Jesus said to him, “You must be born again.”

One day this week, when I was at Evenglow, I decided to bring our 5-year-old Becky with me. I’ll never forget the image of watching these sweet seniors shaking Becky’s hand. The old giving grace to the young. A child teaching older adults about grace. Her young hand, with no wrinkles or blemishes, shaken by hands that have been weathered by both labor and time. This past Friday, I used this same passage of Scripture. As I looked at these sweet people in their 70s, 80s and 90s, I said to them, “It doesn’t matter how old you are, if you are not born again, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. You need to be born again, just like me and my daughter.”

If we want to go to heaven, we must, we must be born again. If we’re not, we won’t see the kingdom of God.

Before I say this next sentence, I want to make sure I have your attention: Nicodemus represents each one of us. He stands in the place of every good, decent, law-abiding, upstanding citizen who ever lived. He was a good man who knew about God but he didn’t know God personally. That’s the enigma of his personality. His story reminds us that religion is good, but it’s not good enough.

You see, if our relationship with God depended upon being righteous and good, we would never make it. Our best efforts simply aren’t enough. We can’t work our way to heaven. Here’s what the new birth teaches me. I cannot get to heaven on my strength. I can’t just make some incremental changes and hope that it will be enough.

I need a brand-new start, a fresh beginning. In short, I need God’s grace. Grace is God giving to me something that I cannot obtain on my own. Grace is being accepted by God even though I do not deserve it, even though I am not worthy of it. The Bible teaches that I receive grace on the basis of my belief and trust in Jesus as my sin payment. I’m granted grace when I’m given new life through the new birth.

Be Like Nic

We need what Nicodemus needed because we stand in exactly the same place. That brings me to the central issue of this sermon. If you want what Nicodemus found, you must do what Nicodemus did.

1. He admitted his need. He did that by taking a personal inventory of his life and realizing that despite all his best efforts, something vital was missing on the inside. In summing up his virtues -- which were many and genuine -- this good man came to the conclusion that he needed “something else” in his life. He didn’t know what it was, he couldn’t put his finger on it, but deep within he sensed that his religion -- sincere though it was -- could not fill the gaping hole in his heart.

I pause to say that nothing else matters until you come to the same conclusion about your life. As long as you go blithely on your merry way thinking that everything is OK with your life, you can never be born again. It simply cannot happen to you because you do not feel your need for God’s intervention in your life. You must start in the same place that Nicodemus started -- with a sense of your own desperate need of God.

2. He came to Jesus personally. Nicodemus came on his own, by himself, individually, man to man. He sought and found the Son of God. He could not have sent someone in his place. Nor could a committee have met his need. Salvation involves a personal, individual commitment of your heart to Jesus Christ. No one can do it for you and you can’t make that commitment for anyone else.

3. He trusted Christ completely. I realize the text doesn’t reveal to us the fact of his conversion but I think it may be implied from the fact that Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea take the dead body of our Lord down from the cross in John 19:39. This means he had “crossed the line” and was now willing to identify with Jesus publicly.

The most famous verse in the Bible -- John 3:16 -- occurs in this passage and promises eternal life to those who “believe” in Jesus Christ. To believe means to rely on Christ so completely -- to trust Him so totally -- that you are casting all that you are, and all that

you have, and all that you hope to become, on Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Nicodemus did this. So must you if you want to be born again.

Let me come back to the question I asked at the beginning: Are you a real Christian or just a religious person?

- A religious person goes through the routine but doesn't have the reality inside.
- A real Christian knows Jesus Christ because he or she has been born again.

Someone challenged me 20 years ago by telling me that he did not think I was a real Christian...

My Testimony

Presentation of the Gospel

Communion

John 3:1-18

Cracking the DaVinci Code: Searching for Holy Grace

Brian Bill 5/21/06

Are you drawn to history or mystery, or both? What we've established in our series called "Cracking the DaVinci Code," is that while Dan Brown has honed in on the human need for mystery, his history is more hysterical than anything else. I don't plan on seeing the movie but I did enjoy this review on CNN.com: "The movie did receive some lukewarm praise, but the majority of the response was highly critical. One scene during the film, meant to be serious, elicited prolonged laughter from the audience. There was no applause when the credits rolled; instead, a few catcalls and hisses broke the silence. The Hollywood Reporter headlined its review, 'Da Vinci Code an unwieldy, bloated puzzle'" (as posted on my blog, 5/17/06, www.pontiacbible.org/brian). When I read this quote to my friend Lee on Thursday while we were working out, he had a very perceptive response: "It just goes to show you that the Bible is strong." I'm glad that people believe the Bible over Brown.

Reporter Jeffrey Weiss from the Dallas Morning News wrote: "Experts agree: Dan Brown gets most of his facts wrong. Religion scholars have been whacking the 'Da Vinci Code' like a low-hanging piñata" (www.dallasnews.com). We've taken some whacks as well this past month as we've focused on how to separate fact from fiction. We've also studied who Jesus really is, whether or not you can trust the Bible, and last week we learned how Mary Magdalene moved from chaos to conversion to community to contributing to commitment to communicating.

While many critics have criticized the "DaVinci Code," it has capitalized on the human desire to get in touch with something beyond what we can see. In addition, millions seem intrigued with mysterious conspiracies and alternative spirituality. Why is that? Simply put, it's because God has put within every person a desire to know Him according to Ecclesiastes 3:11: "He has also set eternity in the hearts of men..." I'd like to suggest this morning that we cannot settle for superficial answers to deeply spiritual questions. We've spent four weeks dismantling the deception found in the DaVinci Code; it's now time for us to look at why this stuff resonates with so many people.

Matt Lauer, co-host of the Today Show on NBC, did a special segment this week called, "On the Road with the Code." The idea was to search out some of the locations and interview some experts about Brown's controversial claims. I only watched one segment and was surprised that the museum director he interviewed at the Louvre in Paris had not even read the book but was quick to dismantle some of the myths. Matt Lauer also interviewed the major players in the movie. I was struck by this comment made by actor Sir Ian McKellen, who plays Sir Leigh Teabing, after he was asked whether the movie should have a disclaimer indicating that it is fiction: "Well, I've often thought that the Bible should have a disclaimer in the front saying, 'this is fiction'" (www.msnbc.com).

I'd like to give a couple disclaimers this morning. First, my own views don't have any value; no fiction found in a book has lasting benefit; and nothing in a movie has merit if it is not based on the Bible. Friend, the Bible is not fiction; it is fact! My second disclaimer is that I'm "DaVincied out," if that's a phrase. While we've taken a detailed look at the claims in the book over the last four weeks, this morning we're going to go on the road, not with the code, but with Christ Himself. Specifically, we're going to listen to a clip between a man who was searching for spiritual secrets and how he found them by interviewing the Savior.

Instead of going to a museum, we're going to go to the Master; instead of cracking a code of conspiracy, we're going to learn about the mode of conversion. This man's name is Nicodemus and he was trying to solve the puzzle of life. I'm sure Matt Lauer was thrilled to be able to interview some famous people; this inquisitive individual had to be ecstatic to finally be alone with Jesus and be

free to ask him any question he wanted. Nick wants in on the secret to spirituality. Jesus reveals three secrets from this passage.

1. Being good is never good enough because it's not about religion; it's about rebirth. Please turn in your Bibles to John 3:1: "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council." Here's what we know about Nicodemus. First, he was a Pharisee. In the first century the Pharisees were widely respected for their intense piety and deep scholarship. These men had taken a solemn vow to devote their entire life to keeping the Ten Commandments. That meant studying the Scriptures diligently, praying two hours a day, giving a tithe of all they possessed, and being concerned about morality. There were never more than 6000 Pharisees because they were a select group and not many men would make that kind of personal sacrifice.

My new pastor friend from California, Rene Schlaepfer (www.tlc.org) shared some insights in a recent sermon: "Their main rule book was called the Mishnah...there are 24 chapters in the Mishnah about how to keep the Sabbath. But even that wasn't enough. They had to interpret the Mishnah so they wrote something called the Talmud which interpreted what the Mishnah had to say about keeping the Ten Commandments. For example, in the Talmud there are 128 pages of interpretation about the 24 chapters on just the keeping of one command, the Sabbath." The Pharisees made a couple basic and very tragic errors – they externalized their religion and they believed that if they just worked hard enough they could make their way to heaven. Some of you may be on that same road this morning.

Second, Nicodemus was a member of the select 70-member Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin. As you might expect, only the leading men were elected to such a prestigious position. In 20th century terms, he would be like a college professor, a judge on the Supreme Court, a United States Senator, and a bishop in the church – all rolled into one. The Sanhedrin had religious authority over every Jewish man in the world.

Third, we know from verse 10 that Jesus refers to Nicodemus as "Israel's teacher." He's a member of the 6,000-strong super spiritual society and he's one of 70 lofty leaders and now we read that he is the instructor of Israel. He was the top dog religiously, morally, socially, and politically...and yet something was missing. Friend, whatever your status is today, don't let it keep you from searching for the Savior.

John 3:2 reads, "He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.'" Since he came to Jesus after dark, we could say he was "Nick at Night." Why did Nick come at night? Perhaps because he knew that Jesus was controversial and he couldn't risk being seen publicly. Or maybe he wished to have time for a lengthy personal interview. There's probably more to the story than that. The fact that he risked his own position to come to Jesus speaks of his own personal need. One could also argue that the word "night" is a symbol of his own spiritual condition because at this point he is still in the dark. Notice what he said, "We know you are a teacher who has come from God." Nicodemus here admits that Jesus has been sent from God. He is no mere man; He's more than just a teacher from Galilee. Don't miss the point about how accessible Jesus is. No doubt He had put in a full day and yet He was fully engaged with Nicodemus. Arthur Pink says that there is no unacceptable time for a sinner to seek the Savior.

That brings us to the answer Jesus gives to this cultured, educated, well-respected religious leader. Actually, it's startling and abrupt and is not in response to a stated question, though it is the question Nicodemus is really asking in his heart. It's just a statement of truth delivered without any small talk. Look at John 3:3, "In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'" Jesus always gets right to the point, doesn't He? Jesus elevates the importance of what He is about to say by the use of "I tell you the truth." In some versions we read, "Verily, verily." Jesus only uses this statement when He is about to say something incredibly profound and monumental.

In the original language the phrase "born again" has a double meaning. The word means "again" and "above." Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the only way to find what he is looking for is to be born again from above. The word "unless" signals a necessary condition. In other words, there is only one way (see John 14:6). Despite all his learning, Nicodemus is utterly baffled by this thought. Instead of just trying to reform himself, he needs to be reborn. In this one sentence the Savior sweeps away all that this religious man stood for.

In verse 4 we see that Nick is ready to head back to the Delivery Room. "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Nicodemus misses the point – Jesus is not talking about a second physical birth, but about a completely different kind of birth – a spiritual birth. Your physical birth introduces you to the physical world. But if you want to enter the kingdom of God (the world of spiritual reality), you need a spiritual birth.

Being good is never good enough because it's not about religion; it's about rebirth. That leads to the second secret...

2. Being good is never good enough because it's not about systems; it's about the Spirit. Jesus replies in verses 5-6 that "unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

The water Jesus speaks of here symbolizes purification. This is how Nicodemus would have understood it from Ezekiel 36:25-26: "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you."

Jesus is also saying that trying harder doesn't work because flesh cannot achieve lasting fruit. It's only the Spirit that can affect permanent change. It's not about rules and regulations and religion because none of this can give you a new heart and a new spirit. I like what Martin Luther King's daughter Bernice has said: "It makes no difference how much education, money, prestige, power or pleasure you acquire; if the time and invitation are right, you will go back to your old nature. That's why you have to be born again; because only when you are born again do you have the new nature of God planted in your heart."

To make sure that Nick does not misunderstand this truth, Jesus adds an important fact in verse 7: "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" Notice the imperative of that statement. The phrase, "You must be born again" stands in front of the gate of heaven. The new birth is not optional for any of us. Jesus didn't say, "I recommend that you be born again" or "You should be born again if after investigation it seems to meet your personal need" or "I think it would be a good idea to be born again." No! Jesus used the urgent language of forceful command: You must be born again. In addition, the word "you" is in the plural, meaning that this message is for each of us, not just Nicodemus.

Before we go on, let me remind you that Jesus spoke these words not to some immoral outcast, but to one of the most religious men of his day. By all human standards Nicodemus was a very good person and certainly a man we would admire for his intense devotion to God. Yet Jesus told him, "You must be born again." If he needed to be born again, what about you and me? Do any of you have the religious pedigree that Nicodemus had? I doubt it. The truth of the matter is that we are much less religious than Nicodemus was. If he needed to be born again, we surely do as well. Question: Have you ever been Born Again?

Just in case I haven't made myself clear, I'm not asking about your church membership, your baptism, your giving record, your Sunday School attendance, or your personal morality. Nicodemus had all those things down cold, but Jesus said to him, "You must be born again."

If we want to go to heaven, we must be born again. If we're not, we won't see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was a good man who knew about God but he didn't know God personally. That's the enigma of his personality. His search reminds us that being good is not good enough because it's not about systems it's about the Spirit.

I need a brand-new start, a fresh beginning. In short, I need God's grace. Grace is God giving to me something that I cannot obtain on my own. Grace is being accepted by God even though I do not deserve it, even though I am not worthy of it. The Bible teaches that I receive grace on the basis of my belief and trust in Jesus as my sin payment. I'm granted grace when I'm given new life through the new birth. If you're looking for mystery, look at verse 8: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." In Greek the word for wind and spirit is the same word. Jesus is saying that the Spirit is like the wind. That analogy makes sense for us in the wind tunnel of central Illinois. The Spirit is similar to the wind in several ways:

- The Spirit is real, but you can't see Him. Nicodemus' religion was about visible things; those born of the Spirit operate in the invisible realm.
- The effects of the Spirit are visible, but His ways are unexplainable. Just like we don't know where the wind comes from and when it will come again, so too the Spirit blows as He wishes. We know He is working by seeing the effects.
- He's powerful, and you can't control Him. Nicodemus could control his religious life but like the wind, the Spirit is too powerful to contain. The spiritual life is not about trying to gain more control but about giving up control to God.
- He's invigorating, and you can't copy Him. There's nothing like a breeze that blows through the mustiness of a closed up house and there's nothing like the Spirit as He breathes fresh life into musty lives.
- He's irresistible, and you can't stop Him. Just like a hurricane that levels a home, so too God's Spirit is unstoppable. He pummels the proud and unsettles the secure but only so that He can bring new birth. When we were in Biloxi several weeks ago we saw some beautiful flowers that apparently are not native to Mississippi. I'm told that the winds of the hurricane brought these seeds from hundreds of miles away from some tropical islands. The new birth is like a flower of the Holy Spirit's sovereign grace.

The first secret that Jesus reveals is that being good is never good enough because it's not about religion; it's about rebirth. The second secret is that being good is not good enough because it's not about systems; it's about the Spirit. That leads to the third truth...

3. Being good is never good enough because it's not about cracking a code; it's about making a commitment to Christ. Some of us think that we just need to find the correct career, or that right relationship, or buy that certain book and then we'll find what we're looking for. If we can just be "good," then things will be great. If we can just solve the puzzle we can finally find our purpose. Friend, let me tell you that you don't need to try a new principle; you need to trust in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

One pastor says that too many people are following the AVIS advice to just "try harder." That reminds me of the homeless man who was standing on a street corner in the Wall Street district of New York, begging for money. A corporate executive passes by and the homeless man reaches out and asks, "Change? Change?" The executive looks at him and says, "I'm trying! I'm trying!" The real issue is not to try harder but to trust in the One who has paid the price for us.

Drop down to verses 14-15: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." I love how Jesus speaks to Nicodemus here. In order to get him to see the importance of the new birth through the Spirit by a commitment to Christ, Jesus holds up his hero. As the giver of the Law that Nicodemus was set on keeping, Moses was his model. Jesus then retells the story found in Numbers 21, the last known miracle performed by Moses.

The Israelites were out in the desert dying because they had been bitten by poisonous snakes. This was part of God's judgment for their complaining spirits and rebellious attitudes. After scores of people died, they pled with Moses to pray that God would take the snakes away. Moses did so and God told him to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole and lift it up high. All the people had to do was simply look at this pole and they would be healed and would not die. They didn't have to do any good works, make an offering, or jump through any holy hoops. It doesn't make much sense but all they had to do was look at the pole. Some may have thought this was too easy and maybe they chose to ignore God's provision. If they did, they died!

Friends, we are all dying of a poison in our souls because we are sin-bitten rebels. The only antidote is to accept the sacrifice of God's Son on the lifted up Cross. He experienced the fiery venom of sin in order to deliver us from it. 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The key is to believe in Him to have eternal life. When you look to Him with the eyes of faith, His sacrifice on the cross will be applied to your life. If you don't, the pervasive poison of sin will consume you.

Listen to these very familiar yet forceful words from John 3:16-18: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." God's love is so intense that in His sweet plan He gave what was most dear to Him. He did it all so that we could be saved from condemnation through belief in His Son. To believe means to rely on Christ so completely that you are casting all that you are, and all that you have, and all that you hope to become, on Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, your Forgiver and Leader. In John 1:12, we read about the importance of receiving what God has done for us: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." The key then is to believe and to receive which results in rebirth. To reject Him results in condemnation.

When I was in college I attended a Bible Study that changed my life. The first week I went they were studying John 1 and I just listened. The next week I went and argued with everything they said about John 2. The third week I almost fell out of my chair when I read the words that Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3 about the necessity of being born again. I didn't know much about the Bible but I knew the words in "red" were important. The guys in the group explained that what Jesus did for me was like a gift that I had to receive. Until I received it, salvation would not become activated in my life. That very night, after I finished reading the entire Gospel of John, I believed and received and was born again and became a child of God. I finally understood that I needed to respond to what Jesus had done for me.

There was a certain Professor of Religion named Dr. Christianson, a studious man who taught at a small college in the western United States. Dr. Christianson taught the required survey course in Christianity at this particular institution. Every student was required to take this course his or her freshman year, regardless of his or her major. Although Dr. Christianson tried hard to communicate the essence of the gospel in his class, he found that most of his students looked upon the course as nothing but required drudgery. Despite his best efforts, most students refused to take Christianity seriously.

This year, Dr. Christianson had a special student named Steve. Steve was only a freshman, but was studying with the intent of going onto seminary for the ministry. Steve was popular, he was well liked, and he was an imposing physical specimen. He was now the starting center on the school football team, and was the best student in the professor's class. One day, Dr. Christianson asked Steve to stay after class so he could talk with him.

"How many push-ups can you do?" Steve said, "I do about 200 every night." "200? That's pretty good, Steve!" Dr. Christianson said. "Do you think you could do 300?" Steve replied, "I don't know... I've never done 300 at a time." "Do you think you could?" again asked Dr. Christianson. "Well, I can try," said Steve. "Can you do 300 in sets of 10? I have a class project in mind and I need you to

do about 300 push-ups in sets of ten for this to work. Can you do it? I need you to tell me you can do it," said the professor.

Steve said, "Well... I think I can...yeah, I can do it." Dr. Christianson said, "Good! I need you to do this on Friday. Let me explain what I have in mind." Friday came and Steve got to class early and sat in the front of the room. When class started, the professor pulled out a big box of donuts. No, these weren't the normal kinds of donuts, they were the extra fancy BIG kind, with cream centers and frosting swirls. Everyone was pretty excited it was Friday, the last class of the day, and they were going to get an early start on the weekend with a party in Dr. Christianson's class.

Dr. Christianson went to the first girl in the first row and asked, "Cynthia, do you want to have one of these donuts?" Cynthia said, "Yes." Dr. Christianson then turned to Steve and asked, "Steve, would you do ten push-ups so that Cynthia can have a donut?" "Sure." Steve jumped down from his desk to do a quick ten. Then Steve again sat in his desk. Dr. Christianson put a donut on Cynthia's desk.

Dr. Christianson then went to Joe, the next person, and asked, "Joe, do you want a donut?" Joe said, "Yes." Dr. Christianson asked, "Steve would you do ten push-ups so Joe can have a donut?" Steve did ten push-ups, Joe got a donut. And so it went, down the first aisle, Steve did ten push-ups for every person before they got their donut.

Walking down the second aisle, Dr. Christianson came to Scott. Scott was on the basketball team, and in as good condition as Steve. He was very popular and never lacking for female companionship. When the professor asked, "Scott do you want a donut?" Scott's reply was, "Well, can I do my own push-ups?" Dr. Christianson said, "No, Steve has to do them." Then Scott said, "Well, I don't want one then." Dr. Christianson shrugged and then turned to Steve and asked, "Steve, would you do ten push-ups so Scott can have a donut he doesn't want?" With perfect obedience Steve started to do ten push-ups. Scott said, "HEY! I said I didn't want one!" Dr. Christianson said, "Look! This is my classroom, my class, my desks, and these are my donuts. Just leave it on the desk if you don't want it." And he put a donut on Scott's desk.

Now by this time, Steve had begun to slow down a little. He just stayed on the floor between sets because it took too much effort to be getting up and down. You could start to see a little perspiration coming out around his brow. Dr. Christianson started down the third row. Now the students were beginning to get a little angry. Dr. Christianson asked Jenny, "Jenny, do you want a donut?" Sternly, Jenny said, "No." Then Dr. Christianson asked Steve, "Steve, would you do ten more push-ups so Jenny can have a donut that she doesn't want?" Steve did ten...Jenny got a donut.

By now, a growing sense of uneasiness filled the room. The students were beginning to say "No" and there were all these uneaten donuts on the desks. Steve also had to really put forth a lot of extra effort to get these push-ups done for each donut. There began to be a small pool of sweat on the floor beneath his face, his arms and brow were beginning to get red because of the physical effort involved.

Dr. Christianson asked Robert, who was the most vocal unbeliever in the class, to watch Steve do each push-up to make sure he did the full ten push-ups in a set because he couldn't bear to watch all of Steve's work for all of those uneaten donuts. He sent Robert over to where Steve was so Robert could count the set and watch Steve closely.

Dr. Christianson started down the fourth row. During his class, however, some students from other classes had wandered in and sat down on the steps along the radiators that ran down the sides of the room. When the professor realized this, he did a quick count and saw that now there were 34 students in the room. He started to worry if Steve would be able to make it. Dr. Christianson went on to the next person and the next and the next. Near the end of that row, Steve was really having a rough time. He was taking a lot more time to complete each set. Steve asked Dr. Christianson, "Do I have to make my nose touch on each one?" Dr. Christianson thought for a moment, "Well, they're your push-ups. You are in charge now. You can do them any way that you want." And Dr. Christianson went on.

A few moments later, Jason, a recent transfer student, came to the room and was about to come in when all the students yelled in one voice, "NO! Don't come in! Stay out!" Jason didn't know what was going on. Steve picked up his head and said, "No, let him come." Professor Christianson said, "You realize that if Jason comes in you will have to do ten push-ups for him?" Steve said, "Yes, let him come in. Give him a donut." Dr. Christianson said, "Okay, Steve, I'll let you get Jason's out of the way right now. Jason, do you want a donut?" Jason, new to the room, hardly knew what was going on. "Yes," he said, "give me a donut." "Steve, will you do ten push-ups so that Jason can have a donut?" Steve did ten push-ups very slowly and with great effort. Jason, bewildered, was handed a donut and sat down.

Dr. Christianson finished the fourth row, and then started on those visitors seated by the heaters. Steve's arms were now shaking with each push-up in a struggle to lift himself against the force of gravity. By this time sweat was profusely dropping off of his face, there was no sound except his heavy breathing; there was not a dry eye in the room.

The very last two students in the room were two young women, both cheerleaders, and very popular. Dr. Christianson went to Linda,

the second to last, and asked, "Linda, do you want a doughnut?" Linda said, very sadly, "No, thank you." Professor Christianson quietly asked, "Steve, would you do ten push-ups so that Linda can have a donut she doesn't want?" Grunting from the effort, Steve did ten very slow push-ups for Linda.

Then Dr. Christianson turned to the last girl, Susan. "Susan, do you want a donut?" Susan, with tears flowing down her face, began to cry. "Dr. Christianson, why can't I help him?" Dr. Christianson, with tears of his own, said, "No, Steve has to do it alone, I have given him this task and he is in charge of seeing that everyone has an opportunity for a donut whether they want it or not. When I decided to have a party this last day of class, I looked my grade book. Steve here is the only student with a perfect grade. Everyone else has failed a test, skipped class, or offered me inferior work. Steve told me that in football practice, when a player messes up he must do push-ups. I told Steve that none of you could come to my party unless he paid the price by doing your push-ups. He and I made a deal for your sakes."

"Steve, would you do ten push-ups so Susan can have a donut?" As Steve very slowly finished his last push-up, with the understanding that he had accomplished all that was required of him, having done 350 push-ups, his arms buckled beneath him and he fell to the floor.

Dr. Christianson turned to the room and said, "And so it was, that our Savior, Jesus Christ, on the cross, plead to the Father, 'into thy hands I commend my spirit.' With the understanding that He had done everything that was required of Him, He yielded up His life. And like some of those in this room, many of us leave the gift on the desk, uneaten." Two students helped Steve up off the floor and to a seat, physically exhausted, but wearing a thin smile. "Well done, good and faithful servant," said the professor, adding "Not all sermons are preached in words."

Turning to his class, the professor said, "My wish is that you might understand and fully comprehend all the riches of grace and mercy that have been given to you through the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He spared not only His Begotten Son, but gave Him up for us all, for the whole world, now and forever. Whether or not we choose to accept His gift to us, the price has been paid. Wouldn't you be foolish and ungrateful to leave it lying on the desk?"

Nicodemus didn't leave it on the desk of the Teacher. While we don't know if he became born again at the end of his interview with Jesus in John 3, we do know that he stood up in front of the religious leaders and defended Christ in John 7:51: "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" Then, after Jesus died, Nicodemus, who by then had come to faith in Christ, partnered with Joseph of Arimathea and helped to bury the body of Jesus. We read in John 19:39 that Nick brought seventy-five pounds of spices to anoint the body of Jesus.

What we see here is a process. He first heard about the new birth, and then he started taking steps toward Christ and finally He crossed the line and declared publicly that he was a follower. Recognizing that the Spirit blows where He will, I wonder this morning if some of you are ready to respond to the invitation to be born again and become a member of God's family.

I like how Josh McDowell shares the truth about Jesus' family in his book called, "The Da Vinci Code: A Quest for Answers" (Page 75): "In fact," said Chris, leaning closer, "here's a little tidbit for you...while the Bible is utterly silent on whether Jesus married and had children, it is utterly clear that we – every one of us...can become children of God, adopted into his family with all the rights and inheritance that children enjoy. To me, that seems to be a greater mystery than the Da Vinci Code."

I entitled this message, "Searching for Holy Grace" as a word play off the search for the Holy Grail. The Grail has traditionally been thought to be the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper, which according to tradition was then used to collect Jesus' blood when he was on the cross. Dan Brown on the other hand, redefines the grail to actually be a person. Which is it?

In the movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," Indy has to save his dying father by selecting the "correct" Holy Grail. The problem is that he is faced with a table loaded with hundreds to choose from. He starts sweating as he struggles to pick the right one, the only one that will save his dad. Instead of picking the most beautiful or expensive or the biggest or the most obvious one, he chooses a very plain, easily overlooked cup, which turns out to be the right one. In the end, his dad is healed and recovers.

Friend, you can search in a lot of places but you will only find what you're looking for when you surrender to the Savior. It's time to admit that you'll never be good enough and it's time to receive the invitation. The Da Vinci Code asserts that the truth about Jesus Christ has been hidden from the world by a select secret society. Ephesians 1:9-14 says that the secret is out and the mystery has been solved: God's secret plan is centered on Christ, designed long ago according to His good pleasure: At the right time He will bring everything together under the authority of Christ. Friend, there is no secret code to break because it has been revealed by Jesus. Here it is: "You must be born again."

- Being good is never good enough because it's not about religion; it's about rebirth.
- Being good is never good enough because it's not about systems; it's about the Spirit.

- Being good is never good enough because it's not about cracking a code; it's about making a commitment to Christ.

If you're ready to receive Christ, I'm going to invite you to come down front and pray with me or Pastor Dick or one of the Elders while Pastor Jeff sings a song called "The Invitation." This is your time to publicly identify with Jesus, just like Nicodemus did, and to let the world know that you want to receive holy grace. Let me just say that there is nothing magical about coming down but it may help you obey Romans 10:9-10: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

As you come down, we don't have any donuts for you but we do have a free book called, "An Anchor for the Soul" that will help get you started on your spiritual journey.

The Invitation (Pastor Jeff)

This is your invitation

Come just the way you are

Come find what your soul has been longing for

Come find your peace

Come join the feast

Come in

This is your invitation

Closing Challenge

1. If you've not been born again, this is what you must do. You've received the invitation; now you must RSVP. Let me say it once again just in case you missed it. Jesus says to you: "You must be born again."

2. If you have already been born again, it's time to move towards maturity. 1 Peter 2:2: "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation." Pastor Dick will help us next Sunday in that regard as he asks and answers the question: "What is God Looking For?" from John 15. Then, two weeks from today we'll begin our summer sermon series from Romans 2-4 called "By Faith Alone."

John 3:16-18

What's Love Got to Do With It?

Brian Bill 12/20/09

I love those words that Dan just sang: "What kind of King would come so small, from glory to a humble stall? That dirty manger is my heart, too; I'll make a royal throne for you."

I want to begin this morning with some group interaction. Turn to the person next to you and answer this question: "What kinds of things have disappeared in the last ten years?" Or to ask it another way: "What every-day-kind-of-stuff has become extinct in the last decade?"

Here are six things that have disappeared in the last decade...

- * Big phone books – people are using the web for phone numbers now.
- * Lick-able stamps – this is a good change.
- * Foldable maps – thanks to MapQuest and GPS, they are mostly a thing of the past.
- * Floppy disks – this one disk can only hold about half of one mp3 song.
- * Cassettes – sales have gone from a high of 442 million in 1990 to just 274,000 thousand in 2007. I was going to bring up one of my old 8-Track tapes but then you would know that I'm a child of the 60s.
- * The Chicago Bears – ok, that was a low blow, but I couldn't resist.

With Christmas less than a week away, retail analysts have identified one sector of the market that is emerging this shopping season. According to the Consumer Electronics Association, 80% of adults say they intend to purchase some type of technology as a gift this year, the highest number ever.

That ties into an article on Pantagraph.com this week called, "Ten Years from Now: When iPhones will Be Antiques." I'm going to read part of the opening and the closing paragraph: "Ten years ago, we would have been blown away by a cell phone with far more computing power and memory than the average PC had in 1999...Ten years from now, the iPhone and its ilk will be antiques. Over the next decade, the evolution of computing and the Internet will produce faster, increasingly intelligent devices...The 2000s saw Google become one of the world's most powerful companies because it helped us get a grip on the sprawling content of the Web. What we will need next, however, is a company that doesn't just organize data. Google, or the next Google, will have to synthesize all that information and help us understand what it all means."

While there's no way I can even come close to synthesizing all the information that's out there, I do want to take a stab at synthesizing the story of Christmas. The Children's Choir captured it well: "His love will last for all eternity." At its heart, Christmas means that no matter what else will disappear in the next decade, God's love will last forever.

Angels Out in the Field

Because the Christmas story is saturated with the supernatural, some of us miss the meaning because we just skim by this season on a superficial level. While it's a stretch for those of us who know John and Nathan to think of them as angelic, what they portrayed helps us to consider what Christmas may have been like from an angel's perspective.

The news about Jesus becoming an "earthling" is so incredible that only angels could be entrusted as the appropriate messengers. No earthly channels of communication or even technology could be relied upon to get this amazing message out because no human person could possibly be persuasive enough.

I want to draw our attention for a few moments to three activities of angels – I don't think they make it snow but here are some things we do know.

1. They love praising the Savior. Luke 2:8: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." In the midst of the mundane, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared. Into the darkness of a silent night came the brightness of the glory of the Lord. I'm sure the shepherds were rubbing their eyes and shaking in their sandals. In fact, the word "terrified" means that they were alarmed and agitated. The angel in our drama was on to something when he said, "When they get a load of His holiness they're just gonna keel over by the millions!"

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid.' The reason they did not need to be afraid is because the messenger was bringing "good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

As the shepherds are trying to handle the message from this one messenger, they are taken aback again in verses 13-14: "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.'" The word "suddenly" tells us that the heavenly host came unexpectedly and without warning. The phrase "great company" means there were so many that it was impossible to count. The phrase "heavenly host" refers to the Lord's army in other passages of Scripture. The shepherds watched as heaven opened up and they literally saw an entire militia of messengers, hundreds and thousands of angelic warriors worshipping God.

First, angels love praising the Savior and second, they love peering into salvation.

2. They love peering into salvation. Did you know that angels are very curious about Christmas? In fact, they have studied salvation and are stunned by it. 1 Peter 1:12 says that "Even angels long to look into these things." It's like they're on the edge of their seats, or peering over a railing to see the drama of how the sacrifice of the Son solves the sin problem for people on this planet. And this phrase is in the present tense, which means that they are still studying salvation right here and now. There's an audience of angels watching to see what your response is going to be today.

Angels don't understand everything about forgiveness because they can't experience it but my guess is that they're dumbfounded when people deny and doubt or just get complacent about Christmas.

Angels love praising the Savior, they love peering into salvation, and finally, they love partying when a sinner is saved.

3. They love partying when a sinner is saved. When you turn from the path you've been on and receive all that Jesus has for you, Luke 15:10 tells us that "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents." The angels are ready to

throw a party on your behalf but you must first receive Jesus as your personal Savior.

At the heart of Christmas is a gift heralded by the angels. It's a present that must be received; a gift that must be opened. And when it is, rejoicing breaks out in the heavenly places.

A Strange Love

The title of today's service is "What's Love Got to Do with It?" Pastor Jeff toyed with the idea of having our two angels do a Tina Turner rendition but we decided against that. But friends, listen. Love has everything to do with Christmas because that's what's behind the sending of the Savior to the planet with the people. Love came down at Christmas.

Before I go much further, I want you to know how much you've been prayed for, even before you came today. PBC people have been praying ten minutes twice a week for each of you. We had people sign up for every day of the week and some have been praying every single day. I went through and counted the names and was weeping when I was finished. When I added it all up, 223 people have been praying for you! I see names of children, teenagers and adults, praying as early as 5:00 in the morning all the way up to midnight, each day of the week. One person even made his own time slot of 3:30 in the morning!

I want to share some Christmas truth that can revitalize your life. It's really the back-story of the birth of the "baby people." Are you ready for it? You may want to sit on the edge of your seat like the angels do. Here it is. There's not one person in this auditorium today that is not loved by God. God loves you with an out-of-this-world kind of love – you can't do anything to earn it and you can't do anything to get more of it. It doesn't matter what you've done or what you're thinking about doing because as we heard in the drama, God has this weird people-thing going on. 1 John 4:9: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."

Max Lucado says that "there's nothing you can do to make God love you any more than He already does and there is nothing you can do to make Him love you any less than He already does." God loves us unconditionally and absolutely, even though we're odd creatures. There's another quote that captures Christmas for me: "God loves you just the way you are, but He doesn't want you to stay the way you are."

No matter what else will disappear in the next decade, God's love will last forever.

When Tim Tebow, the quarterback for the Florida Gators was playing in the National Championship Game a year ago, he had "John 3:16" written in the eye black under his eyes. Amazingly, 90 million people Googled this reference to find out what it says. This verse is "Pure Genius" so let it soak in as I read it slowly: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I see two parts to this verse...God's giving and our receiving.

1. God loved the world so much that He gave His Son. That's the birth of Jesus. God loves, therefore He gave.

The second half explains the "why" behind the giving of the Son.

2. That whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life. That's the second birth. We believe, therefore we live.

In the carol, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," (no, that's not Harold the angel), one line really stands out to me: "Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth." Just as each of us have been born once physically, so too, we need to be born spiritually as Jesus says in John 3:3: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Listen. The angels praised when Christ was born and right now they are peering over the heavenly railing as they watch what will happen right here, right now, when some of you will receive the gift of salvation. When you do, they will throw a party on your behalf. They rejoiced at the birth of Christ and they still explode with joy when people today experience the second birth.

Let me ask you a question: Is it easier to give gifts or to receive them? Let me see a show of hands. It's hard for some of us to receive a gift from God because many of us think we have to earn it or somehow deserve it. John 1:12 says, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." You see, Christmas becomes truly Christmas when we truly receive what Christmas offers.

Allow me to demonstrate. I have a present here and I'd like to give this gift to one of you. Who wants it? If you really want it, you're going to have to do something to get it. What do you need to do? That's right, you need to receive it. You need to take the gift in order for it to really be yours. Do you like the gift? I gave what is close to my heart – a chunk of cheese! Don't try to re-gift it either.

God's love will last forever but you must respond and receive His love before you die or you'll live without his love for eternity in a place called Hell. Let's listen to John 3:16 again while I emphasize one phrase: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and

only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” You probably didn’t come to a Christmas service to hear about Hell but I must tell you about it instead of being silent and wondering if you’ll end up going there.

I love John 3:17 because it shows us that God doesn’t want us to be condemned this Christmas: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” God’s all about saving people – that’s why He sent His Son. And John 3:18 reinforces the necessity of belief as the way to avoid condemnation: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” Friends, that means that in order to go to Hell, you simply do nothing. The gift of a Savior is for sinners. Look at the person next to you – he or she is a sinner. And the person sitting next to him or her is a sinner – that’s you.

The sweet baby in the cradle came to be our sin substitute on the cross and it’s the love of God that made all this happen – Jesus came to die for you, in your place, to pay the price for your sins. At the center of Christmas is a bloody Cross.

There’s a wonderful word found in both John 3:16 and John 3:18. It’s the word “whoever.” After all, who here is not a whoever? (That sounds like a Dr. Seuss question, doesn’t it?) Jesus can save you no matter who you are or what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter what your denominational background is or if you’ve never really gone to church before.

I’d like to talk heart-to-heart with you right now. Try to forget about the person you came with or anyone else sitting around you. Just as the angels wanted good seats, in a similar way you are in a good seat today because you are here by God’s design. This is between you and God. If you know that you’re a sinner and you can’t save yourself and if you’re ready to not just believe in Christmas but to actually receive the Christ of Christmas, I would love to lead you in a prayer. It’s time for some of you to welcome Him to your world. I like to think of it as A-B-C.

Admit that you’re a sinner.

Believe and receive Jesus Christ into your life.

If you’re ready, pray this prayer silently with me right now. If you’ve already received Jesus, would you pray for those around you who haven’t yet? “God, thanks for demonstrating your love by sending Jesus at Christmas. As great as that gift is, I feel so unworthy. I admit that I’m a sinner and with your help I want to turn from the way I’ve been living. I understand that Jesus came in the cradle in order to die on the cross for my sins. I thank you that He was raised from the dead to give me new life. I now transfer my trust to Him, and ask you to forgive my sins. I believe and I want to receive Jesus Christ into my life. And if there’s anything in my life that you want to get rid of, please do it. I ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The “C” of the ABCs is to confess Jesus Christ to others. If you prayed that prayer and meant it, I wonder if you have the courage to stand right now as a way to identify yourself with the Christ of Christmas. We want to have the opportunity to cheer you on, joining in the party that the angels are now throwing for you.

What If?

Biblically understood, love is not just a feeling that fades in and out. Rather, love is an action, or more specifically, a commitment. As we wrap this up, it wouldn’t be right for us to just soak up God’s love and not be moved to action. 1 John 3:23 says, “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.” God deserves, desires and demands our best, therefore this Christmas let’s be conduits of His compassion to those around us.

How many of you have ever “re-gifted” an item? I want to encourage you to “re-gift” the gift of Jesus. Once you believe and receive, then give the gift of Him to others. Here are three ways we can do that.

1. Love the unlovely. Love all. Who do you just walk by? Is there anyone you’re ignoring? Step out of your comfort zone and cross your clique to reach out to someone who needs your love.
2. Forgive the unforgivable. If we ignore the unlovely, then we try to avoid the unforgivable. Is there any friction going on in your family? Is there any one you need to forgive? You say, “They don’t deserve it.” You’re right. They don’t. And neither do you because no one deserves forgiveness from God. Set them free this Christmas. You can give forgiveness because of what God has given you.
3. Lift up the down and out. It’s time for us to lift up those who are down and out by reaching out to the hungry and the thirsty and the cold and the sick and the imprisoned. In Matthew 25, Jesus says that He takes these acts of compassion very personally, for when we minister to the least of these, we minister to Him. It’s been thrilling to see what’s happening at PBC as people worship fully, spend less on themselves, give more to those in need and love all unconditionally – now that’s what I call a Christmas Conspiracy!

* What if we started a countercultural movement to care for those in need that stretched far beyond a few days in December?

- * What if we resisted the empire of consumerism and became content with what we have this Christmas?
- * What if the story of Jesus coming down compelled us to love those living on the margins of life?
- * What if we really cared for the widow, the orphan and those with AIDS?
- * What if we lived out our faith in our families?
- * What if Christmas was no longer about stuff but about the Savior?

Are you guys up for this challenge? I believe you are. Because no matter what else disappears this next decade, God's love will last forever.

John 4:1-42, Acts 9:36-42 Discovering You Style (Part 3)

Brian Bill 3/11/01

Prayer. The woman in the drama is in desperate need of healing. She needs to know that in spite of all that has happened, she can experience the awesome power of God's love and grace. There are people just like her all around us. Many went to church when they were younger and haven't been back in years. They need a certain type of believer to reach them. This woman probably wouldn't respond well to Peter's confrontational approach or Paul's intellectual style.

We've been learning that God has given each of us different evangelistic styles. It takes all kinds of Christians to reach all kinds of people. All people cannot witness the same way, but all people can witness some way. We're looking at six different styles of evangelism in the New Testament.

- Style Biblical Example Text
- Confrontational Peter Acts 2
- Intellectual Paul Acts 17
- Testimonial Blind Man John 9
- Interpersonal Matthew Luke 5
- Invitational Samaritan Woman John 4
- Serving Dorcas Acts 9

Before we tackle the final three styles, I just want to say that I wish I had done this series differently. Instead of combining these approaches in each sermon, it would have been better to take a separate one each week so that we could plumb the depths of these tremendous texts. For the sake of time, we'll have to put it into overdrive and just skim the surface this morning. Perhaps we'll come back to these powerful passages at another time.

The Interpersonal Approach

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 5. Sitting in a tollbooth was a man named Levi, who is also known as Matthew, which means "gift of God." This gift of God had become one of the hated tax collectors.

He was a Jew who had been hired by the Roman government. Tax collectors were also called "publicans," or public servants, and were considered to be on the lowest rung of the social ladder because of their shady dealings. Levi's job was to estimate the worth of goods that flowed through the city in order to levy a tax. Unfortunately, this estimated tax was usually much higher than the goods were worth. As a result, these agents were known as extortionists. They operated on a commission system and the commission was whatever they could get away with.

Levi would have liked the new simplified 1040 form I heard about recently:

- Line A: HOW MUCH DID YOU MAKE LAST YEAR? _____
- Line B: HOW MUCH DO YOU HAVE LEFT? _____
- Line C: SEND IN AMOUNT ON LINE B.

Levi was considered a thief and a traitor, because he was working for a foreign government. Tax collectors were greatly despised because they served as constant reminders to the people that they were not free. To make matters worse, they were hated by their

Roman employers as well. Their only friends were fellow tax collectors and others on the same social scale like thieves and prostitutes.

Tax collectors made people mad and they caused people to be afraid of what might happen to them. We generally feel the same way about the IRS this time of year. According to a survey published in Harper's magazine, fully half of Americans would rather be mugged than audited by the IRS. The other 50% have probably never been audited!

According to the Rabbis, there was no hope for a man like Levi. He was excluded from all religious fellowship and couldn't even go into a synagogue. He probably felt like the woman in our drama did. As a customs agent, Levi had a very secure and prosperous job. His tax booth was a picture of his physical, emotional and spiritual life. Isolated by the Romans and Jews alike, he was materially rich, but spiritually bankrupt. In Luke 5:28 we read that when Jesus saw him checking tax returns, He looked at him and said just two words, "Follow me."

This probably wasn't the first encounter Matthew had ever had with Jesus. He no doubt had heard him speak before. His tax office was next to the sea of Galilee where Jesus had often taught large groups of people. Maybe Matthew had stood at the edge of one of those crowds and listened. And now, it was time for a divine encounter, when Jesus said, "Gift of God, today is the day I'd like for you to make the decision to get up and leave all this and attach yourself to me."

Luke 5:28 gives us his response: "And Levi got up, left everything and followed Him." In the original, this sentence reads this way: "And he left all, rose up, and followed him." This is amazing. Levi left everything even before he got up and went with Jesus! He decided in his heart to leave and then he bolted. He left a troubled job, a distracting lifestyle, and a stable income because Jesus was now his boss. He couldn't follow Him and stay at the tax collector's table.

If you would have asked Matthew at this point if he thought Jesus could use him as an evangelist, he would have said, "That's a good one. That's funnier than a flat tax." And yet, God does use him in a mighty way. Look at Luke 5:29: "Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them."

I picture Matthew brainstorming for a while as he asks himself, "What do I do well? Let's start there." An idea comes to his mind but he blows it off. "I throw great parties but I'm a Christ-follower now. I probably shouldn't be doing that anymore."

But he can't shake the idea and finally it hits him: "What if I threw a party with a purpose? Yeah. What if all my IRS buddies who love to party came and what if I invited Jesus and the guys? What if they all showed up and hung out at the punch bowl together? What if Jesus rubbed shoulders with my irreligious friends and what if some spiritual conversations took place? That would be cool."

His life was transformed and he wanted others to know about it. And so Matthew throws a party and the tax-gatherers come. His network of friends and acquaintances are eating nachos and cheese and watching the Wisconsin Badgers win the NCAA finals. As he looks around the room, he sees Peter talking to two of his buddies. Bring it on, Pete! And there's John over there - go get 'em John! And then he sees Jesus with a whole crowd of people around Him. "Tell 'em Jesus. Tell 'em."

We don't know how many of Matthew's friends became followers of Jesus as a result of his efforts. Maybe some did. Maybe none did. But that's not really the issue. What's important is that something has happened to Matthew. Do you see it? Matthew has become an evangelist. In a way that is appropriate to his personality and the situation, he's become a spokesperson for God.

That night was just the beginning. Being a tax collector, he was good with a pen and paper and for the next three years he recorded what he saw and heard of Jesus. His writings became known as the Gospel of Matthew.

Friends, there was nothing special about Matthew. He was a lot like us. He was an average, ordinary 9-5 working guy. All he had, really, was a positive personal experience with Christ, a heart for his lost friends and the guts to try to reach them. And that allowed God to use him in an extraordinary way ... just as God will use ordinary people like us ... if we'll let him.

Matthew didn't confront like Peter did or engage in a logical argument like Paul did. Nor is there any mention that he told his story like the Blind Man did. Those were simply not his styles. Instead, he relied on the relationships he had cultivated over the years and he invited people into his home. Those with the interpersonal style of evangelism specialize in building relationships with others. If that describes you, why don't you throw a purposeful party?

Here are some qualities that people with the interpersonal approach exhibit:

- Conversational
- Compassionate and Sensitive
- Friendship-oriented

As we've been discussing, each style has some blind spots. Here are some cautions to keep in mind:

- Don't value friendship over truth.
- Don't be overwhelmed by needs.
- Be patient.

The Invitational Approach

I love how God picks unlikely people to fulfill his mission! God delights in using ordinary people, even those of us who've messed up pretty bad, in surprising and exciting ways. Let's turn to John 4 to see how Jesus redeems and then releases someone into ministry.

Here we read about an encounter that Jesus had with a woman who had three black marks against her.

1. First of all, she was a Samaritan. Normally the Jewish people and the Samaritans avoided each other like the plague. In fact, instead of going through the land of Samaria when they were traveling, the Jews would walk all the way around the border, which made their trip three days longer, just so they wouldn't have contact with their despised neighbors. John 4:4 tells us that Jesus "...had to go through Samaria." Jesus had a divine appointment with this woman and he intended to keep it.
2. She was a woman. During the time of Jesus, men were not supposed to talk with women. That didn't stop Jesus from asking her for a drink of water in John 4:7.
3. She was immoral. As she came to the well to get some water, the deep emptiness and thirst in her heart was almost more than she could bear. She was an outcast because of the choices she had made. Jesus knows all about her when he says in verse 18: "...you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband..."

When she first started talking with Jesus, she tried to conceal the truth about herself. We're the same way, aren't we? Our natural tendency is to cover up and hide behind masks. When Jesus confronted her with the truth about her life, she was dumbfounded. But, instead of feeling condemned, she sensed that Jesus saw through her façade and loved her in spite of how she had been living.

After confronting the truth about herself, the woman is now confronted by the truth about Jesus. Take a look at John 4:19: "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet." She recognized that He had to be from God and so she asked him a question about the best place to worship. She wanted to argue religion, but Jesus wanted her to face reality. Jesus establishes that worship is more about attitude than location when he says in verse 24: "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

Verse 25 reveals the steps she is taking in her own understanding of who the Messiah is. She's in process. Jesus makes it very clear in verse 26: "I who speak to you am He." As she begins to put everything together, she's struck by the fact that Jesus knows everything about her and is still willing to talk to her. She can't get over it. She is so startled by this that she left her water jar by the well, ran back to her town and said to the people in verse 29: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

When she says, "come," it's really an imperative. It's a command that could be translated, "Come hither!" The word, "see" literally means, "to know." She compellingly invites everyone to come and know Jesus. Actually, she's both excited and a bit reserved when she says, "This can't be the Christ, can it?" She knows these people think of her as trash so she asks them to check it out for themselves.

She doesn't want them to just hear about Jesus, she longs for them to actually know Him as Forgiver and Leader. It's an invitation that few turn down as we see in verse 30: "They came out of the town and made their way toward Him."

She has been so impacted by Jesus that she can't help but invite others to come and meet Him personally. Her desire is for them to experience the same grace and forgiveness that has been given to her. Because of her reputation in town, she would not have had much credibility. Normally, no one would listen to her. She witnesses the same way that Philip did in John 1:46 when he said, "Come and see." And, since it's obvious that she's met someone great, many accept her invitation.

John 4:39 reveals that many Samaritans believed in Christ because of the woman's testimony. Then, as they listened to Jesus for themselves many came to know Him personally. Look at John 4:42: "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

She made the invitation. She did it with enthusiasm and she was convincing. The people responded to her request and came face-to-face with Jesus. Many of us can do the same thing. We might not feel comfortable giving logical arguments for the existence of God or maybe we're hesitant to have lost people in our homes like Levi did, but we can extend invitations.

Many of you do this on a regular basis as you invite people to our worship service, AWANA, the church picnic, the Ladies' Bible

Study, and the Friendship Banquet. By the way, of the 116 people who had tickets to the banquet last night, 55 were members or regular attendees and 61 were guests! That's how it should be!

A recent poll by George Barna shows that about 25% of adults would go to church if a friend would just invite them. That means one in four of your friends would come if you would ask them to come. I hope you're planning to ask some friends to join you next Sunday as we take the entire sermon time to present the gospel and give people an opportunity to come to Christ. Our Good Friday and Easter Sunday services are designed for you to use as a tool in reaching your friends for Christ.

People who gravitate toward the invitational style exhibit some common qualities:

- Hospitable
- Persuasive
- Enjoy meeting new people

Here are a few blind spots that you should be aware of:

- Be willing to talk about Christ.
- Consider which events to invite people to.
- Don't get discouraged if people refuse your invitation.

The Serving Style

The final style is called the serving approach to evangelism. This is best demonstrated by a woman named Dorcas. Please turn to Acts 9:36: "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor."

She is known as a disciple, or follower of Jesus. She served and people knew it was because of her Savior. That's her identity. She was saved to serve. Tabitha is her Jewish name and those who speak Greek know her as Dorcas. Both names mean, "Gazelle." She was not lazy by any means but was quick to respond when someone needed help. When she saw a need she jumped on it! Miss Gazelle was a devoted disciple who used her gifts and abilities to further the kingdom.

The Bible says that she was always doing good and helping the poor. This phrase literally means that she was "full of good works." Verse 39 helps us see that she was a seamstress. Since there were no OLD NAVY stores in Joppa, making clothing was a task assigned to women in that culture. But she was doing more than just sewing on her Singer machine. She utilized her abilities in evangelism as she served others and pointed them to Christ. Her life reflected Matthew 5:16: "...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Apparently her unique contribution was so important to the church, that when she died, God raised her back to life! Surrounded by the robes and other clothing she had made, Peter prays and she miraculously starts breathing again! We don't hear about what happens next but I don't think she went out on a speaking circuit to give her testimony. I'm convinced that after she regained her strength, she went right back to her quiet and unassuming service.

In his book called, "The Conspiracy of Kindness," Steve Sjogren states that while less than 10% of Christians have the spiritual gift of evangelism, 90% have the gift of serving. His church in Cincinnati is involved in what they call "servant evangelism," where they have washed cars, cleaned toilets, shined shoes and grilled hot dogs in parks – all for free with no strings attached.

During these explosions of kindness, they have seen many people so moved that they eventually come to church and get saved. When we handed out Cokes and Popsicles at the Thresherman's Parade the past two years, people wanted to know why we were giving them away free. Here's a principle for those of you who employ this style: Small things done with great love will change the world.

1 Peter 4:10 sums up the importance of serving: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." As we serve others, the church is strengthened and lost people are drawn to Christ.

Some of you really excel in this style because God has given you a special ability to serve. Perhaps you're a quiet practitioner of acts of kindness just like Dorcas was. You notice needs that others don't even see and you find joy in meeting them. This style is one of the most important evangelistic approaches because service-style evangelists touch people nobody else can reach. Whether it's making meals, sewing clothes, or fixing cars, God can use you to point people to Christ.

Here are some traits that servers generally exhibit:

- Attach value to menial tasks

- Others-centered
- Show love through actions

There are also some things to be careful of:

- Be ready to use your words to talk about Christ.
- Don't underestimate the value of your service.
- Communicate the spiritual motivation behind your acts of service.

Summary

As we wrap up this part of our series, it's my prayer that God will help you identify which style best fits your spiritual gifts, your personality, temperament, and background. God knew what He was doing when He made you. Isn't a great feeling to know that you can be yourself in evangelism? While nobody fits perfectly into just one of these approaches, you are probably stronger in some than you are in others. Which of these styles reflects who God has custom designed you to be?

- Confrontational
- Intellectual
- Testimonial
- Interpersonal
- Invitational
- Serving

The fact of the matter is if we're serious about having an infectious faith, we'll have opportunity to use a variety of these approaches, depending on the individual we are trying to reach. Some of us need to be stretched outside our preferred style and be willing to utilize a different approach when we need to.

And as we've pointed out, when you need help, team up with another Christ-follower who may be able to communicate Christ from a different angle. When we partner with others who have different styles, our combined strengths can be used to reach virtually any kind of person.

The important thing to know is that the most contagious Christians are those who've learned to work within the design God has given them. As we identify, develop, and deploy what we've been given, hearts will be cultivated, the seed of the gospel will be planted in minds, and people will surrender their lives to Christ.

Chuck Swindoll tells a story about some animals who decided they should do something about the problems in the world. So they organized a school. They adopted a strenuous curriculum of running, climbing, swimming and flying. To make it easier to administrate, each of the animals had to take all the subjects.

The duck was excellent in swimming; in fact, he was better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying, and was very poor in running. Since he was so slow he had to drop swimming and stay after school to run around the track. This caused his webbed feet to be badly worn, so that he was only average in swimming. But average was quite acceptable, so nobody worried about that -- except the duck.

The rabbit started at the top of his class in running, but developed a nervous twitch in his leg muscles because he had to stay after school to work on his swimming. The squirrel was excellent in climbing, but he encountered constant frustration in flying class because his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the treetop down. The eagle was a problem child and was severely disciplined for being a non-conformist. In climbing classes he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there...

The obvious moral of the story is a simple one -- each creature has its own set of capabilities in which it will naturally excel -- unless it is expected or forced to fill a mold that doesn't fit. When that happens, discouragement, and guilt can lead to mediocrity and defeat. What is true of creatures in the forest is true of believers in the church. God has not made us all the same. He never intended to. He planned and designed our differences, our unique capabilities, and our evangelistic styles.

Each of these six Bible characters -- Peter, Paul, the Blind Man, Matthew, the Samaritan Woman, and Dorcas -- all met Jesus and had their lives radically transformed by Him. And then God used their personalities to impact others. Friends, the fields are ready, and there's a lot to do. Let's figure out what we've been designed to do and then be as quick as a gazelle to tell others about Christ.

Closing Song: Perception

The Bread Of Life Series

Contributed by Brian Bill on Feb 7, 2016 (message contributor)

(rate this sermon)

| 4,686 views

Scripture: John 6:35-71 (suggest scripture)

Tags: Communion, Bread Of Life, Jesus Deity, Bread Of Heaven, I Am Sayings (suggest tag)

Denomination: Baptist

Summary: Material things have a built-in mortality. No matter how much we exercise, how good our diet is, we're eventually going to die. If you want something that lasts for eternity then you must partake of the one who alone is eternal.

John 6:35-71 The Bread of Life

Brian Bill

February 6-7, 2016

For my dad's 80th birthday, my four sisters and I met in California two weeks ago to surprise him. I think we pulled it off. I came to the front door with a bunch of balloons so he couldn't see my face and declared, "Happy Birthday." I think he thought I was a delivery boy. I then moved the balloons to the side and my dad exclaimed, "What are you doing here?" My mom then came to the door and had a similar reaction. While they tried to gather themselves, my sisters snuck in the back door and took their seats in the kitchen.

Here's a one-minute video of what happened next.

BTW, my dad had a health scare last Sunday but is fine. Thanks to many of you for praying for him. We had a blast as a family. We walked through the redwoods at Muir Woods, crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and visited Alcatraz. And, we ate...a lot. It's interesting how important food is when you're with family and friends, isn't it? One of my favorite memories is eating clam chowder out of a sour dough bread bowl at Fisherman's Wharf.

[Take bite of bread]

I'd like you to think about food right now. For some of us, that's not all that difficult to do. In fact, some of you started planning your lunch as soon as the service started and you can't wait to chow down before and during the big game. I learned this week that Super Bowl Sunday is America's second-biggest eating day, after Thanksgiving. Here's what we'll consume:

- 1.2 billion chicken wings. That's enough for everyone in America to have three wings apiece.
- 12.5 million pounds of bacon.
- 11.2 million pounds of potato chips.

According to Cornell University, the average American will eat more than 6,000 calories on Sunday. Not surprisingly, antacid sales increase by 20% on the Monday after the big game.

During our team time this week I asked the staff to shout out their favorite food places in the QCA. Restaurants included: Johnny's, Brady Street Chophouse and Biaggi's. Nominees for best bread: Panera, Olive Garden, Texas Roadhouse and Red Lobster. And for desserts: Lagomarcino's, Old Towne Bakery, Aceine Allen, and Whitey's. Did you know that Conde Nast Traveler has recently declared Whitey's the best ice cream in the world? They beat out others on the list from California, the UK, Texas, Michigan and New York.

Have you ever noticed that even when you eat your favorite food, you still get hungry again in a few hours? Some of us have been on a search for something that will satisfy and we've come up short. A few of us have tried partying, relationships, purchasing

things, or rooting for a favorite sports team! In the long run, we're still starving as we search for satisfaction.

As we launch a new series today called, "Metaphors of the Messiah," we come face-to-face with the Bread of Bethlehem. He's the Savior who alone who can provide satisfaction. Some of you are experiencing spiritual hunger pangs that nothing in this world can fill. C.S. Lewis put it like this: "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."

If we settle for material things, we'll hunger again. If we partake of the Bread of Life, our hunger will be taken care of and all of our needs will be met.

We're going to focus on each of the "I Am" statements found in the Gospel of John and one from the Book of Revelation. Didn't Pastor Tim do a great job preaching the past two weeks? I'm still pondering the question he raised last weekend: "What are you saying 'no' to?"

Here then is how Jesus identifies Himself:

- I am the Bread of Life
- I am the Light of the World
- I am the Gate
- I am the Good Shepherd
- I am the Way, the Truth and the Life
- I am the Vine
- I am the Alpha and Omega
- I am the Resurrection and the Life. We'll have 5 instead of 4 services Easter weekend. Our title is "The Comeback."

We're return to our study of Mark after Easter.

The pronoun "I" means it comes from within and is very personal. The word "am" is in the present tense, not I "was" in the past, or I "might be" in the future, but I am...right here, right now. These metaphors of the Messiah are rich in meaning and are very comforting and yet there's more to them than what meets the eye. I hope you're ready to go deep today.

R.C. Sproul points out that the Greek word rendered "I am" normally uses one verb form. When Jesus said, "I am" He does something very extraordinary – He takes two verbs and puts them together. While it may sound a bit redundant, the literal meaning is this: "I am, I am..." or "I, even I, am..."

This is the way Exodus 3:14 is translated in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where we read, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" Every time Jesus uses one of the "I AM" metaphors, He is emphatically stating that He is Yahweh, the great "I AM" of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

While my dad was in shock and totally surprised when we showed up, we should be in awe and astonishment when we hear Jesus make these stunning statements.

Let's admit something. Most of us focus on what we think of Jesus and often our understanding is tainted by our experiences in the past or our expectations in the present. Instead of looking at what He can do for us, my prayer is that we will have a fuller understanding of who Jesus is and what He demands of us.

I was struck in my Bible reading some time ago when I came across a passage in John 18. Jesus was about to be arrested by a group of soldiers, priests, and Pharisees. He knew what they wanted but He asked them a question in verse 4: "Whom do you seek?" They replied, "Jesus of Nazareth."

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus responded with a phrase that is reminiscent of how He introduced the Messiah Metaphors when He said, "I am He." Notice what happened in verse 6: "When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground." When these enemies came face-to-face with the majesty of the Almighty, they dropped to their knees! The New Living Translation says that they "all fell backward to the ground!" These men were armed with weapons, but they dropped like bowling pins in His presence.

Brothers and sisters, we should be filled with wonder and awe as we respond humbly to the One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Let's not approach Him flippantly. The absence of awesomeness unfortunately describes the church in America. May that never be said about Edgewood!

Tim Keller says something that is quite startling: “If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealized version of yourself.”

I haven’t read it yet but I love how Paul Tripp entitled his latest book, “Awe: Why it Matters for Everything We Think, Say and Do.” Here’s a summary of what he says, “Humans are hardwired for awe. Our hearts are always captured by something—that’s how God made us. But sin threatens to distract us from the glory of our Creator. All too often, we stand in awe of everything but God.”

I like what Keith and Kristyn Getty pray on a regular basis, “Lord, don’t let me lose my wonder.”

Please turn in your Bibles to John 6. As Jesus often does, He loves to start with the material in order to get us to think about the spiritual. He talked about natural birth with Nicodemus in chapter 3 in order to explain the necessity of the new birth. With the woman at the well in chapter 4, Jesus started with water and ended up talking about worship. In chapter 6, He moves from physical hunger to spiritual satisfaction. Before we get to the text, here’s some background about bread.

Bread Background

- Bread was the most important part of the meal. [Take a bite]. When we go to a restaurant we generally focus on what kind of entrée we’re going to order, and the basket of bread on the table is usually secondary (unless you’re at Olive Garden or Texas Roadhouse or Johnny’s or Red Lobster!). In Jesus’ day, meat was simply a side dish, and bread represented the major part of the meal. When Jesus says that He is the bread of life, He’s saying that He’s the most important part of life.
- Everyone had access to bread. Poorer people used barley to make bread while the wealthier used wheat, but most everyone had the means to make or buy bread. By using this metaphor, Jesus is saying that He is available to everyone.
- Bread was the means of fellowship. In that culture, when you broke bread with someone, you were friends for life. Jesus likewise offers a friendship with us that will never end.
- Bread symbolizes God’s presence. Bethlehem means the “house of Bread,” and the temple was continually filled with the showbread (Numbers 4:7). This can be interpreted as “show up bread” or in Hebrew terms, “face bread.” This bread was a heavenly symbol of God Himself, and a reminder to His people that every time they eat bread, they should think of Him. Interestingly, if a person would see a scrap of bread on the road, he would pick it up and put it on a tree branch for the birds to eat. Bread was never to be trampled under foot in the common dust because it carries with it an element of mystery and sacredness.

By the way, I visited 8 places that sell bread this week to see if they would donate some for the sermon. I was glad to find out that many of them give their leftover bread to food pantries.

In the first 15 verses of chapter 6, we read about Jesus turning a boy’s lunchable of five small barley loaves and two sardines into a feast for over 5,000 people. We don’t have time to study this in detail, but I do want to point out a few things.

1. Jesus cares about our felt needs. Jesus knew they were hungry and so He took care of their physical needs. Jesus is concerned about every area of our lives.
2. Jesus wanted to stretch their faith. He specifically asked Philip a question about where to buy enough bread because he wanted him to exercise his faith. Without being asked, Andrew spoke up and offered a young lad’s lunch.
3. Jesus takes what we have. When we give Jesus what we have, no matter how little it is He will multiply it for great purposes. Even the little that you have is worth a lot to God. Or, as we learned from a sermon last month: You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.
4. Jesus provides satisfaction. It’s interesting that verse 11 says the people “ate as much as they wanted.” Verse 12 says that there were even leftovers. God is not stingy with his grace. Our cups overflow with His blessings if we will but receive them.
5. Jesus takes us deeper than we were planning to go. It’s very significant that there were 12 baskets of leftovers. This was an object lesson for the 12 disciples so that they should never doubt the power of Jesus. But there’s another reason why there were 12 baskets of bread. According to Leviticus 24:5-9, the priests put 12 loaves of fresh bread in the temple each Sabbath day. When the people saw the 12 baskets of bread they would have thought about the bread of presence at this point. I’m sure their eyes got big and they probably started talking among themselves. I wonder if some of them made the connection that God was present with them through Jesus the Savior, the living showbread.

6. Jesus is more than we think He is. Verse 14 tells us that the people viewed this as a miracle and wondered if Jesus was the promised prophet. During that time, there was a belief among the Jews that the Messiah would provide bread from heaven much like Moses did. When they saw the loaves multiplying in front of their eyes, many of them wanted to make Jesus king on the spot. After all, if He was their king, He could feed them every day and wipe out the Romans at the same time. But Jesus had other plans. Verse 15 says that he withdrew to a mountain by himself.

Right after this miracle, the disciples get into a boat and head to Capernaum in verse 17. When they are about halfway across, a storm arises and starts buffeting their boat. It's at the moment of their greatest need that Jesus performs another miracle as He walks on the water and comes to them. He speaks words of comfort to them in verse 20: "It is I; don't be afraid." In other contexts this phrase is translated as "I am." Once again we're reminded that when we're in the presence of the great I AM, there is no need to be anxious. Verse 21 records another miracle when we read that as soon as Jesus got into the boat, they immediately reached the shore where they were headed.

The crowd, eager to get their stomachs filled again, found Jesus in Capernaum. Jesus stopped them in their tracks and blew away their plans for a breakfast buffet when He said in verses 26-27: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."

Like many of us, the people thought they needed to do some sort of work in order to earn God's favor. I love the answer Jesus gives in verse 29: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." If you insist on working, here's your job description: BELIEVE IN THE ONE HE HAS SENT.

These hungry people had the nerve to ask for another sign instead of believing. We do the same, don't we? We continuously ask God to do something for us while forgetting what He's already done. Our needs were met yesterday but we want to know what Jesus is going to do for us today.

In verse 31, the crowd lays out a challenge for Jesus. Essentially they were asking Jesus to prove Himself. In their minds, Moses provided bread for over 3 million people for 40 years; Jesus had only given them bread once. The bread from Moses came from heaven; Jesus used earthly bread and multiplied it. Their trouble was that their growling stomachs had blinded them to the ache in their souls.

Check out how Jesus responds. Once again He's unpredictable. He arrests their attention with this stunning statement in verse 32: "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven." God was the giver of the Manna, not Moses, and it was the Father who sent the true bread from heaven.

I love how our children's ministry focuses on teaching the Bible so that kids can grow in their faith. Doesn't Sheila do a tremendous job? This past Wednesday Sheila invited a team of pastors to compete against some Awana clubbers in a mock Bible Quiz. She called it, "Are You Smarter Than an Awana Clubber?" In her email to the pastoral team she asked, "Any brave volunteers?" I quickly replied, "I'm in...as long as you give me the answers ahead of time!" I started to get nervous when she didn't cough up the answers.

It was pretty intimidating. Before we began Ed talked some smack to get the other teams off their game. Some of the kids in the front row were giving us "thumbs-down" signs. People laughed at us when we got the answers wrong. When the scores were tallied, we came in third place...out of three teams. I saw some of the kids in the gym later and they were all laughing at me. One of them said, "I thought you were smart." Props to the Awana kids for knowing their Bibles better than their pastors!

Our Awana clubbers go deep, don't they? Jesus wants us to go deep as well.

Jesus then defines this true bread in verse 33: "For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Manna could only solve physical hunger; the Bread of God gives life to all. Do the you see the pronoun "He"? It was Jesus who came down from heaven. Their appetite is now whetted and in verse 34 they respond: "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus then said to them in verse 35: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." The crowd came with a one-upmanship challenge for Jesus to match the Manna from Moses. They were not expecting an answer so jarring.

In verse 41, we read that many began to grumble about Jesus because He said that He was the bread that came down from heaven. It's very interesting that the Israelites grumbled when God provided manna generations earlier. I guess human nature hasn't changed much because many of us still grumble at God today. In verse 42, they reveal the reason behind their grouching. They knew all about Jesus but couldn't believe He was more than He appeared.

Their real problem was that they had grown too familiar with Him: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we

know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Some of us are in danger of doing the same thing. Maybe you grew up in a church, attended Awana, know a few Bible stories, you know what happened at Christmas and at Easter, and you think you have Jesus all figured out. Be careful that you don't allow what you know about Him to keep you from actually knowing Him.

[Eat some more bread].

The Israelites ate the manna and were famished the next day. Jesus repeats this metaphor in verse 48: "I am the bread of life." He then reminds them that even though people ate manna in the desert, they eventually died. Material things have a built-in mortality. No matter how much we exercise, how good our diet is, we're eventually going to die. If you want something that lasts for eternity then you must partake of the one who alone is eternal. Look at verse 51: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

This is really a startling statement. Verse 52 reveals that his listeners begin to argue sharply among themselves. The word used reveals that they almost break out into a fist fight. They're stumped because Jesus is making it seem like they must commit cannibalism. Instead of backing off, His statements get more deliberate and even harder to swallow (no pun intended).

Once again we see that we can't put Jesus in a nice and neat package and think we have Him all figured out. What He is saying in verse 58 is that we must take Him into the very core of our being: "This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." We must believe in His finished work on the cross and receive Jesus into our lives.

Time to Decide

Whenever an individual encounters Jesus, a decision has to be made. We see this in the closing verses of chapter 6.

1. Disruption (John 6:60-65).

The first thing we notice is that Jesus always disrupts us. Look at verses 60-65: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'" The word "hard" means that the teaching of Jesus as the Bread of Life is difficult for them to accept. This was too tough for some of them to hear. And as a result, many wouldn't accept it.

The issue here wasn't that they couldn't understand it. They just didn't want to accept it. Many times we think someone just needs more information about Christ before they can be saved. While this may be true, more often than not, it's not a matter of needing more data; it's an issue of deciding who will lead your life. In other words, the problem is not intellectual, it's moral. Let's face it; some of you do not want to fully surrender your lives to Christ because you don't really want to stop doing the things you've been doing.

It's striking that Jesus doesn't adjust His teaching to make it more palatable to people. In fact, He challenges them some more when he asks in verse 61: "Do you take offense at this?" In John 6:62, he suggests that they wouldn't believe even if they saw Him ascend to heaven with their own eyes.

The real Jesus is not always easy to listen to or to follow. Are you bothered by what the Bread of Life is asking you to do? Good. Do you feel like Jesus cramps your style? He does. Does it seem like His teaching is hard to accept? It is. The question now becomes, "What are you going to do about Him?"

2. Desertion (John 6:66).

We can't help but feel a little sad at this point. The crowds had listened to his teaching, they had been fed bread and fish, they followed Jesus across the lake to hear more of his teaching and then many of them listening to Jesus had enough. Look at verse 66: "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." The word "disciple" here means a follower or a student, not necessarily one who was a true believer.

They didn't get what they wanted, so they left lacking what they needed. They left because Jesus offered what they needed and not what they thought they wanted. In a similar way, we often want things that won't benefit us and all the while we need things we never give a thought to. As a result, we bail instead of believing.

I'm sure this happens during every sermon at Edgewood. Listen. I'd rather have people walk away than compromise the Word of God. We will keep preaching the fundamentals of the faith, whether people follow or not. I'm reminded of the encounter Jesus had with the rich young ruler in Mark 10. Jesus challenged him to turn from his idols but the man walked away in verse 22: "Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." It's interesting that Jesus didn't chase after him or soften the message. Instead, he declared, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

Will you walk away when the Word is too tough? Will you bail or will you believe? Will you desert or will you become a disciple?

3. Declaration.

As Jesus looks around and watches the crowd thin out, He turns to the twelve in John 6:67 and asks, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter speaks up in John 6: 68-69: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter is saying something like this: "Lord, you are not easy to hang out with. You embarrass us and, at times, you frighten us. We don't always understand you, and yet, your words are the most remarkable that we have ever heard. They explain who we are and they make us understand life itself. We are satisfied by you and are held here by our desire for more of you. We have put our faith in you. You fit the prophecies and fulfill the predictions. You are the Great I AM. Where else would we even think about going?"

As World War II was drawing to a close, the Allied Armies gathered up many hungry orphans. [BTW, we're doing a new shoe drive for gypsy children in Romania] These orphans were placed in camps where they were well fed. Despite the great care they received, they couldn't sleep at night because they were nervous and afraid. Finally they came up with a solution. Each child was given a piece of bread to hold in bed. [Hold piece of bread] They were told to hold on to it, but not to eat it. An amazing thing happened. These orphans slept soundly because they knew instinctively that they would have food to eat the next day.

Friends, the Bible says we are orphans because of our sin. And God wants to give us bread to hold on to. But there's more. Jesus is the bread of life. And you and I must partake of Him by asking Him to come deep down inside. Some of us are just holding him at arms length. You may even comment on how good the bread looks and how sweetly it smells. [point to the bread machine] But it will do you no good unless you take Him in and digest Him as the very food for your soul. It's time to believe and receive.

Friends, you don't have to do anything to be saved because it's all been done for you. But you do need to respond. Will you believe? Will you receive Him? Will you say yes to Him right now? When He disrupts your thinking, will you desert Him, or will you declare Him to be the very Bread of Life?

It's Time for Supper

Several years ago, I was grazing through the channels and came across a so-called "Reality Show" called, "Fear Factor." As part of the competition, the contestants had to eat moldy cheese covered with live maggots! It was really gross. Some of them refused to participate in this segment and others gulped, swallowed, and almost heaved on national television. I think only two were left standing (I'm not sure who won because I was so nauseous I had to leave the room).

As I thought about that show, it struck me that this is a picture of all the things we try to cram into our lives. They might look good, and even taste delicious, but compared with what Jesus wants to give us; it's nothing more than a bowl of moving maggots on moldy Limburger.

Do you remember what happened to the manna when the Israelites tried to hoard it? When they became selfish and untrusting, Exodus 16:20 says, "it was full of maggots and began to smell." Some of you are shoving smelly stuff into your life. Sure, it might look good on the outside, but it's really moving with maggots if you look closely.

We want to conclude our service this morning with a different kind of meal. One that tastes much better. The night before Jesus was betrayed, He had supper with His disciples...and He invites us to participate in that meal right now.

As we prepare to celebrate communion, let's remember the manna, let's remember the miracle of the bread and fish, and most of all, let's remember the Messiah, who alone is the Bread of Life.

[Hold up bread]

Thank You Jesus for the Cross

This song starts with confession and then moves to profession.

John 8:2-11 The Sensitivity Of Grace

Brian Bill Apr 29, 2003

Summary: This morning, we're going to encounter someone who was in desperate need of grace. She came face-to-face with her sin and with Jesus and drank deeply of the "Sensitivity of Grace."

The Sensitivity of Grace

If you've been with us for the last four weeks, you'll know that we're in the middle of a series called, "Grace Encounters." As we look at how Jesus interacted with people, we've been learning about how grace can change our lives.

In the first message entitled, "The Setting for Grace," we learned about how gracious Jesus was with children. We were reminded to:

Let children come

Learn from children

Love children intentionally

In week two, we focused on "The Search for Grace" as we observed how Nicodemus came to Jesus wanting to know how he could get to Heaven. Jesus pointed him to the new birth. This saving grace is not something we can earn or work for it's a free gift given by a gracious God. If we want what Nicodemus found, we need to do what he did:

Admitted his need

Came to Jesus personally

Trusted Christ completely

Two weeks ago, we tackled "The Scandal of Grace" where we established that:

- Grace reminds us that God's favor is a gift
- Grace keeps us from looking down on ourselves
- Grace makes us equal to everyone else
- Grace offers us a fresh start

Last week in a message entitled, "The Scope of Grace," we established that while some people are like the younger son who left God, and others of us are more like the older brother who sinned while staying home, we're all in need of grace.

- The Father comes out to meet us
- The Father offers us grace

This morning, we're going to encounter someone who was in desperate need of grace. She came face-to-face with her sin and with Jesus and drank deeply of the "Sensitivity of Grace." Turn in your Bibles to John 8.

I need to mention before we start that this section is not found in some of your Bibles. This passage, while very well known, was not included in most of the early transmissions of the Bible.

Having said that, this grace encounter is certainly in the spirit of how Jesus dealt with broken people. Without a doubt, it does constitute a genuine account of what took place when Jesus met with this woman.

Introduction

I like reading the comics. In one, Calvin and Hobbes are walking along and Calvin says, "You know what the problem is with the universe?"

Waiting for the shoe to drop, Hobbes responds, "What?"

Calvin answers, "There's no toll-free customer service hot line for complaints! That's why things don't get fixed. If the Universe had any decent management, we'd get a full refund if we weren't completely satisfied!"

Hobbes objects: "But hey, the universe is free."

To which Calvin retorts: "See, that's another thing. They should have a cover charge and keep out all the riffraff."

If we're honest, many of us wish that the riffraff would just go away or that they be punished. We tend to be pretty tough on people when they do things that bother us. We clamor for God's justice to be poured out on others, while we ourselves long for God's grace.

It's like the haughty woman in London who asked a well-known painter to do her portrait. She added, "And see that the painting does me justice." Taking one look at the hard features of this brash woman's face, the painter observed: "Madame, what you need is not

justice, but mercy and grace!"

In John 8, we come to a powerful story about the sensitivity of grace, which clearly teaches that from the perspective of God's perfect holiness, we're all riffraff — we're all sinners who fall short of God's glory and desperately need, not justice, but mercy and grace.

Here's what we're going to do this morning. We're going to follow a simple three-word outline as we camp in this passage. After we get a better understanding of the text and its background, we'll conclude with some principles and action steps that we can apply to our lives.

Here's the outline:

- Verses 1-6a Confrontation
- Verses 6b-9 Conviction
- Verses 10-11 Comfort

Confrontation

Let's start with the Confrontation in the first six verses. Let's read it together. (1) But Jesus went up to the Mount of Olives. (2) At dawn he appeared again in the temple court, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. (3) The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and (4) said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. (5) In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (6) They were using this as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

It's early in the morning, the sun just having come up. A multitude of people gathered around Jesus because they wanted to hear him teach. Jesus is seated, which in that culture communicated authority, as the crowds continue to come into the temple court.

Then, suddenly, the arrogant religious leaders barge in, and interrupt Jesus by dragging a woman in front of him. The text says that they made her stand in front of the group as they shouted out the charges against her. Can you imagine how she must have felt?

John tells us in verse 6 that this was all a set-up. Leviticus 20:10 states that both the man and woman adulterers were supposed to be stoned. So where's the guy? He was probably involved in the trap somehow. How else would these "morality police" have known just when to barge in and catch the woman?

It's actually quite a clever trap. The Law of Moses specifies death by stoning for adultery, yet Roman law forbids the Jews from carrying out executions. If Jesus doesn't condemn the woman, He breaks the Jewish law. If he does condemn her, He breaks the Roman law.

What hypocrites! They accuse a woman of adultery as part of their scheme to commit murder! The Pharisees justified their hypocrisy in the same way that many of us do — we look at our sins as excusable, while we get down on how other people live.

A recent survey raised the question: "Of fifteen prominent figures, who is most likely to go to heaven?" Mother Teresa received 79%; Oprah Winfrey, 66%; Bill Clinton,

52%; Pat Robertson, 47%; Dennis Rodman, 28%; O.J. Simpson, 19%. But none of these celebrities received the highest score, which the respondents attributed surprisingly to themselves. 87% believed that they themselves would go to Heaven.

Conviction

The next step is conviction. Can you sense the tension here? The religious leaders have just dropped a very difficult question on Jesus. Everyone's wondering what Jesus will say. The leaders are feeling pretty smug. Let's read the second half of verse 6 through verse 9.

(6) But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. (7) When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him begin stoning her." (8) Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. (9) At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

Notice that Jesus doesn't answer their question in verse 6. Instead, He bent down and started to write on the ground. While we don't really know what He wrote, we do know that this is the only time in the Gospels that we read of Jesus writing something. Scholars have different opinions as to what Jesus wrote. Here are a few possibilities:

Made a list of their sins. The word “katagrapho” has the nuance of “making a list,” so many believe Jesus, knowing the hearts of these men, was listing their specific sins by name.

Wrote out the Ten Commandments. Just as God had inscribed them “with His finger” (Exodus 31:18), so Jesus did with His finger. In that case, Jesus was saying, “Guys, don’t instruct me in the law; I wrote it the first time just like I’m doing now, and I know each of you have broken it.”

Wrote down their names. Listen to this judgment from Jeremiah 17:13 “O lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.”

In verse 7, we read that they kept on questioning Him. The meaning here is that they “continued asking obstinately.” Jesus then straightens up, which gives the picture of strength of force, and says to them, “If any of you is without sin, let him begin stoning her.” Wow. The word Jesus used here is “sinless.”

Jesus upheld the standards of God’s perfect holiness but made it clear that there was only one person present who could have judged the woman. Only one who was sinless. With these words, Jesus made the religious leaders as uncomfortable as they had made the woman who was still in the middle of the group.

I’m sure the leaders were stunned. They probably thought Jesus was going to let the woman go, but instead He upholds the Law of Moses. Adultery is sin. It violates marriage. It wrecks homes and injures innocent children.

I want you to notice that Jesus does not say, “You had better not throw stones on her.” Rather, what He said was more like a command, “Throw stones...if you are sinless.” When a person was deserving of a stoning, he or she would be thrown into a pit. Then, the person who witnessed the grievous sin would spit on the victim, pick up a stone and throw it first. The others would wait until he threw the first one, then they would send a volley of sharp and heavy rocks, which would cut the skin and crush the bones.

It was kind of like not eating until the hostess picks up her fork (which, by the way, I learned just recently). When the fork is picked up, it’s a signal that the feast can commence. Likewise, when the first stone was launched the execution could begin.

In effect, Jesus is saying to these men (and to us), “You are no better off than she is. Your hearts are filled with murder and hatred.” Someone has said that if our inner thoughts were written on our foreheads, we would always wear a hat!

Jesus then stooped down and drew in the dust again. I get the sense that no one talked. I bet there was kind of an eerie silence, much like what we read about in Revelation 8:1: “When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

During this time of awkward quietness, conviction began to settle in their hearts. What was Jesus writing this time? Maybe just four words, which were written once before by the finger of God in chapter 5 of the Book of Daniel “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPSHARIN,” which was translated to mean, “You are weighed in the balance and found wanting.”

Now, like the woman, the leaders have been caught in the act. Verse 9 says that they began to go away one at a time, the older ones first... They are finally convicted of their own sins. It is always more comfortable to focus on another person’s sin than it is to confront our own. As they filed out, with shame on their faces, they admitted that they were unable to judge others. Perhaps the older ones left first because they had committed more sins than the younger ones or maybe they were wiser and appreciated the wisdom of Jesus’ response.

I love the last part of verse 9: “...until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.” Jesus is the only one qualified to deliver judgment. I also find it interesting that the woman was still standing there have you ever thought of that before? She could have left with the others, but she stayed. This leads to the third point she was confronted, she was convicted, and now we will see that she was comforted.

Comfort

Let’s read verses 10-11: (10) Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (11) “No one sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

At this point, we realize how little we know about this woman. Was she gentle and likeable or harsh and obnoxious? As she stood in the midst of her accusers, was she softly sobbing the tears of a person crushed by her shame, or was she defiantly glaring at those who dared to drag her to the temple? All we know is that she had been caught in a sin and was publicly paraded through the temple grounds. What makes this story so beautiful, is not the woman, but the way Jesus responded to her.

How Jesus Treated Her

With Dignity. The leaders had treated her as an object, speaking about her in front of everyone. Jesus spoke to her He did not view her as an embarrassing failure or an irritating difficulty; He saw her as a person, a creation of God who possessed incredible worth. Friend, if you feel worthless today, remember that Jesus will always treat you with dignity.

With Compassion. The first compassionate act that Jesus did was to write on the ground. The scribes and Pharisees loudly proclaimed her sins. Jesus stooped down and wrote in the sand. Suddenly no one was looking at the woman. By diverting the stares of the crowd from the sinner to the Sinless One, Jesus gave her the precious gift of compassion.

With Frankness. Some people have said that Jesus was too easy on sin in this Grace Encounter. But, I want you to notice that Jesus confronted this woman with her root problem when he said, Go now, and leave your life of sin. She had already been confronted and convicted by her sin. Now, Jesus is talking straight with her. Christ-followers are to leave sin, to move on by following Him with their whole hearts.

With Grace. This woman was condemned by the leaders and by her own sins. But, because of the grace of Jesus, He looked at her and said, Then neither do I condemn you. I love the truth of Romans 8:1: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

With Hope. This woman needed hope for the future. The phrase, "Go now" literally means "from the now." Jesus is forward-looking, not past-focused. He is ready to give her a new life, a new identity, and the power to overcome her sin. Jesus is not only interested in what we've done but also in what we can become. He loves us too much to let us keep living the way we have been. I am so glad that the Christian life is really a series of new beginnings, aren't you?

Action Steps

Now, how can we bring this passage home to us today? Let me give you two principles for each part of our outline confrontation, conviction and comfort.

Confrontation

Sometimes we need to confront others. The Bible says that we all have this responsibility. If you see me doing something that is not right, come and talk to me. If I notice that you're involved in something that God does not permit, I'll come to you. Sometimes the Elders of this church need to address sin issues in the body. When we do it, we're to do it with gentleness, with humility, and with the desire to restore the sinning brother or sister. In short, we're not supposed to come with stones in our hands, but with grace in our hearts. But, we're to do it.

Sin has a way of coming to the light. Friends, don't make the mistake of thinking you can hide your sin you can't. God knows about it already and others will eventually. We need to be more severe with sin in our own lives, than with the sin we seen in others.

Conviction

Conviction is good, not bad. It's God's way of letting us know how much He cares for us. Without conviction, we can't change. The great British Christian G.K. Chesterton demonstrated his awareness of sin's impact in his own life when he responded to a London Times question asking what was wrong with the world. His notable reply: "Dear Sirs: in response to your question, 'What is wrong with the world?' I am. Yours Truly, G.K. Chesterton."

Be courageous, not a coward. The Pharisees had their wounds and their needs opened by Christ, but instead of sticking around to be forgiven and cleansed, they went away. Don't run away from Him. We are left, like this woman, alone with Jesus. Do you feel like your sins have begun to control your life? Face them, don't run. Own them. When you do, you can have the freedom you long for.

Comfort

Grace leads us to repentance. Romans 2:4 says "...God's kindness leads you to repentance." Aren't you tired of living with your guilt and shame? Weary of trying to hide? Come to Jesus and let His grace flood your wounds with rivers of forgiveness.

Grace demands a fresh start. It doesn't matter what you've done or where you've been sleeping. You can have a fresh start. You can start over. From this day on, you can lead a life of sexual purity. If you've made some mistakes, don't let them dictate your future. Make a commitment today, right now, to start over. With Jesus' help, you can. It's never too late.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus let the woman go? After all, there was One present who was qualified by His own sinlessness to cast the first stone—Jesus Himself. If Jesus cared so much about God's law, why didn't He insist that payment be made for the woman's transgression?

He didn't condemn her because He had come to be condemned for her. He wasn't sweeping her sins under the carpet, just

anticipating shedding His blood for them on the cross.

That's God's solution for sin—not ignoring or minimizing it, but taking it upon Himself. Jesus' forgiveness of the adulteress was free, but it was not cheap. It cost Him everything, and that high cost should make us shudder at the seriousness of our sin.

In reality the woman was the blessed one that day. Her partner may well have escaped, and the leaders sure left in a hurry when the heat was turned up, but at least she did not walk away. The leaders were cowards; she was courageous. When you think about it, she could have left, too. While Jesus was stooped down, writing in the dirt, she could have slipped away. But, something kept her there. Grace kept her there.

Conclusion

Having four daughters, Beth and I have started to think ahead to the teenage years with some fear and trepidation. We want to help equip our daughters for life, and want to do all we can to help them become the women God has created them to be. In order to help in this regard, we've been reading a very challenging book entitled, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris. In one of the chapters, the author relates a dream he had one night that ties in well to what we've been learning this morning. He calls it "The Room."

There were not distinguishing features of the room except for one wall covered with small index-card files. They were like the ones in libraries that list titles by author or subject in alphabetical order. But these files, which stretched from floor to ceiling...had very different headings...the first to catch my attention was one that read, "Girls I have liked."

And then without being told, I knew exactly where I was. This lifeless room with its small files was a crude catalog system for my life. Here were written the actions of every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn't match.

A sense of wonder and curiosity, coupled with horror, stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their contents. Some brought joy and sweet memories; others a sense of shame and regret so intense that I would look over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching me. A file named "Friends" was next to one marked "Friends I Have Betrayed."

The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I have read." "Jokes I've Laughed At." "Things I've done in anger." Often there were many more cards than I expected. Sometimes there were fewer than I had hoped.

I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the life I had lived. Could it be possible that I had the time...to write each of these thousands, possibly millions, of cards? But each card confirmed this truth. Each was written in my own handwriting. Each signed with my signature.

When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts," I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed contents. I felt so sick to think that such a moment had been recorded.

Suddenly I felt an almost animal rage. One thought dominated my mind: "No one must ever see these cards! No one must ever see this room! I have to destroy them!" In an insane frenzy I yanked the file out. Its size didn't matter now. I had to empty and burn the cards. But as I took the file at one end and began pounding it on the floor, I could not dislodge a single card. I became desperate and pulled out a card, only to find it as strong as steel when I tried to tear it.

Defeated and utterly helpless, I returned the file to its slot. Leaning my forehead against the wall, I let out a long self-pitying sigh... and then the tears came. I began to weep. Sobs so deep that the hurt started in my stomach and shook through me. I fell on my knees and cried. I cried out in shame, from the overwhelming shame of it all. The rows of file shelves swirled in my tear-filled eyes. No one must ever, ever know of this room. I must lock it up and hide the key.

But then as I pushed away the tears I saw Him. No, please not Him. Not here. Oh, anyone but Jesus.

I watched helplessly as he began to open the files and read the cards. I couldn't bear to watch his response. And in the moments I could bring myself to look at his face, I saw a sorrow deeper than my own. He seemed to intuitively go to the worst boxes. Why did He have to read every one?

Finally He turned and looked at me from across the room. He looked at me with grace in His eyes. But this was a compassion that didn't anger me. I dropped my head, covered my face with my hands and began to cry again. He walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so many things. But He didn't say a word. He just cried with me.

Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files. Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file and, one by one, began to sign His name over mine on each card.

"No!" I shouted, rushing to Him. All I could find to say was, "No, no," as I pulled the card from Him. His name shouldn't be on these

cards. But there it was, written in red so rich, so dark, and so alive. The name of Jesus covered mine. It was written with His blood.

He gently took the card back. He smiled a sad smile and continued to sign the cards. I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly, but the next instant it seemed I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, "It is finished."

John 8:12-30

The Light Of The World

Brian Bill February 13-14, 2016

[Bring up flashlights, candles, nightlight, lantern, spotlight, construction lights, etc.]

This little nightlight is not very bright but it gives just enough light to dispel the darkness in the middle of the night. On the other extreme, some spotlights claim to be one million times brighter than a single candle. Their light is so bright that they come with a warning to not look directly into the beam.

As we continue in our sermon series, "Metaphors of the Messiah," we're focusing this weekend on the second "I Am" statement of Jesus: "I am the Light of the World." Several people told me last week's sermon was excruciating to sit through because of the smell of fresh bread filling the room. We've been learning that whenever we come face-to-face with Jesus, an agonizing decision has to be made. When Jesus disrupts, some will desert Him and others will declare their allegiance to Him.

In each of these magnificent metaphors, the phrase "I Am" harkens back to when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. When Moses saw the "flames of fire," he wanted to get a closer look but was told to remove his sandals because God's presence had made the ground holy. After Moses is informed that he will lead God's people out of Egypt, he wants to know what to say when people ask about God's name. God answers in Exodus 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM."

"I Am" is God's covenantal name. This title was so sacred that it was only uttered by the high priest, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. It literally means, "I am who I am," and signals the truth that nothing else defines who God is but God Himself.

Every time Jesus uses one of the "I AM" metaphors, He is emphatically stating that He is Yahweh. This is a staggering statement of His sovereign supremacy. Just as the bush burned brightly and cast light all around, so too, Jesus is the light of the world, and a consuming fire that should stop us in our tracks because we are on holy ground. When Jesus used the phrase, "I AM" He did so on purpose and those who heard Him did not miss the obvious connection He was making.

This riles up the Pharisees and they interrupt Jesus ten times in John 8 alone. They take umbrage at His outrageous utterances and ask Jesus a pointed question in verse 53: "Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" Jesus pushes them further than they were intending to go when he declares in verse 56: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." They don't know how to respond to this scandalous statement so they turn to sarcasm in verse 57: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

They're probably chuckling to themselves at the absurdity of this statement and then they're bowled over because Jesus isn't finished yet. Look at verse 58: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." Verse 59 tells us that they picked up stones to slay him, but Jesus slipped away.

Light Background

Please turn now to John 8:12: "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" Jesus is not saying that He is holding the light, or that He has the light, or that He's the way to the light. [Hold up various lights]

Instead, He is unequivocally stating, "He is the light." As we go through these Messiah Metaphors, it's important to understand some background information. Let's begin by looking at the properties of light.

1. Light reveals.

Light enables us to see things that were there all along but because of the darkness we could not see them [Use flashlight to reveal the ugly scar on my face]. Darkness conceals and light reveals. Without light we can't see anything. It was C.S. Lewis who said, "I believe in Christ like I believe in the sun. Not only because I see it, but because by it all things are seen." Ephesians 5:13: "But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible." By the way, that's why some people avoid coming to church. They really don't

want Christ to shine His light on the way they've been living.

2. Light gives life.

Light is necessary for life itself. It sets our biological clocks, triggers in our brains the sensations of color, and supplies the energy for things to grow. Have you heard of SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder)? Winter is a tough time because the sun often disappears and depression can set in. I have an extended family member who deals with this. Interestingly, only about 1% of Floridians have SAD, while 10% of Alaskans struggle with it. I'm told that one of the best treatments is using bright light therapy [turn on lantern].

In John 1:4 we read this about Jesus: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." While some of us struggle with Seasonal Affective Disorder, all of us have Sin Affective Disorder, which is indeed SAD, but we should be GLAD because the light of Jesus frees us from our sins.

3. Light scatters darkness.

In Scripture, darkness is often a metaphor for sin, spiritual blindness, and death. John 1:5: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

4. Light gives warmth.

Did you know that one small candle, properly reflected, will raise the temperature of an igloo from below freezing to over 45 degrees? [Show construction lights and explain the heat they generate] In the Bible, warmth is often equated with the comfort of God. Ecclesiastes 11:7: "Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun."

5. Light provides guidance.

It's difficult to walk in the dark, isn't it? Light can help us see where we're headed. Psalm 43:3: "Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me."

Light in Scripture

Let's look now at how light is portrayed in Scripture. Those who heard Jesus declare that He is the light of the world would have had these passages running through their minds.

- Genesis 1:3-4: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness." The first thing God created was light in order to dispel darkness.
- After God appeared to Moses and revealed His name as the "I AM," He did an amazing thing. He turned the lights out on the Egyptians, literally. Exodus 10:21-23: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.' So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days...but all the people of Israel had light where they lived."
- After illuminating the Israelites with an unforgettable display of luminary brightness, God then promised to lead His people for forty years with bright light at night and a smoky cloud during the day. They never had to be afraid of the dark because the Shekinah fire of God's holy presence was always with them. They didn't need any night-lights [hold up] because the lights were always on! Check out Exodus 13:21: "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night." His listeners would be shocked to realize that Jesus was equating Himself with the pillar of holy fire.
- One of the names of the coming Messiah was "light." We see this in Daniel 2:22: "He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him."
- God Himself is referred to as light in 1 John 1:5: "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." When Jesus declares Himself to be the light of the world, He is declaring His deity.
- God's first act was to create light and His final crescendo will be splashed with light as His work of redemption culminates. Revelation 21:23-24: "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." Revelation 22:5: "And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

Now let's see the context in which Jesus made this startling claim.

1. Light in the Gospel of John. The word "light" is used 24 times in John's gospel. In the prologue, we read in John 1:9: "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."

2. Wilderness Metaphors. As we learned last week, when Jesus declared Himself to be the bread of life in John 6, the people remembered the manna that was supplied for 40 years.

In John 7, Jesus attends the Feast of Tabernacles. Part of this celebration involved the pouring of water onto the ground, commemorating the water that came out of the rock in Numbers 17. While people are watching the water splash on the stones in the Temple, Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice in John 7:37: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."

And, now in chapter 8, Jesus asserts that He is the light of the world, hearkening back to the pillar of fire that led God's people in the desert. Jesus deliberately associated Himself with these three wilderness images in three consecutive chapters in order to establish His identity. He is the bread of life, the water of life, and the light of life.

Feast of Tabernacles

In order to fully grasp the impact of Jesus' statement, we need to understand the Feast of Tabernacles.

God inaugurated this annual feast to help the Israelites remember that for 4 decades they wandered in the wilderness before they were finally brought into the Promised Land (see Leviticus 23:40-43). There were two distinctives about this celebration that made it different from all their other annual feasts.

1. For 7 days the entire nation camped out in booths or tents made of branches and foliage to remind them of the hardships their ancestors had endured in the wilderness.

2. On the opening night of the celebration, four gigantic candelabras standing 75 feet high were lit, gloriously illuminating the entire Temple and much of Jerusalem (this is not to be confused with the ever-burning lampstand or menorah that was in the tabernacle according to Exodus 25). Each candelabra for the Feast of Tabernacles had four branches supplied by golden bowls filled with 10 gallons of oil. These flames lept toward the sky.

Throughout the week the light burned brightly as the religious leaders praised the Lord and sang songs of joy while the people watched and waited. Musicians played harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets. This festival was to remind the Israelites of the glory of God, dwelling among them and how God's Shekinah brightness had once filled the Temple. This celebration also focused on the promise of God to send a light, the Anointed One, the Messiah, who would deliver them from darkness and despair.

Sacrifices were offered and Scriptures like Isaiah 9:2 were read: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone."

The exquisite imagery of this celebration culminates on the final day of the feast as Jesus declares: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." We know that Jesus makes this statement on the last day from John 7:37. What's amazing about His timing is that as the celebration wraps up, all the lights are extinguished. The reason that all the lights are put out is that in their minds, God has not yet sent the Savior. The Temple has grown dark. The tents are torn down. And then Jesus stands up next to the magnificent Menorahs and declares that He is the Messiah!

One more point. John 1:14 says, "...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus "tabernacled" among us, which is exactly what they were celebrating in the feast of booths.

Application

We started broadly so that we could narrow in and understand the meaning of this metaphor. Keeping in mind the properties of light, the Scriptural survey, the context, and the background to the Feast of Tabernacles, let's now apply this verse to our lives. Here are some truths that come to light (no pun intended).

Look again at John 8:12: "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

1. Repetition.

The first thing to notice is that "Again Jesus spoke" to the people. Aren't you thankful that God doesn't just give us one chance? He spoke to both the sexual sinner and the lost legalist in the same chapter and is ready to do it again and again and again. Jesus loves to give us chances. I had to hear the gospel many times before I responded. But we don't have unlimited opportunities. At some point it will be too late for you. Twice in this chapter, in verse 21 and in verse 24, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they "will die in their

sins.” I can’t think of anything more tragic than that. It’s no accident that you’re here today. This could be your last chance to put your faith in Christ.

2. Revelation.

Perhaps you’re not sure if Jesus is really who He says He is. Friend, I don’t know what else you could be waiting for. What more evidence do you need? When Jesus said, “I am the light,” He is claiming to be both God and Savior. He has perfectly fulfilled the prophecy found in Isaiah 42:6-7: “I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

3. Redemption.

Notice what comes next, “...I am the light of the world. Whoever...” Jesus came for the whole world. Interestingly, the word “world” occurs only 15 times in the first three gospels and 77 times alone in the Gospel of John! We must never lose sight of the importance of taking the gospel to the nations. I love that phrase, “whoever.” Anyone can come to Him. He died for the sins of everyone. No matter what you’ve done, you can be forgiven. John 12:46: “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

At the end of the service next weekend we’re going to participate in a “global hymn sing” with thousands of churches around the world. Keith and Kristyn Getty have reintroduced a song called, “Facing a Task Unfinished” to shine the spotlight on the importance of taking the gospel to the nations. Pastor Chad and I will be talking about this on Moody Radio this Wednesday morning. I posted the song on the EBC Facebook page and have also included a link on the Sermon Extras tab on our website so you can learn it this week.

Friend, do you need to be forgiven? Don’t run away from the light! Come to the light and be forgiven. Colossians 1:13-14: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

4. Response.

Salvation is not automatic. It doesn’t work by osmosis just because you’re in church today. It’s for whoever “follows.” To follow the Lord Jesus means to believe and receive or literally, “to follow together along a way.” Have you done that yet? John 1:5 says that by nature we try to extinguish the light because it hurts our eyes. The problem with that is we will then stumble around in the darkness of our sins. The only way to have light is to follow the light.

This past Mondy night I was invited by Edgewood member Nels Lindell to speak to the brand new Fellowship of Christian Athletes group at Blackhawk College. Incidentally, I’ve also spoken to another Christian group on campus called, “The Conversation.” Seven guys from the baseball team came and three of them responded and decided to follow Christ! Some of them are in our services this weekend. Here’s a picture. The whole reason this group got off the ground is because of the prayers of Nels. These groups are shining the light of Christ in a dark place.

This gave me a renewed vision for the impact Edgewood can have on college campuses around the Quad Cities. God is doing some great things in our Ignite Singles Ministry. Last Sunday I attended their class and was really impressed with Robert Sanders’ teaching and the large group discussion that focused on application. Things are also going well in our student ministry under the leadership of Chris and Jamie Rogers – over 50 students came to the Super Bowl party! I can’t wait to onboard our Youth and Young Adults Pastor to bring even more focus and leadership so that we can reach more students and singles. Our search consultant will be presenting a list of candidates to the Deacons and Pastoral team this Thursday night.

5. Result.

Once you respond and decide to follow Christ you “...will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” This literally reads, “He shall surely not walk in darkness.” Darkness is a metaphor for disaster, death and destruction, along with sin and its consequences. Do you see the word “have”? We don’t just get to see the light, we can have the light.

You can live in the light or despair in the dark. John 12:35: “So Jesus said to them, ‘The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going.’”

A boy once heard his Sunday School teacher say that Jesus was the light of the world. After class, he went up to his teacher and said, “If Jesus really is the light of the world, I wish He’d come hang out in my house. It’s awfully dark where I live.”

Is it dark where you live? You can change that by embracing the light of life.

6. Repent.

Have you been slipping spiritually? Have you been defaulting to the dark instead of living in the light? If so, it's time to turn the lights on. Listen to Ephesians 5:8: "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light."

7. Reflect.

One of our purposes as His followers is to shine His light in a dark world. Matthew 5:14: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." Someone put it like this: "I'd rather light a candle than curse the darkness."

Last Sunday after the service an Edgewood member was so pumped about what he learned about Jesus being the bread of life that he told his parents all about it. He then went and told a neighbor. On Monday he shared with one of his employees. He's living out our value of going with the gospel – to his family, his neighbors and to his workplace. How about you?

I heard another amazing story this week.

Kendall, a first-grader, got saved in November, and has been reading Anchor for the Soul. She can't put it down (By the way, we've given away around 4,000 of these gospel books and are getting ready to publish it in Spanish – several EBC members are reading the manuscript right now to check for errors).

Recently Kendall asked her mom (Kara Fitch) if she could bring the book to school so she could read it on the bus. When she started reading it, one of her friends became curious and so they started reading it together. A few days later, another friend became interested and started reading it with the other two. One day both of these girls said to Kendall, "We want to know how to have Jesus in our lives." So this little 7-year-old told them. They both prayed right there on the bus and asked Jesus to save them! She came home and told her mom, "They asked me how to get to heaven. I told them and they did it."

Kendall and her sister Kailey are following Christ and will be baptized soon. Their parents, Tim and Kara Fitch, are living on mission and equipping their daughters to shine the light of Jesus in our dark world.

If you're stirred by this and want to do a better job of letting your light shine, here are some growing and going ideas.

1. If you're a mom, consider going to the Hearts at Home conference in Peoria April 22-23.
2. If you're single and looking to connect with others, there's a bowling and laser tag night at the QC Entertainment Center this Saturday night.
3. If you're divorced, check out Divorce Care on Wednesday nights.
4. If you're in high school and want to learn how to let your light shine on your campus, block out April 8-9 for Dare to Share in Chicago.
5. Participate in our shoe drive for gypsy children in Romania.
6. There's an event this Saturday focusing on biblical womanhood.
7. And I want to challenge every man at Edgewood to attend the Iron Sharpens Iron Men's Conference on Saturday, April 16th at Harvest. I'm hoping for 100 men to go! Guys, we need to step it up. Former NFL quarterback Jeff Kemp and Moody grad Mark Jobe whose church in Chicago has over 20 locations, will be speaking.

1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Growing and Going

Let's milk this metaphor a little more as we look at some things that could be keeping us from fully shining for Christ.

1. Stop covering your light [put a box over lit lantern]. Are you doing something that is snuffing out the light of Christ in your life? Matthew 5:15-16: "Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

The whole purpose of shining our light is to give glory to God. This past Tuesday night I had the joy of presenting a check to Pregnancy Resources in the amount of \$51,555 for the Mobile Ultrasound Van. Thanks for living out your light as you gave so generously. The people at the training even stood up and applauded. I simply pointed to heaven and said, "All glory to God."

2. Make sure you're plugged in [try to turn lamp on that is not plugged in]. Some of you are not shining simply because you've

unplugged from your power source. You can't grow if you're not plugged into God. In addition, one of our core values is to gather with God's people. Hebrews 10:25: "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

3. Get recharged daily [hold up dim flashlight]. Is your light growing dim? The only way to burn bright is by getting recharged and rejuvenated by daily time in the Word of God. Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

4. Use these metaphors to help you remember. Whenever you eat bread or see bread or smell bread, ask yourself this question: "Am I finding my satisfaction by feeding on Christ?" And when you see the light of the sun (be patient; it's coming) or when you turn on a light, ask this question: "Am I plugged in to Christ and am I shining for Him today?"

We're going to turn off some of the lights and ask you to come forward if you are ready to follow Jesus Christ. Have you asked Christ to be your forgiver and leader? Are you a believer but you've been doing some things in the dark? It's time to bring it into the light.

Closing Song: "The Great Light of the World."

Sometimes at night I am afraid
I cover my eyes,
Cover my shame
So here in the dark
Broken apart
Come with your light

John 10:1-10 The Door

Brian Bill on Feb 22, 2016

A mixed metaphor combines images that don't always make sense. Here are some of my favorites:

- Running around like a chicken chasing its tail.
- Stick your neck out on a limb.
- We'll burn that bridge when we come to it.
- That's about as funny as a screen door on a submarine

While these metaphorical mix-ups won't make an English teacher happy, they can be very effective because they stick in our minds. We shouldn't feel too badly if we struggle to comprehend our passage today because John 10:6 says, "This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them." Part of the challenge is that the word "door" is used four times with several different meanings in John 10:1-10. Follow along as I read:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Doors are some of the most common things in the world, present in some form in all societies and cultures. Here are a few from Dublin taken by Patty Steele and a couple from the Dominican Republic taken by our daughter Emily. Don't you love how Jesus takes what is common in order to teach us profound truth about His worth and His work?

We've already seen that He takes ordinary bread and declares Himself to be the extraordinary Bread of Life. Last week we learned that the qualities of light reflect the kind of Savior He is when He said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

BTW, there was a cool shoutout on Facebook this week from a guest who came to one of our services last weekend: "...I journeyed to the distant land of Rock Island, braving snow and impatient drivers to attend Edgewood Baptist Church...the coolest thing was coming out of the service and seeing the members of the congregation cleaning off other people's cars."

Let's make a few observations.

1. This "I AM" phrase is both personal and powerful. Like He does with the other Messiah Metaphors, Jesus states strongly: "I, even I, and only I, am the door." His listeners would have immediately thought of Exodus 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM." This is a staggering statement of His sovereign supremacy.

When Jesus declares Himself to be the door, passages like Psalm 78:23 come to mind: "Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven." They would have also thought of Genesis 28:17, when Jacob had a dream of a stairway to heaven: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

2. Jesus is contrasting himself with the phony Pharisees. In particular, He is referencing the events of chapter 9 in which He gave sight to a man who was born blind. Because of an unfortunate chapter break, it's easy to think that chapter 10 is a different conversation. The Pharisees ostracized this new believer and according to 9:34, "they cast him out." Because of this, Jesus subsequently accuses them of being thieves and robbers in 10:1.

3. The setting is a normal day for sheep and a shepherd. In verses 1-5, it's morning and the shepherd is forming his flock. In verses 7-10, the time moves to midday and the shepherd is feeding his flock. Shepherding was not only an important role in that society; the metaphor itself was employed time and again in the Scriptures to show God's loving heart toward His lambs. Psalm 100:3: "Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture."

Let's think for a moment about what a door does. Go ahead and shout out what a door is designed to do.

- To provide an entrance.
- To provide an exit (BTW, we have two doors on either side of the platform that are fire exits. We also have fire exit doors in each of our children's classrooms so if there is ever an emergency parents do not need to go down and get their kids. Our teachers have been trained to take your children outside to safety).
- To provide a noise and weather barrier
- To provide safety and security (BTW, we're installing a door in the hallway downstairs as extra protection for our children's area).

We also use "door" as a figure of speech when we talk about God opening a door for us. I'm praying that the upcoming Iron Sharpens Iron Conference on April 16 will open a door for EBC men to gather in groups so we can grow. We're also praying for God to open a door as we seek His man as our Youth and Young Adults Pastor. The deacons and pastoral team met with our Search Consultant Thursday night. There have been over 5,400 online views of our position summary, 78 men have applied and we've narrowed it down to six candidates. We're now studying their resumes and listening to their messages and will be pursuing the top ones. Please continue praying for this process.

With all that as background, let's unpack verses 9-10: "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Jesus the Door meets three of our most important needs:

- Salvation
- Safety
- Satisfaction

1 - Door of Salvation (John 10:9a)

Look at the front half of John 10:9: "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved..." The first thing we discover is that the door is a person ("I am") and the way in is personal ("if anyone"). Jesus declares that He is the door and that the only entrance is "by me."

An Arab shepherd showed off his sheep enclosure to a tourist and said confidently, "When the sheep go in there they are perfectly safe." To which the tourist asked, "Why doesn't your pen have a door on it?" The shepherd responded, "I am the door. After my sheep are in the pen, I lay my body across the opening. No sheep will step over me and no wolf can get in without getting past me first."

Perhaps that's why Jesus can mix metaphors so easily. He's the shepherd who goes through the door and He's the door Himself. The shepherd lays down His life for the sheep because His body is the very door that provides the entrance for salvation.

Let's break this down a bit further.

1. A single entrance.

A sheepfold only had one entry point. Just as Noah was instructed to make only one door into the ark, so too, there is just one way to be saved from certain destruction. While this is not very popular in our politically correct culture, all roads do not lead to heaven. We don't all worship the same God. Sincerity doesn't get you there. Good works aren't good enough. Jesus is the only way. Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

2. Anyone can enter.

Salvation is available for all: "if anyone enters by me." It's not limited to one group of people but is intended for the whole world. It doesn't matter what you've done or how you've been living. I like the title of Moody Radio's "Share Hope" new campaign. As one of our "Go Team" partners, they are providing hope to the hopeless and hurting. Jesus is the door of deliverance and yet people continue to look for other ways to get there. The only way in is by relationship, not ritual or religious activity because Christianity is Christ Himself. Romans 10:13: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

3. Discipleship is demanding.

While the way is open, it's certainly not easy to follow Jesus as stated in Mark 8:34: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

4. A response is necessary.

While the door is open 24/7, an individual must "enter" in order to be saved. One must believe and receive. 2 Corinthians 6:2: "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

Before leaving this point, notice that Jesus doesn't say you might be saved or maybe you'll get in, but rather: "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved..."

Q: Have you entered the door of salvation?

2 - Door of Safety (John 10:9b)

The first thing we're given is salvation. Secondly, the sheep know they are safe because the shepherd is protecting them.

According to the last part of verse 9, the sheep "will go in and out..." The sheep were safe inside the fold and they were secure out in the pasture because the shepherd was with them. This was a Hebrew phrase for going about one's business. It's the idea of every day living. Deuteronomy 28:6: "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out." Psalm 121:8: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

We see a similar idea in Psalm 23:4-5 "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies..."

I like that we get to "go in and out." Almost sounds like the hamburger place called "In 'N Out," doesn't it? We come in to gather, grow and give in order to go out! We gather here and we go out there to bring others in here. We can come in and go out with freedom because Jesus wants us to live life with liberty, not shackled down with rules and regulations. Whether we're in the pen or out in the pastures, we pass through Jesus and receive His grace.

With all that is happening in our world right now, isn't it good to know that our faith gives us freedom to trust that the Redeemer is our refuge? We can go about our daily routines and be confident about our salvation and about our ultimate safety, even if the Lord were to call us home sooner than we expect.

3 - Door of Satisfaction (John 10:9c-10)

There's one more guarantee found in the last phrase of verse 9 and verse 10. It's the promise that we will experience satisfaction: "...and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

1. Jesus meets the needs of those in his flock

Notice that the sheep go in and go out and "find pasture." As we learned two weeks ago, the hunger of the human soul can only be

satisfied by the Bread of Life. Are you feeding upon Him daily? Did you know that sheep won't settle down until their needs are met?

Listen to the opening words of Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

Since the Lord is my shepherd I will not lack anything that is really necessary and good for me. Friend, if Jesus is your shepherd, everything else is secondary. One of the best definitions of contentment I've ever heard is this: Contentment is not having everything you want. Contentment is wanting everything you have. If the Lord is your shepherd, you have everything you need.

2. Satan uses sinister ways to wipe people out

1 Peter 5:8-9 reminds us that Satan is stalking us: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." James 4:7 gives us our strategy to overcome the devil: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Almost 20 years ago a group calling themselves Heaven's Gate, tried to reach what they believed was an alien spacecraft. 39 members committed mass suicide so their souls could be taken by this UFO to "another level of existence above human." That was a lie from the pit of Hell!

Satan is behind the taking of all life because he is a thief who steals, kills and destroys. The adversary celebrates suicides, applauds abortions and moves humans to murder each other. I saw this headline in Friday's Dispatch about a recent crime: "There's like a shooting here every other week." There are at least three things the thief does in our lives today.

- He steals our first love. We used to be on fire for God. Our appetite for His Word was voracious, our witness was strong, and our prayers were intense but now we're just going through the motions.
- He kills our joy. He loves to get us to blame God and others for the bad things that have happened to us. The devil wants us to see life as drudgery.
- He destroys our purpose. Some of you have been knocked off track and you've stopped serving the Savior.

A couple weeks ago a friend gave me a copy of Jim Cymbala's book called, Breakthrough Prayer. I read a portion at our Deacon Meeting Tuesday night: "...passionate, desperate prayer is definitely out of vogue today. Maybe that's the reason why we experience so little divine blessing on both the church as a whole and her individual members. So often we seem content with the status quo rather than reaching out for more of God. Because of this, we seem to have little effect on the world around us." We then cried out to God in prayer, asking Him to send revival to us, to our church and to our community. BTW, there's a group that meets for prayer every Tuesday night in the library and they'd love to have you join them.

3. Jesus longs for us to live an abundant life.

Jesus came to give us more than just freedom and even more than just food. He wants us to experience fullness. Unfortunately, many of us are just limping through life as we stumble along in survival mode.

That reminds me of the story of a hamster and its owner. Each morning Sam would jump on the wheel, stopping only to grab a bite to eat. He was driven by some ingrained belief that his effort was getting him somewhere. Trudge, trudge, trudge. Run, run, run. Nibble, nibble, nibble. He eats a few occasional treats to break the monotony. That's Sam's life... and life for Sam's hamster is almost as monotonous!

For some of us life is a drag because we've never lived it. If the truth were known, some of us are just putting in our time.

Jesus not only came to save, and to give you safety, He also came to satisfy: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." The word "abundantly" means, "beyond what is necessary," "exceeding," "superabundant" or "excessively superior." Believer, are you living that kind of life right now? Psalm 23:5: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

On Tuesday the pastoral team went to Wendy's for lunch. Pastor Tim ordered a bowl of chili and was asked if he wanted some crackers. He said, "sure." They gave him like 12 packages. It was pretty funny seeing the overabundance he was given. It was way more than he needed and way more than he could use. In a similar way, God gives us an overabundance of everything we need so we can live a life that is not just blah or ordinary.

This principle of abundance is clearly outlined throughout Scripture: Psalm 36:8: "They feast on the abundance of your house and you give them drink from the river of your delights." Ephesians 3:20: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think..." Romans 5:20: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

Eternal life is forever but it doesn't start once you die. It begins as soon as you are saved! He has chosen you and He has a mission

for your life. Are you tuned in to Him or have you allowed Satan to steal some things from you?

Genesis 14:16 tells us that Abraham “recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions...” It’s time to recover your stolen property and get your love, joy and purpose back!

Jesus wants us SAVED, SAFE and SATISFIED. Are you?

Action Steps

There are only two groups of people here today. Those who are saved and those who are not...yet. You’ve either entered the door of salvation or you’re still standing outside that door. Because of that, I want to gear the application of this message to both groups. I looked up a bunch of passages that have the word “door” in them and narrowed it down to six – three geared to those who are not yet saved and three for those who by God’s grace have been saved but don’t feel safe or satisfied.

Action Steps for the Unsaved

1. Admit that sin is crouching at your door. Genesis 4:7: “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”
2. Enter the narrow door of salvation right now. Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”
3. Be saved before the door shuts. Matthew 25:10-13: “ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Action Steps for the Saved

1. Open the door to Christ and restore your relationship with Him. We often quote Revelation 3:20 in our evangelism efforts but it’s actually directed to Christians and to churches who’ve shut the Savior out: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”
2. Stop grumbling because the Judge is at the door. James 5:9: “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.”
3. Live on mission and go through open doors. God will open doors and we must go through them, knowing it will be difficult, but ultimately satisfying. 1 Corinthians 16:9: “For a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”

I want to challenge you to do something right now that could set your life in a whole new direction. I’m going to ask you to get off your seat and walk through this door we have set up if you’re ready to make one of these decisions. Pastor Chad is going to play some music and you get up right now and walk through this door. I’ll go first.

We’re going to end today by singing a song that is new to us. It was first written by Frank Houghton, a missionary with China Inland Mission (now OMF) and is called, “Facing a Task Unfinished.” He wrote it in the 1920s as a call for 200 missionaries to go to China. By 1931, over 200 missionaries had responded which led to the greatest growth of Christianity in the history of the world – the number of Christians went from less than a million to around 100 million today!

Keith and Kristyn Getty, modern day hymn writers, repurposed this song to make it easier to sing without changing the words. They also added a new chorus to it. Keith Getty refers to this song as the “greatest hymn on missions ever written.” Here’s his prayer, and mine: “It’s my prayer that Christians around the world will get more excited about both music and mission, but also about living the mission of God on our own doorsteps and in our own kitchens, as well as around the world.”

They are hoping for over 10,000 churches across the globe to sing this song this weekend, from Argentina to Uzbekistan and from America to Australia. Here’s a map of what that looks like.

You should be able to pick it up easily because the tune is, “The Church’s One Foundation”

Facing a task unfinished

That drives us to our knees

A need that, undiminished

Rebukes our slothful ease
With none to heed their crying
For life, and love, and light
Unnumbered souls are dying
And pass into the night
From cowardice defend us
From lethargy awake!
Forth on thine errands send us
To labour for thy sake

While the metaphors may be mixed up in our passage, the message is clear. It's time to go through the door. As we close today, if you haven't walked through the door, feel free to walk through it after the service to indicate that you've made a decision.

John 10:1-18

The Value of One

Brian Bill 1/21/01

An elderly man was out walking along the beach early one morning when he noticed a teenager ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the youth, he asked him what he was doing. The student responded by saying that the stranded starfish would die if they were left in the morning sun.

The man chuckled a bit and said, "But the beach goes on for miles and miles, and there are millions of starfish. You can't save all of them! How can your effort make any difference?"

The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it safely into the water. He then turned, looked at the older man and said, "It makes a difference to that one."

As we focus this morning on the Sanctity of Human Life, we have to admit that it's easy to wonder if we're making any difference. Life today has been cheapened, our society has been characterized as a "culture of death," and those of us who are "pro-life" are often ridiculed and castigated by the media.

Some people would say that abortion is strictly a preference or a political view that shouldn't be discussed in church. I want to argue this morning that it is, in fact, a moral issue that must be addressed.

There is some good news to report. A recent study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute shows that the number of abortions in the United States dropped more than 17% between 1990 and 1997. The Centers for Disease Control has stated that one of the contributing factors for this decline is the changing attitude about the moral implications of abortion! Christians are making a difference – and churches that have the courage to speak the truth in love are positively affecting our culture. The bad news is that abortion clinics have started to aggressively compete for more clients and have begun to diversify by dispensing the abortion pill called RU-486 (BreakPoint with Charles Colson, 1/4/01).

C. Everett Koop and Francis Schaeffer wrote a profound and prophetic book in 1979 called, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* They argued that without a biblical view of life, what is unthinkable today becomes thinkable tomorrow. When law and conscience are not rooted in a transcendent source of authority, relativism prevails and anything goes if those in power can be persuaded.

At the beginning, abortion-rights advocates argued that only extreme and rare conditions warranted more liberal abortion laws. Today, almost 30 years and more than 30 million abortions later, a woman can end the life of her preborn child, including using a partial-birth abortion, for any reason. The unthinkable becomes thinkable – and legally protected.

Today, respected experts are arguing that it's OK to take the life of an infant even after it's born. In an article entitled "Killing Babies Isn't Always Wrong," philosopher Peter Singer, a professor at Princeton, writes: "Perhaps, like the ancient Greeks, we should have a ceremony a month after birth, at which the infant is admitted to the community. Before that time, infants would not be recognized as having the same right to life as older people." He's not alone. American University philosopher Jeffrey Reiman agrees: "Infants do

not possess in their own right a property that makes it wrong to kill them.” (BreakPoint with Charles Colson, 9/2/00).

Friends, the unthinkable is becoming thinkable...again.

What Can We Do?

Which leads to a question. What can we do? We must begin by recognizing the value of every created person – the preborn, the newborn, the disabled, the mentally challenged, those with AIDS, the elderly, and those we might not care for because they have a different colored skin or religion than we do.

In order to frame our study this morning, I want us to look at how Jesus dealt with people. Even though He often taught the crowds, Jesus always saw the value of one. I love the story of how Jesus ministered to the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. Luke 8:42 tells us that the surging crowds almost crushed Jesus when he was trying to teach. And then this hurting woman comes up behind him and touches the edge of his cloak. In the midst of all the people, we see how Jesus places supreme value on the individual when he says, “Who touched me?” He then gives her both spiritual and physical healing.

Please turn to John 10. We’ll see at least four practical principles in this passage that can help us address the moral issues of our day. If we want to make a difference we must:

- Proclaim the Truth (10:10a)
- Preach the Gospel (10:10b-11)
- Promote Obedience (10:1-5)
- Practice Grace (10:14-18)

Jesus loved to use word pictures. In this chapter he describes a sheep pen. It was an enclosure made out of rough stone, only partially covered, if covered at all. It had only one door. When the sheep returned to the fold at night after a day of grazing, the shepherd stood in the doorway and inspected each one as it entered.

If a sheep was scratched or wounded by thorns, the shepherd would anoint it with oil to facilitate healing. If they were thirsty, he gave them water. After all the sheep had been counted and brought into the pen, the shepherd would lay across the doorway so no intruder could enter. The shepherd became the door. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who protects, gives, and sustains the life of the sheep.

Proclaim Truth

Let’s begin by looking at the first part of verse 10: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy...” In addressing an issue like this, the first thing we must do is to proclaim the truth. Jesus made it very clear that Satan is committed to kill and devoted to destruction. He will do whatever he can to steal life from us.

There are two parts of proclaiming truth as it relates to abortion. The first is this: Every person has value because they’ve been created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Let’s get more specific. A year ago, when I preached on this same topic, I listed 8 biblical reasons to establish that life in the womb is not only viable, but also valuable. They bear repeating this morning:

1. The preborn are called “babies.” “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb...” (Luke 1:41).
2. The life of the preborn is protected by the same punishment for injury or death as that of an adult. “If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely...if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life.” (Exodus 21:22-23).
3. Christ was fully human from the point of conception. “...Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son...” (Matthew 1:20-21).
4. Preborn children have a propensity to sin. “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5).
5. Personal pronouns are used to describe preborn children. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart...” (Jeremiah 1:5).

6. God calls people to ministry even before they are born. "Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name." (Isaiah 49:1).

7. God creates the preborn. "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." (Psalm 139:13).

8. God knows the preborn intimately and personally. "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body..." (Psalm 139:15-16)

As we proclaim the truth, we need to know what the Bible says. However, since some people don't accept the Bible as the ultimate truth source, we can also argue for the value and sanctity of the preborn by focusing on the baby's development in the womb.

On August 19, 1999, freelance photographer Michael Clancy was hired by USA Today to photograph a fetal surgery for spina bifida that was done on a preborn baby at 21 weeks gestation. At the end of the operation, as the doctor was preparing to close up the opening in the mother's uterus, the baby's hand slipped out. The doctor reached down with his finger and held Samuel's little hand. Let me show you the picture...

PPT Slide of Baby Samuel

I wish this image could be shown on every newscast and run in every newspaper in America. Every teenager should see it. Why? Because it is an unmistakable reminder that a baby is growing and developing in the womb. It's not a "blob of tissue," or "fetal material." A preborn baby is fully human from the moment of conception.

Little Samuel's parents wept for days when they saw this picture. His mother said this: "The photo reminds us that my pregnancy wasn't about disability or illness. It was about a little person."

Based on both biblical and medical evidence, the first conclusion is obvious: human life is sacred and full of dignity. The baby in the womb is a tiny human being with an eternal soul being formed in the "image of God." That leads to the second element of proclaiming truth: it is wrong to murder an innocent human being. To take the life of someone created in God's image is to indirectly attack the God who created life. Abortion must be defined as the destruction of a human life in violation of the 6th Commandment: "You shall not commit murder."

That's exactly what Satan wants to happen. Look again at John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." The evil one is a thief who steals. This word is "klepto" in the Greek. It's where we get the word "kleptomaniac" which is someone who has an abnormal and irresistible desire to steal, especially things of symbolic value. This is one of the ways Satan tries to get back at the Creator by snatching that which God has created.

"Kill," is the word used to denote a "sacrifice by slaying a victim." The devil is determined to snuff out life at every opportunity he can find. The word, "destroy," carries with it the idea of utter destruction. Satan not only is destroying life in the womb, he is also trying to destroy the women who have had abortions. Abortion comes from hell. It is the work of the devil himself.

Now that's the bad news. It needs to be proclaimed. But we can't stop here even though many Christians do. We're often known more by what we are against than by what we're for. We have to move on to the good news.

Preach the Gospel

After proclaiming the truth about abortion, the second step is to preach the gospel.

Take a look at the last half of verse 10 and verse 11: "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

While we can, and must, support legislative initiatives to overturn Roe v. Wade, and protest partial birth abortions and RU-486 on moral grounds, we must also preach the gospel. Our society will ultimately be changed as hearts are transformed by the life-changing power of Jesus.

Jesus came to cancel out the coming of the thief. He has defeated the deceiver who only wants to take life. Jesus came in order to give life. He is the good shepherd. This phrase in the Greek actually reads this way: "I am the shepherd, the good one." The basic meaning of the word "good" is "beautiful or excellent." The beautiful Shepherd lays down his life for the benefit of the sheep by dying in their place.

Jesus came to forgive our sins and give us eternal life. And, He also came to give us abundant life that is to be experienced this side of heaven. The idea here is that the Christian life is meant to be filled with showers of God's blessings. This kind of life is to be

normative for all believers. It's not a separate stage or level that just a few are supposed to reach. To know Him as shepherd is to have everything change in your life.

We're to live a life that is overflowing. That ties in to the "Prayer of Jabez." God brings on blessings so that we can ask Him to bring on more ministry in our lives. We have been blessed with life that is full – if we'll but live that way.

That's the message we've been entrusted with. Jesus is ready to forgive, restore, cleanse and to give a new and abundant life to those who are dead in their sins. We're going to focus more on how to become a "Contagious Christian" in our series that begins next Sunday.

Schaeffer and Koop urge us to "stand against the loss of humanness in all its forms. It is God's life-changing power that is able to touch every individual, who then has a responsibility to touch the world around him with the absolutes found in the Bible. In the end, we must realize that the tide of humanism, with its loss of humanness, is not merely a cultural ill, but a spiritual ill that Christ alone can cure." (As quoted by Douglas Groothuis in "Culture Watch", Moody Magazine, 12/00, page 50).

Promote Obedience

We must first proclaim the truth about abortion. Second, we are to preach the gospel. Third, we must promote obedience. Check out verses 3-4: "...and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."

Did you catch the two key phrases? We are to "listen" and we are to "follow." Jesus continues to paint a picture of a shepherd with his sheep. His listeners would know that at night various flocks would gather together in the safety of the sheepfold. In the morning the shepherds would come to take their sheep out to pasture. Interestingly, the sheep will only follow their own shepherd. They recognize his voice and they know He will care for them. Following is the constant habit of true sheep.

We're a lot like sheep aren't we? We tend to go astray. And yet, if we know the Good Shepherd, we'll be locked into listening to His voice and focused on following Him. Even with all the other voices clamoring for our attention, we'll want to follow Jesus.

Let me give you a practical way to promote obedience in your own life: commit yourself to moral purity. If our society would limit physical intimacy to the safety and pleasure of marriage, we would see a significant drop in the abortion rate. Will that ever happen? It can if hearts are changed by the Shepherd. Changed hearts will lead to changed morals. Guess who needs to take the lead on this one – we do!

I read this week about a very practical way to live out your listening and your following. According to a new study published in the American Journal of Sociology, "adolescents who take public pledges to remain virgins are much less likely" to be physically intimate with someone before marriage. According to the authors of this study, the delay effect is "substantial and robust." In fact, those who make "purity pledges" wait about 18 months longer to engage in physical intimacy than those who don't.

One of the guys who designed the survey, J. Richard Udry, from the University of North Carolina said, "We were cynical about the likelihood that the pledge would produce significant results. But we were wrong." (Christianity Today Weblog: "True Love Actually Does Wait," 1/4/01).

The Bible puts it this way in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable." Teenagers, and single adults, as your pastor, I plead with you to make a promise for purity. If you feel like it's too late, that you've already blown it, decide right now to be a faithful follower of Jesus and pledge from this day forward to save yourself for marriage. If you're already married, renew your vows and determine to be faithful to your spouse.

If you'd like more information about "promise rings," or other tools that can help you maintain your purity, talk to Pastor Geoff or check out www.truelovewaits.com. On Valentine's Day, February 14th, hundreds of thousands of students committed to moral purity will be "signing" and "mailing" True Love Waits cards on the Web. Their goal is to "seize the net" by taking a stand for abstinence until marriage.

Friend, as you commit to listen to the Shepherd and follow Him wherever He leads, He may expand your territory in ways you've never dreamed. I can't tell you specifically how to respond to the issue of abortion, but I urge you to follow the Holy Spirit's nudges. We can't just sit back and do nothing. Proverbs 24:11 lays it out in pretty strong words: "Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter."

It may be more comfortable to adopt a passive stance with regard to the abortion issue. It certainly would be the least offensive response. But who, with a clear conscience, can sit back, say little, and do nothing while babies continue to be killed? Here are a few ideas – ask God to expand your ministry borders as you consider the following:

- Volunteer at the Caring Pregnancy Center.
- Support the CPC financially and with other gifts like diapers, formula, etc.
- Work with The Rage or 24-7, our student ministries.
- Consider adopting a baby.
- Write letters to your legislative representative.
- Offer to baby-sit for a single parent.
- Invite a pro-life speaker to your school.
- Start a support group for women who have had abortions.
- Be an extended family to a young woman in need.
- Talk to your children about sexual purity.

Practice Grace

Let's proclaim the truth about abortion and then let's preach the gospel. As we do, we better make sure we're promoting obedience in our own life, and in our own church. The final challenge is perhaps the most difficult for us as believers – let's practice grace.

When the Pharisees first heard Jesus paint this picture, they became very angry. They were especially troubled by His teaching in verse 16: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also..."

Jesus not only valued everyone He came in contact with, He went out of His way to "seek and save the lost." He loved to give grace to those who had little value in the eyes of the church crowd. In John 4, Jesus spoke words of life to a woman who had multiple marriage partners and was living with another man. Instead of condemning her, He gave her what she was really looking for – a relationship with the Good Shepherd. In John 8, when the righteous religious people were ready to wipe out a woman caught in adultery, instead of slinging a stone, Jesus launched some love and gave some grace.

Brothers and sisters, I'm not really sure why we're so hard on people when they mess up, but we need to practice some grace. I've said it before and I'll say it again. Why do we get so angry with people who sin differently than we do? Some of us are more like the Pharisees than we care to admit as we act like our sins smell better than the sins of others.

Abortion is wrong. It's repulsive and sinful. But, it's forgivable. While we need to speak out against moral concerns in our society, we must also offer love and compassion to those who need help. We need to remember that the primary biblical call is to make disciples, not win arguments.

The Elliot Institute in Springfield, Illinois recently conducted a comprehensive survey of 260 post-abortive women. Not surprisingly, 92% of these women report that they have experienced feelings of guilt and 87% indicated that they suffered some depression (see the web site called, www.afterabortion.org for more information and additional resources).

In order to help us practice grace, I want you to meet Sandy Gordon. Sandy lives in Fairbury and ministers with the Caring Pregnancy Center here in Pontiac. She has a special interest in helping women deal with the aftereffects of abortion.

John 11:17-27

Easter Comeback

Brian Bill on Mar 29, 2016

→ Transition from "Unchained"

Are you in need of a comeback? I love those words...

I was a captive till you set me free

I was an outcast and you accepted me

I was a dead man but you are the risen one

I've found mercy and a second chance

I've been unchained...like a prisoner that's been set free!

Have you ever met someone who always seems to have a good comeback line when you say something sarcastic? On a list of the "10 Best Comebacks," Winston Churchill's one-liners appear three different times.

One time the American socialite Nancy Astor was invited to a dinner party held by Churchill and became annoyed with him so she blurted out: "Winston, if you were my husband, I'd put poison in your coffee." Unaffected by her sudden outburst, Churchill quickly replied with an unforgettable comeback: "Nancy, if you were my wife I'd drink it!"

We're not going to talk about that kind of comeback today. Instead we want to focus on the kind of comeback that often follows a setback.

Everybody loves a good comeback story because they give us hope!

That's why the Rocky movies are so fun to watch – well, maybe a couple of them but certainly not all 7!

Bethany Hamilton was just 13 years old when her left arm got bitten off by a shark while surfing. After a month of medical operations, she returned and learned how to surf with one arm. She's made a pretty cool comeback!

I personally enjoyed the comeback that the Wisconsin Badgers made against Xavier a week ago when Bronson Koenig hit a three-pointer as time expired.

Or, how about that amazing half-court buzzer beater by Carson Frakes that sent Rockridge to the state finals! That comeback shot made ESPN and USA Today!

I read an article recently from the Huffington Post that began like this: "Comebacks are possible; in fact, they happen all the time. Yet, if you have had a setback, a comeback may seem impossible to you...The challenge is how you can overcome your setback. How do you take a setback and make a comeback?"

That question frames our topic today. How do you take a setback and make a comeback?

While these stories and lists of one-liners are amazing, I wasn't able to find two of the most incredible comebacks ever. For some reason they're left off all the lists – Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and the comeback of Jesus Christ Himself from the grave.

Here's the main idea today: Because Christ came back from the dead He can turn your setback into a comeback.

We're going to focus our attention on John 11, where we learn about a man named Lazarus who was very sick. His two sisters, Mary and Martha, are very worried and so they send word to Jesus, hoping that He would come and heal their brother. The response of Jesus is jarring in verses 4-6: "But when Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

Instead of hurrying to help, Jesus purposely waited two more days. In the meantime, Lazarus dies and then Jesus arrives.

Decisions are very deliberate in this chapter as we see faith flourish in the midst of a mess. I'm reminded that this is the real world where lives are suddenly interrupted by the great enemy of death. There are five stages in Martha's spiritual journey that we can apply to our lives so that Christ can turn our setbacks into a comeback.

1. State your setback (19). When Martha heard that her brother Lazarus had died, she was gripped with grief. Verse 19 tells us that many people came to comfort and console her and her sister "...in the loss of her brother." The scene was one of weeping and wailing as hired mourners filled the air with loud shrieks and screams. Friend, if you're upset today it's important to let it out. Express what you're feeling to God – He can handle it.

What setback has created blowback in your life?

- Have some of your relationships ruptured, leaving you lonely and abandoned?
- Are you struggling with some sort of sin that you can't shake or an addiction that you can't break?
- Are you overwhelmed at work...or wish you had work...or different kind of work?
- Are you stressed about school?
- Have you done something that has led to deep embarrassment and shame?
- Is debt causing deep discouragement?

- Do you just feel empty and aimless?
- Has someone close to you died and you feel gutted with grief?
- Do you just feel lost?

The first step is to state your setback. It's good to own that you're far away from God. Is your life spiraling downhill? Listen to how a young man describes what happened to him.

→ Play Donte Video

Do it now. It's time to start making your comeback. It's something that can be done but you must be willing to change.

Because Christ came back from the dead He can turn your setback into a comeback.

2. Get close to Christ (John 11:20).

You have a choice to make. You can stay where you are or you can take a step toward the Savior. Verse 20 tells us about the decision Martha made. She could have stayed in the house like her sister Mary, or run the other way. Instead, "So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him..." Even before Jesus arrived inside the city limits, Martha moved toward Him. She wasn't exactly sure what Jesus could do, but she knew she needed to get close to Him.

Wherever you are right now, would you take a step toward Jesus? Don't stay where you are. Maybe you're not really sure what Jesus can do but you're open to Him. Or perhaps, like Donte, you came today because you were begged to come by a loved one. Whatever the case, can I encourage you to get close to Christ? Seek Him out. And, when you do, you'll find what you're looking for in Him. Jeremiah 29:13: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Now, when you move toward Christ, it doesn't mean that you have to have everything answered or figured out. Some of you are waiting until you clean yourself up, change some habits, and get yourself ready before you get close to Christ. God wants you to come just as you are.

If you want a comeback, start by stating your setback. Second, get close to Christ. Third, tell Him your hurts.

3. Tell Him your hurts (John 11:21).

When Martha got close to Jesus, she communicated her complaint directly to Him in verse 21: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I suspect some of you have been asking "If" questions as well. "If only I would have done this." "If only so-and-so would not have done this to me."

These kinds of "If" questions are normal when we're rocked by the crushing waves of circumstances that are beyond our control. We ask these questions because we somehow think that maybe if things had worked out a little differently, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in. Others of you may be blaming God. That's precisely the implication Martha makes when she says, "Lord if YOU had been here, my brother would not have died."

It helps to know that Jesus can relate to us in our pain. In verse 33 after Mary registers a similar complaint to Jesus, we read these comforting words: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled." Just two verses later we come to the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept."

Friend, you are not alone in your agony. Jesus loves you more than you know. In John 11, we read in verse 3: "He whom you love is ill." In verse 5 we see that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister." In verse 36, after Jesus wept openly, people remark, "see how he loved him." Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses.

Because Christ came back from the dead He can turn your setback into a comeback.

4. Learn who the Lord is (John 11:24).

Notice what happens next. It's not until Martha states her setback, gets close to Christ and then tells Him her hurts, that Jesus speaks. Don't be afraid of being real with God. He can handle your honesty and absorb your attacks. And He'll speak truth into your troubles once you communicate your complaints. In verse 23, Jesus replied, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha's gives the correct Sunday School answer but it lacks any linkage to her life. It's the religious response, but it has no relevancy to her. Listen to verse 24: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She understands this in her head, but it hasn't filtered down into her heart.

Does that describe you today? Do you have a cursory acquaintance with Christ? Do you know about Him, without actually knowing

Him personally? Once we see who Jesus is, it's not difficult to believe what He can do. Erwin Lutzer puts it this way: "We do not need a Savior who can just 'help' us. We need a Savior who can resurrect us. We do not just need a Savior who helps us when life gets tough; we need a Savior who can help us when life ends."

I love how Jesus interjects Himself into Mary's theoretical theology in verses 25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life. [literally, "I, even I, and only I, am the resurrection and the life."] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus is moving her from an abstract belief about something in the distant future to a personalized trust in Himself, who alone can raise the dead and give her a comeback. Jesus is in the present tense: "I Am," not "I will be," or, "I was." He is, right now, the resurrection and the life. The resurrection is not just an event, but a Person. There is no hope for a comeback apart from Christ.

Jesus didn't merely say that there is a resurrection. He claimed that HE IS the resurrection. The fact that He would rise from the dead was the guarantee that others would too. He doesn't just give life; He is life. John 1:4: "In Him was life." Jesus put it this way in John 14:19: "Because I live, you also will live."

Because Christ came back from the dead He can turn your setback into a comeback.

5. Boldly believe and receive Jesus Christ (John 11:27).

Jesus' question to Martha is the same question He's asking you right now: "Do you believe this?" The word "believe" has much more than just an intellectual element to it. In the New Testament, faith, trust, and belief all come from the same general root word meaning "to lean wholly upon," as when you lie down on a bed, resting your whole weight upon it. It's the idea of being fully persuaded, to rely on and to trust in.

Faith begins with knowledge, which is where the intellect is involved. Then it moves to the emotions where convictions are developed. Saving faith must then move to the will, where a commitment is made. True saving faith involves appropriating what Christ has done for us.

As I was percolating on this passage, I saw something that made me smile.

After declaring that He is the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus drives this doctrine into Martha's life...and into ours.

1. He starts by saying, "Whoever believes in me, though He die; yet shall He live." Whoever refers to all people, everywhere, in everyplace [put my arms out wide].
2. Next, he narrows it by saying, "And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." [bring hands closer together]
3. And then it becomes very personal as He looks intently at Martha and at you and says, "Do you believe this?" [put hands close together to frame one person]
4. I love Martha's response in John 11:27: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." Jesus is waiting to hear you say, "Yes, Lord I believe." Have you ever said that to Him?

When Martha said "yes" to Jesus she wasn't just nodding her head or passively having some positive thoughts about Him. She was making a strong affirmation. She was saying, "Yes and more also, truly, certainly, altogether." Are you ready to boldly believe and receive what Jesus has done for you?

Because Christ came back from the dead He can turn your setback into a comeback.

The word "believe" is found four more times in this chapter.

- The reason Jesus purposely waited until after Lazarus died before He came is found in verse 15: "And for your sake I am glad I was not there so that you may believe." Likewise, Jesus allows us to go through grief so we can exercise belief!
- God does things for His own glory as seen in verse 40: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"
- In verse 42, we learn why Jesus prayed aloud to His Father, "that they may believe that you sent me."
- And, the result of Lazarus coming back to life was that many experienced the miracle of new life according to verse 45: "Many of the Jews therefore...believed in Him."

Ron Hutchcraft puts it like this: "Jesus walked out of the grave so He could walk into your life." At what stage are you stuck in your

spiritual journey? Because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, you can have a fresh start right now and He can give you the power to live life as it's meant to be lived.

1. Start by stating your setback.
2. Get close to Christ.
3. Tell Him about all your hurts.
4. Learn who the Lord is.
5. Boldly believe and receive Jesus Christ.

In John 11:43, Jesus called out in a loud voice to Lazarus, who had been dead and decomposing for 4 days: "Lazarus, come out!" Jesus called him by name and He's calling your name right now. He wants you to come out so He can give you a comeback!

I like what Louie Giglio writes: "Jesus' ultimate comeback trumps all our comebacks, but it also makes it possible in a general sense for us to come back from anything, from anywhere, at any time."

Watch and listen how Jesus Christ gave a comeback to a woman named Joanie.

→ Play Joanie video

It's pretty incredible how God gives comebacks to those who have experienced setbacks. Joanie has boldly believed and received salvation...and so can you.

Paul Tripp summarizes it well: "If Jesus defeated death, and the empty tomb tells us he did, then there is no dark thing in your heart that he is not also able to defeat."

Let's see if I can pull it all together...

No matter your setback, you can make a comeback.

Because the stone was rolled back, He now has your back.

You can pushback or you can giveback your life to Him.

Because Christ came back from the dead He can turn your setback into a comeback.

The Bible says that we're all dead in our sins. To turn our lives around and make us spiritually alive is as great a miracle as raising Lazarus from the dead.

You've not gone too far or done too much to be disqualified from a comeback. Jesus died as your substitute on the cross, paying the price for all your sins. And He is the resurrection that brings life, so that when you die, yet shall you live. But you must boldly believe and receive Him as your Savior and Lord right here and right now. You can demonstrate your belief by praying something like this.

Invitation Prayer: "Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept you out of my life. I admit my biggest setback is that is that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I own my hurts and my sins and I repent by changing my mind about the way I've been living. I don't want to stay where I am any longer and so I'm choosing to get closer to you and to learn more about you. By faith I boldly believe and receive your gift of salvation. With all my heart I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and as the resurrection and the life, you rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I surrender to you as my Savior and Lord, my Forgiver and Leader. I want to be born again. Make me into the person you want me to be. In Jesus' name. Amen."

If you prayed that prayer and meant it, would you have the courage to raise your hand so we can rejoice with you?

Could you also take out your Connection Card and check the box that describes the decision you made? There's a place to indicate that you received Christ for the first time or if you rededicated your life to Him. If you want to explore baptism or membership you can let us know that as well.

We're going to take an offering now and we'd like you to put your card in the offering plate. And remember, if you're our guest we don't expect you to participate in this part of our service.

The band is going to come back up and lead us in a closing song. As the ushers come forward, let's pray.

Offering Prayer

Closing Song – Forever

We'd love for you to come back next weekend. Our topic will be, "Withered Lives Restored." We'd love to have you come back!

Please stop by the table in the lobby and pick up a gift bag on your way out [hold up].

We began our service today by singing, "He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!" That's quite a comeback story!

There's a tradition that takes place all around the world this weekend and we're going to join thousands of churches by participating in it. I will say, "He is Risen!" and you can respond with, "He is Risen Indeed!"

ME: He is Risen!

ALL: He is Risen Indeed!

John 13:1-17, Matthew 20:20-28

Becoming A Servant

Brian Bill Mar 26, 2003

Summary: In contrast to our self-seeking ways, Jesus is the personification of servanthood. Just as He came to serve and not to be served, we're expected to do the same. Becoming a servant means that we swim against the cultural current and follow the model of t

Becoming a Servant

Q. What do you call a chicken crossing the road?

A. Poultry in motion.

Q. What do you call a boomerang that doesn't work?

A. A stick.

Q. What do you call four bullfighters in quicksand?

A. Quatro sinko.

Q. Where do you find a dog with no legs?

A. Right where you left him.

Q. What do you call cheese that isn't yours?

A. Nacho cheese.

Q. What do you call a man who falls into an upholstery machine?

A. Fully recovered.

Q. What do you call a Christian who isn't serving?

A. A contradiction.

This morning we're beginning a new series called, "Improving Your Serve." I'm making an assumption that while this church is saturated with servants, each of us can ratchet up our servanthood quotient. As we'll discover in our text today, our default setting is selfishness, not other-centeredness. In order to improve our serve we must seek the Savior and follow the model of the Master.

You and I have been redeemed for a reason. As we learned last week from Keith Shubert, we've been converted to the cause of the Great Commission. Another way to say it is that we've been saved to serve. According to our second purpose statement that comes directly from Acts 2:45, you and I have been mobilized for ministry.

Let me summarize our six strategic IMPACT statements. If someone asks you to describe the values and mission of PBC you can tell them that we are seeking to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission by:

Instructing in God's Word

Mobilizing for ministry
Praying with faith
Adoring God in worship
Caring for one another
Telling others the gospel

4 Ways to Become a Servant

Please turn in your Bible to Matthew 20. We're going to walk through this passage in order to learn four ways to become better servants. Let's set the context. In the first part of chapter 20, Jesus told a parable about some laborers who were hired to work in a vineyard. The landowner decided to pay everyone the same wage, regardless of how long they worked in the fields. Those who were hired first started to complain because they didn't think it was fair. Jesus concluded his teaching by saying in verse 16: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Verse 19 tells us that as Jesus was headed to Jerusalem to face suffering and death, He took the disciples aside and told them that He would be "mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life."

As we come to our text today, we'll see that we're really a lot like those first followers.

1. Check your motives. When we look at verses 20-21, we see that our motives can get all mixed up. In contrast to this announcement from the suffering servant we read that the mother of James and John came to Jesus with her sons, "and kneeling down, asked a favor of Him." This mother's name was Salome, who was likely the aunt of Jesus. When we compare this account with Mark's version, James and John are eager to have their mom go to bat for them. Maybe they knew that they'd have a better chance with Jesus if she made the request for them.

The phrase "kneeling down" is an act of homage or reverence. Some translations use the word "worship." Salome is following a very common protocol. First, she respects and honors Jesus and then asks a favor of Him. She begins with a general request and then is ready with her answer when Jesus asks, "What is it you want?" She responds by saying, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

Now, before we get too tough on Salome, Jesus did say in Matthew 19:28 that "at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." She got that part right but her methods were clouded because her motives were mixed up. While it's perfectly understandable that a mother would want the best for her boys, she passed right over Matthew 19:30: "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" and Matthew 20:16: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Warren Wiersbe comments, "Jesus spoke about a cross, but they were interested in a crown."

It's really easy for our motives to get out of whack. James and John were interested in glory, position and rank. They wanted to be the closest to Jesus and they wanted to be higher than anyone else. And their mother desired the best for them. The name "Salome" means clothing or clothed. And clothing, like motives, can be good or bad. Our clothes can be used to protect and shield or they can conceal or hide. She came in worship but she also secretly wanted something. She bowed but also begged. She knelt down and asked a favor. All three of them wanted their will done in their way.

If we want to improve our serve, we must first learn to check our motives. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to have pure motivation? My motives are often misaligned, even when I try to keep them straight. I can remember the few times I helped out in the Family Life Center. I sincerely wanted to lend a hand but I also wanted people to know I was helping. My telling you this morning probably has an element of mixed motives in it. Even though I'm confessing my duplicity, my motive in telling you is probably to make you think better of me than I really am.

As best we can, we really need to get our reason for serving straightened out. It is the Lord God we serve. Don't serve to impress others or to try to gain favor with God. Even the Apostle Paul struggled with this in 1 Corinthians 4:4-5: "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."

When faced with this mother's mixed up motives, Jesus asks a question to reveal what she was thinking: "What is it you want?" A truthful answer to this same question can help you and I in our serving as well. "What is it you want?" "Why are you doing this?" "Who are you serving?" "Who do you want to impress?"

2. Expect difficulty. After Salome boldly makes her request, Jesus responds rather bluntly: “You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” Jesus is really saying, “You don’t have a clue what you’re asking.” The word “cup” was a symbol of suffering or affliction. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed in Matthew 26:39: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” In John 18:11, Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”

Interestingly, both James and John answer this pointed question with complete confidence by saying, “We can.” I think they were a little too eager in their response. Jesus reinforces this when he says in verse 23: “You will indeed drink from my cup...” They wanted glory but Jesus tells them to get ready for some grief.

While we don’t always know in advance how much we’re going to suffer, we do know that if we’re serious about following Christ and serving Him wholeheartedly, we will face difficulty. Philippians 1:29: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” James didn’t suffer long but he lost his life as the first of the twelve to be martyred (Acts 12:2). John lived to be about 95 but his life was filled with difficulty, culminating with his banishment to the island of Patmos. Revelation 1:9: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

Friend, if you’re serious about serving, then get ready to suffer. You might be taken home early like James was or you may battle a long time like John did. To “drink of the cup” has reference not only to suffering, but refers to remaining faithful to the end. This phrase was understood to mean to drain the entire cup until it was emptied. While you can’t beat kingdom service, it will not always be easy. If you’re serving in a ministry right now, chances are that you’ve already experienced some difficulty. If you haven’t yet, you will. We’ve done a disservice by promising that the Christian life will be trouble-free and by promoting ministry as simple and a piece of cake. It will cost you to serve Christ! Are you willing to pay the price?

Ministry is often a struggle but it is worth it! If you sense yourself wanting to pull back or find yourself wondering if your ministry matters, allow the words of 1 Corinthians 15:58 to encourage you: “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

3. Put others first. After checking our motives and expecting difficulty, the third route to becoming a servant is to put others first. In case you’re wondering how the other ten felt when they saw that James and John were trying to grab the power positions, look at verse 24: “When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.”

This word “indignant” means, “to be greatly afflicted.” They were really mad that these two were using a relative of Jesus to get special treatment and they weren’t going to give up the top spots without a fight. They weren’t appalled by the brothers’ lack of understanding of true servanthood; they were mad that these two got to Jesus first. The spiritual attitude of the ten was not any better than that of the two. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to be angry at the sin we see in others, while we indulge in the same ones ourselves? Why is it that we condemn in others what we excuse in our own lives?

Here we see that selfishness always results in dissension. When we think only of ourselves, community breaks down and unity is replaced with division and backbiting. That’s why one of the best things we can do as a church is to serve together. A church that serves together stays together.

I love what Jesus does next in the first part of verse 25: “Jesus called them together...” That’s exactly what needs to happen when there is tension and strife. We need to come together. When Jesus calls them to Himself He does so with tenderness and familiarity. Later on, when looking out over Jerusalem, Jesus said in Matthew 23:37: “How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” Jesus is gathering his children together, holding them close like a hen under her wings. I picture Him calling a huddle and saying something like this, “Guys, please come here. Let’s form a tight circle. Get a little closer so you can hear what I’m about to say.”

He knows their default systems are set on selfishness and so he calls them together. He doesn’t take the two brothers aside and blast away, nor does he slam the ten for being indignant. He brings them back to community and then gives them a lesson in how differently things are to run in His kingdom. There is a sharp contrast between the servanthood philosophy of the Savior and the world system in which they lived: “...You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” The world’s way teaches that we should spend all our energy to get to the top and then when we get there we can boss others around.

The disciples knew the Gentile model of authority very well. History was filled with tyrannical kings and brutal provincial agents who showed little regard for the Jewish people. When Jesus reminded them that seeking power was a “Gentile” or “pagan” practice, He was in essence telling them they should not operate this way. Rabbis often used Gentile illustrations as negative examples.

Verse 26 begins with a rebuke as Jesus reframes their understanding: “Not so with you...” A Christ-follower must not operate this

way. The meaning here is: "It shall not be," or "It must not be." In the family of God there is only one category of people: servants. Notice the rest of this verse and verse 27: "...Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." This was a counter-cultural and radical teaching for Jesus to define greatness in terms of servanthood because slaves were considered to be socially inferior. Even the few masters who believed that slaves were theoretical equals would not go as far as Jesus did when He inverted the role of master and servant.

If the disciples wanted to be leaders in His kingdom, they first had to become servants. What is a servant? It's someone whose heart is intent upon, and whose will is bound to, the will and wishes of another. If I am your servant, then what you say goes. You have the last word.

One of the best biblical images of this single-minded resolve to put others first is found in Psalm 123:2: "As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God." When the master moves his finger in command, the servant simply obeys. A true servant is one who has learned to subdue the defiant autonomy of self and to subject the will to the wishes of another. What God says goes. When God says, "Jump," we should say, "How high?"

Here's the principle: If we want to become truly great then we must give up personal rights and serve others. We need to be repeatedly reminded that our central ambition should be to minister to people, not to be admired by them.

Have you ever noticed how a conversation with Jesus usually doesn't turn out the way we thought it would before it began? We have so many things that need to be changed in our lives because we're more wowed by the world than most of us care to admit.

God's ways are very different than our ways. Here are a few contrasts just from the Book of Matthew:

- To gain your life, you must lose it (Matthew 16:25)
- To experience eternal life, you must have the faith of a child (Matthew 18:3)
- To receive, you must first give (Matthew 19:21)
- To be great, you must be a servant (Matthew 20:26)

4. Follow the example of Jesus. Jesus does not just shake up our self-centered motives and tell us to expect difficulties. He also challenges us to put others first. And, in case we're wondering how to do this, He offers Himself as the perfect role model. Look at verse 28: "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This verse has been rightly regarded as one of the most precious of Christ's sayings. Jesus is both our example and our motivation.

He wasn't focused on keeping His position and getting more. In fact, according to Philippians 2:3-7, Jesus left His throne in order to serve us: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." He served the needs of others and then demonstrated the ultimate act of servanthood when He gave His life as payment for our sins, so that we can be set free. The true standard of greatness is the Savior's pattern of self-sacrifice.

Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's, who died recently, once appeared on the cover of their annual report dressed in a knee-length work apron holding a mop and a plastic bucket. Here's how he described that picture: "I got my M.B.A. long before my G.E.D. At Wendy's M.B.A. does not mean Master of Business Administration. It means Mop Bucket Attitude." Dave Thomas got his M.B.A. from following the model of the Master.

Bucket Theology

Friend, do you have a bucket theology? Do you remember what Pilate did when he had a chance to acquit Jesus? He called for a bucket and washed his hands of the whole thing. Matthew 27:24: "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'" But Jesus, the night before His death, called for a bucket and proceeded to wash the dirty and dusty feet of His disciples. It all comes down to bucket theology. Which one will you use?

Pilate's paradigm is alive and well today. He knew what he should have done but he took the easy way out. He passed on to others the responsibility that should have been his. Many people today pass the buck and wash their hands clean of everything they can.

Maybe it's because we think Somebody Else will do it.

There's a clever young guy named Somebody Else,

There's nothing this guy can't do.
He is busy from morning till way late at night,
Just substituting for you.
You're asked to do this or you're asked to do that
And what is your reply?
Get Somebody Else to do that job,
He'll do it much better than I.
So much to do in this weary old world
So much and workers so few,
And Somebody Else, all weary and worn,
Is still substituting for you.

Far too many have been content to let Somebody Else do the work. The problem with this is that there aren't that many Somebody Elses out there. And those there are have grown weary and tired. Pilate's bucket is the wrong choice. It leads to death and destruction. But there is another choice.

In John 13:4-5 we see that Jesus and His disciples are sharing the Passover meal together when Jesus "got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him." Peter didn't like that Jesus, as the guest of honor, was doing this. Have you ever stopped and wondered why Peter was so upset that Jesus was washing their smelly feet? It was because Peter knew it wasn't His responsibility. Washing feet was the job of the lowest of all slaves. This was unheard of! Jesus was their teacher. If anything, they should be washing His feet!

Roads in Jerusalem were covered with a thick layer of dust. When it rained, they turned to liquid slush. It was the custom for the host to provide a slave at the door of his home to wash the feet of dinner guests as they arrived. The servant would kneel with a bucket of water and a towel and scrub off the manure and mud from foul feet. If a home could not afford a slave, one of the early arriving guests was to take upon himself the role of the house servant and wash feet. It's interesting that none of the disciples had volunteered for the job! Chuck Swindoll writes, "The room was filled with proud hearts and dirty feet. The disciples were willing to fight for a throne, but not a towel." (Improving Your Serve, Page 164).

Listen. Jesus is revealing that servanthood is in fact the responsibility of those who follow Him. John 13:14-15: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." Does this mean that foot washing is supposed to be a church ordinance today? I don't have time to go into this now but I do want to say that this is a reenactment of heaven emptying itself for the sake of earth. At the very minimum Jesus is showing us that if the Son of God could humble Himself and serve, then we must do the same.

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. And we must do likewise. Like the disciples, we are often filled with a worldly spirit of criticism and competition as we try to position ourselves in the best light and maneuver things for our own gain. We desperately need this lesson in humility.

Obedience means personal involvement. We can't serve from a distance but must get close enough to get our hands dirty. If we're going to serve like Christ served, then we must learn to see others as He sees them. In John 13:17, Jesus tells us that if we do these things, we will be blessed. In the final analysis, happiness comes from doing the things that a servant does managing our motives, getting ready for difficulties, putting others first, and following the example of Christ.

Peter never forgot this image of Jesus taking off His outer garments and replacing them with a towel to do the work of a slave. These outer garments represented His position as the great I AM, the King of King and Lord of Lords, but He willingly laid them aside in order to serve. This greatly impacted Peter when He wrote in 1 Peter 5:5: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" D.L. Moody once said, "We may easily be too big for God to use, but never too small." Proud Peter had learned his lesson.

Pilate uses his bucket to avoid his rightful responsibility. Jesus used His bucket to take on responsibility which most would say was not His in the first place. If we call ourselves Christ followers then we shouldn't be looking for ways to wash our hands but instead we should be getting them dirty.

What Are You Waiting For?

After lightning struck on old shed, a farmer was relieved because now he didn't have to tear it down. The rain cleaned off his car and that saved him from having to wash it. When asked what he was doing now, he replied, "I'm waiting for an earthquake to shake the potatoes out of the ground."

If we want to become servants, we can't just wait for something to happen. Jesus said we're blessed when we do something. Let me give you four action steps.

1. Serve whenever you can.
2. Serve wherever you can.
3. Serve whoever is in need.
4. Be willing to do whatever it takes.

Next week we'll focus on how God has uniquely gifted each one of us so that we can serve in ways that are a perfect match for who we are.

I want to close with some helpful words from Richard Foster in his book called, "The Celebration of Discipline."

Self-righteous service comes through human effort. True service comes from the whispered promptings of Christ.

Self-righteous service is impressed with the big deal. True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large.

Self-righteous service requires external rewards. True service rests in hiddenness.

Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve. True service is indiscriminate in its ministry.

Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need.

Self-righteous service is temporary. True service is a lifestyle.

Self-righteous service fractures community. True service builds community.

Letters from the close of the 18th Century often ended with this standard description of service: "I am, with due respect, your obedient, humble servant." But over time this closing shriveled into a mere formality: "Sincerely yours."

Friends, let's close this service and live our lives as obedient and humble servants. Don't be a contradiction

John 14:1-6, Acts 4:12

What About Other Religions?

Brian Bill 5/13/01

As has been the tradition for the last seven years, Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church in Marietta, Georgia, agreed to host their community's baccalaureate service again this year. But this time, the organizers wanted to include speakers representing the Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and Wiccan religions.

Several students expressed a desire not to have the name of Jesus mentioned during the service because it would be offensive. The pastor explained that it would be a dishonor not to mention the name of Christ in His own house and that the service should be moved to a neutral location if they wanted to include other religious groups.

Many major newspapers and media outlets picked up on this story and focused on the narrow mindedness of the pastor. Let me read part of this pastor's response from a sermon he preached three weeks ago:

"My single purpose as an ordained minister is to preach Christ. Political correctness is not a deity here. In the past few weeks, I have been asked to pray in this church and not use the name of Jesus Christ. I've been asked to cover the crosses in the church because they might be offensive to non-believers. I've said 'no' to each one of these requests. It's absolutely amazing to me how people who push tolerance will push anything except tolerance of Christian faith even when it is expressed within its own church." (Compiled from www.mtbethel.org/pages/sermon.htm)

The Exclusive Claims of Christ

Some of you might not think the question we are addressing this morning is all that difficult to answer. Since we live in America, we value cultural diversity and religious pluralism. Pluralism is the view that all religions offer equally valid paths to God.

Though Christianity still dominates by sheer numbers, the U.S. now has a greater diversity of religious groups than any country in recorded history. The Encyclopedia of American Religions lists 1,600 different groups, with 44% of them non-Christian. Half of these have blossomed just since 1960. There are now more Muslims in America than there are Methodists.

In the midst of all this doctrinal diversity, the Bible makes some rather startling claims that run counter-cultural to the mantra of religious tolerance. Let me list just a few:

- Referring to Jesus, Peter boldly states in Acts 4:12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”
- 1 Timothy 2:5-6: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time.”
- 1 John 5:12: “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

These passages are extremely exclusive and overwhelmingly clear: Jesus is the only way to heaven. His statements of divine authority are incompatible with the homogenizing views of religious pluralists. The claims of Christ are outrageous but they happen to be what G.K. Chesterton called “the wild truth.”

Perhaps the strongest verse in the entire Bible is a sentence uttered by Jesus Himself. Please turn to John 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Here are a few observations:

- Notice that this verse begins with the pronoun “I.” We are not saved by a principle or a force but by a person. Jesus did not say that He knew the way, the truth and the life, or even that he taught these great principles. He declared Himself to be the embodiment of the way, the truth and the life. While answering all of life’s questions, Jesus doesn’t offer a recipe to follow, but rather a relationship.
- In the original, the words way, truth and life have the definite article in front of them so that the verse would read, “I am the way (that is, the only way), I am the truth (that is, the only truth), and the life (that is, the only life).”
- All three concepts are active and dynamic. The way brings to God; the truth makes us free; and the life produces relationship. Without the way there is no going, without the truth there is no knowing, without the life there is no living.
- The context indicates that the idea of “the way” predominates. We could put it like this: “I am the way because I am the truth and the life.”
- There is only one avenue to salvation. With Christ removed there is no redemptive truth, no everlasting life and no way to the Father. While other religions offer systems of thought that try to bridge the gap between man and God, Jesus is the only one who has succeeded in bridging the divide.

Since every word of this astonishing statement challenges the fundamental beliefs of our culture, let’s look at this verse a little more closely.

1. Jesus is the way. Jesus does not merely show the way; He is Himself the way. This has a twofold meaning. He is the way from God to us in that all divine blessings come down from the Father through the Son. He is also the way from us to God. The only way to get to God is through Jesus.

Many people today, maybe even some of you here this morning, believe that there are multiple paths to God. Studies in comparative religion have concluded that there is an “essence” to all religions. Out of this quest to find the lowest common religious denominator, “The Mountain Analogy” was developed. God is pictured at the peak of the mountain with mankind at the bottom.

According to this illustration, the story of religion is the account of man’s effort to move from the base of the mountain to the peak of union with God. The mountain has many roads. Some go by a direct path. Other roads wind all over the mountain, but eventually reach the top. The bottom line, according to this analogy, is that all religious roads, though they differ in route, ultimately arrive at the same place.

Here's the rub. Jesus very clearly states that there's only one way to the summit. All the other roads are dead-ends.

2. Jesus is the truth. Truth is the scarcest commodity in the world. We hear people say, "that might be true for you, but it's not for me." Chuck Colson writes that the dominant worldview of many younger Americans can be summed up in one word: "Whatever." People today don't seem all that interested in finding out what is true. And without the clarity and consistency of absolute moral truth, we are reduced to doing what seems right, what feels good, what produces the least resistance, and what provides the greatest personal fulfillment.

Jesus rises above our cultural confusion and shouts out, "I am the truth. Get to know me and you will discover that which is totally true and transforming." Truth is a very exclusive thing because it implies an objective standard. It is not something that changes with the whims of emotion or time or culture. What was true yesterday is true today.

3. Jesus is the life. All through the gospel of John life describes the principle of spiritual vitality. Just as death spells separation from God, so life implies communion with Him. We are dead without Him. We live when we surrender ourselves to Him. Since Jesus is life we will only find meaning when we commit to His lordship. John 1:4: "In Him was life, and that life was the light of men."

3 Questions

Jesus doesn't mince any words. No one can come to the Father except if they go through Him. In light of His exclusive claims, you and I may be asked at least three questions by pluralistic people.

1. The Question of Sincerity. The first question is the Question of Sincerity. After all, there are millions of sincere worshippers in different religions. Who can question the sincerity of a Muslim bowing to pray five times a day or the self-discipline that many Buddhists seem to possess?

The assumption here is that because people are sincere they can't be wrong. But sincerity, or the lack of it, has nothing to do with determining truth. In other words, we can be sincere and right or be sincere and wrong.

2. The Question of Tolerance. At the heart of our national sense of unity stands the crucial principle of religious toleration. The question goes something like this: "Even if you believe Christianity is true for you, does that mean it has to be true for the rest of the world? Isn't that condescending and unloving?"

Because Christianity does have a narrow nature to it, it has been attacked as being intolerant of what others believe. It's important to make a distinction at this point. The underlying assumption is that anything this narrow has to be wrong.

A position can be narrow and wrong, or it can be narrow and right. For instance, truth is always intolerant of error. The fact that one plus one always equals two is very narrow, but it's also right. When we fly in an airplane we want the pilot to land on the runway, not the highway. I want my pilot to be narrow-minded when he's flying the plane I'm on.

If Jesus is the only way, then that's true for me and it's true for you -- whether we believe it or not. We can argue all day about whether this claim has an intolerant spirit about it. But the real issue is whether or not it is true. Is it backed up by evidence? Are there reasons to believe what Jesus said? If so, then we must allow for a certain amount of intolerance because truth is always intolerant of error.

3. The Question of Truth. If Christianity is true, then the issues of sincerity and tolerance take a back seat to truth. It doesn't matter how sincere someone is if they don't acknowledge the truth of what Christ teaches. Tolerance is a non-issue if Christianity really is the only true religion.

Obviously, not everyone accepts the exclusivity of Christianity -- or any other religion for that matter. The Bahai faith seeks a total synthesis and amalgamation of all of the world religions. They try to take elements of all the different doctrines and blend them into one.

I suspect that some of you hold to this view as well. No, you might not consider yourself to be a practicing Bahai, but you like to think you can take a smorgasbord approach to faith by picking out what you like from the matrix of religious views.

The problem with this approach is that there are many clear contradictions between the various religious beliefs.

Here's another way to say it. How can all religions be true if they contradict each other? The Law of Noncontradiction states that if two statements about one particular issue contradict each other, then there are only two possible answers: (1) only one of them is true, or (2) they're both false. They cannot both be true in the same sense and at the same time.

If Jesus Christ claims to be the only way to God and Mohammed says there's another way to God, then either Christ is right and Mohammed is wrong, or Christ is wrong and Mohammed is right, or they're both wrong. They cannot both be right. Since Jews,

Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians all view Jesus differently, they simply cannot, logically speaking, all be correct. If Christianity is true, then those religions that contradict it cannot also be true.

The Claims of Christ in a Pluralistic Culture

The Bible records for us what happened when a man came face-to-face with Jesus. Before he encountered Jesus, he was filled with rage against Christians. He practiced another religion and was determined to persecute and even assassinate the leaders of this new religion with its exclusive truth claims.

One day, as he was traveling to another city to arrest some more Christ followers, he met Jesus and was converted. He realized through his encounter with Him that Jesus was the only way. Now, instead of tormenting Christians, he devoted his life to telling others about the claims of Christ.

Several years after this life-changing event, the apostle Paul traveled to a cosmopolitan city that was known for its religious diversity and pluralistic views. Athens was a lot like America today. People were free to believe whatever they wanted to. There were hundreds of different religions to choose from, and thousands of deities to worship. When Paul arrived, Acts 17:16 says that he was “distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” He was bummed out when he saw this cornucopia of human religiosity.

This culture valued open discussion about new views, so Paul reasoned with people in their religious centers and out in the marketplace. The crowds grew as he taught them about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Because of this, the city leaders asked Paul to come to a City Council meeting and explain himself more clearly. Since they were interested in religion, they thought they could just add Christianity to their belief system. Maybe what Paul was saying could be mixed in with their other religions.

You might be surprised to know that Paul affirmed them for their interest in spiritual matters. He acknowledged their sincerity in verse 22, “I see that in every way you are very religious.” He didn’t demean them for their views; instead he recognized something that is true for each one of us -- we all have a God-given desire to connect with God. By the way, it’s good to affirm people. We don’t want to blast people just because they believe something different.

Because God created the world, we can expect to find traces of Him throughout His creation. He made us to know Him. Ecclesiastes 3:11: “...He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

While they were busy worshipping and following the dictates of their religious system, these citizens didn’t fully understand the uniqueness of Jesus. God had set eternity in their hearts but they had not yet discovered salvation through Christ.

If Jesus is the only way to a relationship with the Father, and He most certainly is, how then should we live and act in our increasingly pluralistic culture? I find some great help from Paul’s sermon in Acts 17. There are four key points to his message. Let me summarize them briefly.

Paul’s Message

First, Paul begins in verse 24 by establishing the Greatness of God: He is the Creator: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of Heaven and earth...”

Second, in verse 25 Paul expounds on the Goodness of God: He is the Provider. God not only gives us life, He gives us everything else we need: “...He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”

Paul now has their attention. His third point focuses on the Government of God: He is the Ruler. We see this in verse 26: “...And He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.” The gods of the Greeks were distant beings who had no concern for the problems of people. Paul taught in verse 27 that the true God is “... not far from each one of us.” He’s intimately involved in our lives.

As he brings his sermon to a close, Paul points people to the Grace of God: Jesus is the Savior. Many years ago, there was a conference where the participants were arguing about what made Christianity unique from all other religions. C. S. Lewis, a strong defender of Christianity, came in late, sat down and asked, “What’s all the rumpus about?” When he learned that they were debating the essence of Christianity, he immediately commented, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

For centuries, God demonstrated His greatness, His goodness, His government, and His grace. He was patient with people’s ignorance, but now Paul boldly declares in verse 30: “...he commands people everywhere to repent.” Things are different now. Something has happened. Since Jesus Christ died and rose again, the playing field has dramatically changed.

Listen to how Paul drives this point home in verse 31: “For God has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man [Jesus] He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead.” Jesus will judge the whole world. The proof of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is wrapped up in the Resurrection. If you missed our Easter service, you may want to access

this sermon on our web site or pick up a tape. Everything in Christianity rises or falls on the resurrection.

How do you think people responded? How do you think this went over? Actually, people reacted much like they do today.

3 Responses

1. The Bible says that the first group of people were indignant. Acts 17:32: "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered." This group mocked Paul and laughed at him. They wanted nothing to do with the exclusive claims of Christ. To them, this whole business of only one way to God, and the resurrection was ludicrous. Why, that would mean all their other religions were invalid!

Radical relativity has invaded our cultural consciousness as well. Any absolute claim is labeled as bigoted or intolerant. Choice, in and of itself, is deemed good. And the only choice that cannot be tolerated is that some beliefs are true and good while others are false and wrong.

2. There was another response to Paul's message that day. Some were indignant but there were others who were curious. Instead of sneering at Paul, they were seekers of the truth. In verse 32 they said: "We want to hear you again on this subject." They were open to investigating what Paul had to say. They were curious. What if what they had always believed wasn't true? What if Jesus did really rise from the dead? What if He is the only way?

3. Along with the indignant and the curious, there was another response -- some believed. Verse 34 tells us that one of the members of the city council became a believer and a woman named Damaris became a Christian. I should mention that this passage says that only a few believed. My guess is that most of the people blew Paul off. A smaller number wanted to examine the evidence, and only a few were actually saved.

Friend, where are you today? What camp are you in?

Are you upset about the claims of Christ? Let me challenge you to examine the evidence before making your decision. It's logically impossible to believe that all religions are true. And, it's not really a good idea to think that none of them are true. Do you have the courage to take a look at the evidence? The stakes are high. Don't assume that the narrow way is too narrow because there's room on the road for you.

What about those of you who are curious? I applaud you for taking the time to ask questions, to explore, to examine. Keep it up. Jeremiah 29:13 says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Many of you already believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He has radically impacted your life. I want to give you four bedrock truths to help you remain anchored to the truth as the waves of relativism and pluralism crash against our culture.

1. God is perfect and fair. Genesis 18:25: "...Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"

2. Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God. John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known."

3. There is no other way to be saved apart from Christ. Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

4. We are mandated to evangelize and disciple. Matthew 28:19: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..."

All the other major world religions teach that you must get yourself together. You must pray five times a day, give money, fast, take a pilgrimage, use a Tibetan prayer wheel, avoid certain foods, observe the Sabbath, attend religious services, live a decent life and other innumerable requirements. If you do these things, then maybe you'll work your way to Nirvana or Heaven or to God.

Christianity is different. God tells us that we will never earn Heaven or deserve a right relationship with Him. Simply put, we can't live up to His standards. Instead, God has taken the initiative. Because of His great love for us, He sent Jesus to rescue us from the penalty of death that our wrongdoing deserves.

Jesus is the only way to God. You see, religion is our attempt at finding God. Christianity is God's plan to find us. Here's your choice: you can be religious or you can have a relationship with the one who made you and loves you.

When the missionary John Paton arrived in the New Hebrides in the mid-1800s, he began translating the New Testament and didn't know how to illustrate the word believe. One day, when he was leaning on a chair, the concept of trust emerged. This is how John 3:16 now reads in their Bible, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever throws his whole weight on Him, will not perish but have eternal life."

Are you ready to do that right now? Because Jesus is the only way, throw your entire weight on Him before it's too late. Next week we'll focus on another provocative question: "Will Jesus Come Again?"

John 14:3

The Promise of the Lord's Return

Brian Bill 8/28/11

This has been quite a week weather-wise in our country. With Hurricane Irene bearing down on the East Coast, people are worried and taking precautions. Earlier in the week an earthquake shook up many of these same people. Some headlines are asking if we are in the last days because of these cataclysmic events. Others are mocking and making fun of it all.

This was especially the case when many Californians scoffed at the scared people on the East Coast. One lifelong veteran of earthquakes had this to say: "Really all this excitement over a 5.8 quake? Come on East Coast, we have those for breakfast out here!" Another tweeted, "That's what us Californians use to stir our coffee with."

My wife heard some talk radio people laughing their heads off this week after one of them read Isaiah 29:6 in a mocking way: "The Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire." I don't know what they said next because she switched stations in a hurry.

Let's face it. Some of the stuff we hear does make us roll our eyes, like when Harold Camping predicted the world was going to end this past May. I guess the countdown clock we're supposed to follow now is the coming expiration of the Mayan calendar on December 21, 2012. Funny, I didn't know we were following the pseudo-scientific and superstitious Mayan calendar!

With all this apocalyptic hyperbole, many Americans mock it all and others are seriously questioning if Christ is coming back at all. Friends, we should not be surprised when unbelievers laugh at the Lord's return. Listen to the words of 2 Peter 3:3-4: "First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this coming he promised?'"

While Harold Camping was wrong in many things he said, he was right when he said Jesus is coming back. His timing was all messed up, but the truth of the second coming is a promise made by Christ Himself.

Before we ponder this promise, here are three thoughts.

1. This is a deep subject. One scholar has estimated that there are over 300 separate prophecies related to the second coming of Jesus in the Bible. For every prophecy concerning the first coming of Christ, there are eight that look forward to His second! (Today in the Word, April 1989, page 27). I've included three appendices at the end of the manuscript for those who would like to study more in-depth.

2. There are differences of opinion. The theology of the end times has been debated and argued down through the centuries. My own understanding of this doctrine has not been without some struggle because no one passage tells us everything. No matter which view you hold, you have to think about how Matthew 24 and 1 and 2 Thessalonians relate and how all this goes together with the Book of Daniel and Revelation. When we come to terms with what we believe the Bible to teach, we must be gracious towards those that have different views.

3. Avoid the dangers of two extremes. One extreme is to be more concerned about dates and times and signs than with His return. The other extreme is to ignore the promise of His return and go through life as if He's not coming back. Frankly, I don't know which one is worse.

I'll Be Back

According to a survey in U.S. News and World Report, 61% of Americans believe in the Second Coming of Christ. A Newsweek poll reports that 45% believe that Christ will return in their lifetime. The people at Pew Research report that 79% of U.S. Christians believe in the return of Jesus, but there's much less agreement about the timing and the circumstances surrounding His coming.

As helpful as polls might be, when it comes right down to it, what really matters are the promises of God as found in the Bible. That's what we've learned together this summer – the promise of eternal life, the promise of victory, the promise of forgiveness, the promise of guidance, the promise of answered prayer, the promise of wisdom, the promise of peace, and the promise of God's presence. You can jump online to catch any you might have missed at pontiacbible.org. The difference between all these promises

and the one we're studying today is that we're still waiting for the fulfillment of His return.

The Bible is clear that the return of Christ is a promise that can be counted on. Jesus communicated this very clearly in John 14:3: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." This literally reads, "I come again." His coming is meant to serve as a comfort to the disciples. The One who said, "I go," is the same One who said, "I come."

After His Resurrection, Jesus appeared to people over a period of 40 days. After giving some final instructions, He was transported to Heaven before their very eyes and Acts 1:9 says, "and a cloud hid him from their sight." This was no ordinary cloud but was the same cloud that led Israel in the wilderness, God's Shekinah glory. Two angels appear and say these words in Acts 1:11, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Hebrews 9:28 says, "So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him." Hebrews 10 calls us to persevere so that we will receive the promise and verse 37 says, "For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay...'" And in the second to the last verse of the Bible, in Revelation 22:20, Jesus restates the promise of His return: "Yes, I am coming soon."

From the first century up to now, Christ followers have always believed that Jesus could return at any time. That's exactly how the doctrinal statement of Pontiac Bible Church reads, "We believe in the literal, personal, imminent, pre-tribulation, and pre-millennial return of the Lord Jesus Christ..." Literal means that He's actually coming back. Personal means that it will be Jesus Himself. Imminent means it could happen before we take our next breath. Pre-tribulation refers to the belief that Jesus will remove true Christians from the world before the terrible time of tribulation, which will last 7 years. Pre-millennial means that Jesus will return to the earth with believers at the end of the tribulation period and set up a thousand-year reign.

When Is He Coming?

The exact timing of His return is a bit more difficult to establish than the certainty of His coming.

Please turn in your Bible to Matthew 24. This chapter contains more about the end times from the lips of Jesus than any other section of Scripture. In verse 1, the disciples are showing off the beauty of the buildings that made up the Temple. Jesus shocks them in verse 2 when he drops a bombshell: "Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." Then, without any further explanation, Jesus walks about another ½ mile and sits down on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Temple mount.

By the way, it is highly significant that Jesus chose to teach on the end times while He was sitting on the Mount of Olives. This is one of those goose-bump moments in the Bible. Referring to the second coming of Christ, Zechariah 14:4 says, "On that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south."

After hearing the prediction of the temple's demolition, the disciples come up to Jesus privately and ask Him some questions in verse 3: "...when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" In the first part of his answer in verses 4-14, Jesus gives us three noteworthy signs to let us know that His return is right around the corner.

3 Signs

1. Destructive Deception. We see this in verses 4-5: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." There have been many examples of false messiahs in recent memory: Jim Jones in Jonestown and David Koresh in Waco to a Puerto Rican Preacher. As we near the return of the real Jesus, there will be a growing number of leaders who will claim that they are the Christ. There will also be an increased amount of false teaching as the end nears.

2. Terrible Times. Check out verses 6-13. Our world will increasingly experience cataclysmic natural disasters to an outpouring of evil like we've never seen before. Killer hurricanes, famines, deadly floods, and life-shattering earthquakes are almost a daily occurrence in the news. Jesus very clearly taught that earthquakes and famines are only the beginning of birth pains in verse 8. Along with natural disasters, we will see an acceleration of unbridled evil.

Things are bad now but the greatest evil is yet to come. In verse 10 we read that "...many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other." Verse 12 tells us that even love will be in short supply: "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold." I wonder what the answer to this question asked by Jesus in Luke 18:8 will be: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" 2

Timothy 3:1 says, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days."

3. Expansive Evangelism. These first two signs are negative; let's take a look now at a positive precursor that will indicate that the return of Jesus is close at hand. Listen to the words of Jesus in verse 14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." The word 'nations' in this verse does not refer primarily to political entities but to the various 'people groups' of the world. In other words, every group of people must hear the gospel message before the end will come. Did you know that there are still about 7,000 unreached people groups?

As we approach the end times, there will be a marked increase in the tempo of world evangelization. There will be a renewed interest in communicating the good news of forgiveness and eternal life through Christ. We will see a new sense of urgency to penetrate the entire world with the life-changing message of Jesus Christ. That's why PBC is so committed to sending out missionaries all over the world.

I believe that is precisely what is going on right now. There are reports of unprecedented church growth from China, Latin America, in India, in Africa and even in Iran. A friend of our daughter Emily has been serving in Iraq, and shared with Emily this week how eager people are to hear about Jesus.

When I was preparing this message, I received an email from someone in Pakistan: "Dear pastor Bill. In 2004 you sent me a book about sin. That book and Bible reading healed me and I am now a Christian and was baptized in bath tub secretly by a missionary. My family are Muslim scholars. Thank you. Now I need you to pray for me." (Basim)

In tandem with the spread of the good news around the world, we will see an openness to spiritual matters in the last days. I see it here in our church and in the community. Here's one more story that happened on Thursday. I had a lunch appointment with a new PBC couple and arrived early and was sitting outside the restaurant holding a copy of "Why Did This Happen to Me?" One of the waitresses came up and actually took the book out of my hand and said she needed it. I told her to keep it. I also gave her a tract and offered to have a PBC pastor meet with her. Just then another waitress came up and told me about a scary moment in her life. I gave her a tract as well.

In verses 15-28, Jesus reveals some specific events that will take place just prior to His return. Then, in verses 29-31, He speaks of His return to the earth in great power and glory. I want to focus now on the last part of chapter 24, where Jesus addresses the question of "when."

When Is He Coming?

1. The timing is unknown. No one will ever know the precise moment of His return as Jesus declares in verse 36: "No one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The best we can do is to read the signs and know that the time is at hand. If anyone ever tells you that they know exactly when Jesus will return, don't believe it.
2. Jesus will come when most are unprepared. Look at verses 37-41: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left."

While Noah patiently built the ark and warned people of coming judgment, people laughed at him and said, "It will never happen." Noah's day was like our day - an age of scoffing skepticism and moral relativity. The more Noah preached, the more his contemporaries mocked him. And just as the ark saved Noah, even so Jesus Christ is the "ark of safety" for those who believe in Him.

3. Make sure you're ready. Look at verses 42-44: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

Note the two main commands: "Keep watch" and "Be ready." A burglar comes unannounced and suddenly. In a similar way, Jesus is coming like a thief in the night. When we least expect Him, He will return to the earth. Therefore, keep your eyes on the skies and be ready at any moment to meet the Lord face-to-face.

In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus announces that He is coming soon.

- Rev 22:7 – “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”
- Rev 22:12 – “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.”
- Rev 22:20 – “Yes, I am coming soon.” This is the last promise made in the entire Bible.

That leads me to ask a simple question: When was the last time you said to yourself, “Jesus may come today?”

The Relevance of His Return

So what are some practical applications that flow out of the promise of His return? There are many but let me offer just three.

1. Encourage one another. This topic is not meant to terrify you...unless you are not yet a born again believer. After a lengthy discussion of the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul points out the comfort that comes from knowing that Jesus is returning and in verse 18 he says this: “Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

The message of the coming of Christ ought to fill us with tremendous excitement. Let’s encourage each other to “go for it” spiritually. Let’s be completely committed, fully engaged, and passionately involved in kingdom living. This is no time to play it safe. If you’re a believer, and you’ve not been baptized, what are you waiting for? Our next service will be on September 11th. If you’re not in a Connection Group or a Bible study, what’s your reason? If you’re a mom, I don’t know why you wouldn’t want to join “Entrusted with a Child’s Heart” on Monday nights. One reason we’re adding a third service in January is because we see so many PBC people living out their faith and inviting friends, that we want to make sure we have room for all of them!

The first Christians used to greet each other with the phrase, “Maranatha,” which literally means, “Come, Lord Jesus!” from Revelation 22:20. This is the last prayer of the Bible. Believers also used it when they wanted to emphasize something as seen in 1 Corinthians 16:22 – “If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him. Come, O Lord! I wonder what would happen if we started using this phrase in our conversations? Let’s try saying, “Maranatha” to each other right now. Turn to the person next to you and say it.

2. Live pure lives. Here’s a good question to ask yourself when you’re sinning: “Would I want to be doing this when Jesus returns?” Wouldn’t it be terrible to be ashamed when Jesus comes back? 1 John 2:28: “And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming.” By the way, we’re kicking off a new sermon series next week called, “Confident Christianity” from 1 John. Could I encourage you to read this book at least twice before next Sunday?

We don’t have to sell everything and move to the wilderness of Wisconsin to wait for the Lord. Matthew 24 ends with a challenge to be faithful and wise servants. Be faithful today and you’ll be ready today. Be faithful tomorrow and you’ll be ready tomorrow. Be faithful next week and you’ll be ready next week. Be faithful always and you’ll be ready always. Someone has said the biblical balance is to plan as though Jesus won’t return for a thousand years but to live as though He might come today.

One church leader put it like this: “As far as predicting the approximate time of Christ’s Second Advent is concerned, I resigned from the Planning Committee and have joined the Welcoming Committee.” If you knew that Jesus was coming tonight at 8:00 p.m., what would you do differently? What changes would you make? Here’s the deal. One day He will return. Therefore, let’s live in light of His coming today because every day we move closer to Christ’s return.

3. Ask Jesus to save you. If you have never turned your life over to Christ and received His salvation, then I want to appeal to you with all my heart. Be reconciled to God before it’s too late! Listen to 2 Peter 3:9-10: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

Friend, I can’t beat around the bush. The consequences are too staggering and the stakes are way too high. Let me say it as clearly as I can. If you have never made a decision to put your faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins, you will be in deep trouble when Jesus comes back. Your judgment will be certain, swift, and severe.

Don’t be left behind. Jesus right now is seeking a relationship with you. Respond to Him before it’s too late!

All Shook Up

After listening to all the mocking done by Californians, an op-ed piece in the LA Times quoted this statement from another writer that appeared just hours after Japan’s massive earthquake and Tsunami in March: “It’s not a question of whether we’re due for a catastrophic quake, but when.” I don’t know if you’ve ever hunkered down during a hurricane or lived through an earthquake. When we lived in Mexico I was studying Spanish in a McDonalds when everything started moving and shaking. I felt dizzy and sick and all

shook up on the inside.

I wonder if any of you feel shaken spiritually this morning because you know that if Jesus would come back right now you wouldn't be ready for His return. The only way to be ready is to receive Him as your Lord and Savior because it's not a question of whether but of when.

You see, one day all mockery and scoffing will cease. Philippians 2:9-11: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Let's go back to the promise stated in John 14:3: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." After telling his disciples that they knew the way to that place, Thomas replied, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Check out what Jesus says in John 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Are you ready to come to Christ right now? It's not enough to just be moved on the inside; you must actually move and come to Christ. Listen to how this word is used in several passages:

- Isaiah 1:18 – "'Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.'"
- Isaiah 55:1 – "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!"
- Matthew 11:28 – "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
- Luke 14:17 – "At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'"
- Revelation 22:17 – "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

Are you ready to come to Christ right now? If so, you could express your desire in a prayer similar to this.

"Lord, I confess that I'm a sinner and that I fall way short of your standards. Thank you for paying the price for my sins and for dying on the cross as my substitute. I believe that you rose again on the third day and I affirm that you will return one day. I want to be ready for that so I now repent from the way that I've been living and receive you into my life. Please forgive me for all my sins and make me into the person you want me to be. As best I know how, I surrender all that I am and all that I have to you. If there's anything in my life that you don't like please get rid of it and help me to live for you. Amen."

Closing Song: [Glorious Day](#)

Appendix A – Outline of Second Coming

Many years ago the Sunday School Times published an outline (later reprinted in the Biblical Illustrator) of biblical truth related to the Second Coming of Christ. Ray Pritchard has made some revisions and corrections to this outline and is included here for further study.

I. Time of Christ's Return

- A. Unknown: Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32
- B. Unexpected: Matthew 24:44

II. Other Terms for Christ's Return

- A. The Times of Refreshing: Acts 3:19
- B. The Day of God: 2 Peter 3:12
- C. The Last Days: 2 Timothy 3:1
- D. The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Revelation 1:1
- E. The Glorious Appearing of Our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Titus 2:13
- F. The Day of Jesus Christ: Philippians 1:6
- G. The Appearing of the Chief Shepherd: 1 Peter 5:4

H. The Blessed Hope: Titus 2:13

III. The Manner of His Coming

- A. Sudden and unexpected: Matthew 24:44; Luke 12:40
- B. The same way he ascended: Acts 1:11
- C. Like a thief in the night: 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 16:15
- D. Like a flash of lightning: Matthew 24:27
- E. In the clouds: Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7
- F. With a trumpet, a shout, and the cry of the archangel: 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16
- G. Accompanied by angels: Matthew 16:27; 2 Thessalonians 1:7
- H. With his saints: 1 Thessalonians 3:13; Jude 14
- I. With great glory: Matthew 16:27, 25:31
- J. In flaming fire: 2 Thessalonians 1:8

IV. The Purpose of His Coming

- A. To be glorified with his saints: 2 Thessalonians 1:10
- B. To raise the dead in Christ: 1 Thessalonians 4:16
- C. To rapture the living saints: 1 Thessalonians 4:17
- D. To reign on the earth: Isaiah 24:23; Revelation 11:15
- E. To judge and reward his saints: 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10
- F. To defeat the devil forever: Revelation 20:10

V. Our Duties in Relation to His Return

- A. Consider it close at hand: Romans 13:12; Philippians 4:5
- B. Be prepared: Matthew 24:44,46
- C. Look for it: Philippians 3:20; Titus 2:13
- D. Love his appearing: 2 Timothy 4:8
- E. Put on the armor of God: Romans 13:12-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:8
- F. Wait patiently for it: 1 Corinthians 1:7; Hebrews 9:28; James 5:7-8
- G. Purify ourselves in light of it: 2 Peter 3:11-12; 1 John 3:1-3
- H. Pray for his coming: Matthew 6:10; Revelation 22:20

Appendix B – Seven Signs of the Last Days

Pastor Ray has compiled seven signs that lead him to believe that we are indeed living in the last days ("When is Jesus Coming Back?" www.keepbelieving.com).

1. Fig Tree Blossoming (Israel back in their own land).
2. Rapid move toward a united Europe (Daniel 2, 7 and Revelation 13).
3. World attention focused on the Middle East (history begins and ends here).
4. Global communications network (the internet has connected each of us).
5. Vast spiritual apostasy (2 Timothy 3:1-9).
6. Worldwide preaching of the gospel (Matthew 24:14).
7. Growing movement of political correctness and the enshrinement of "tolerance" (1 John 2:18).

Appendix C – Two Stages

Pastor Ray has also written a two-paragraph summary that reflects my beliefs and is included here. Be sure to look up all the verses in parenthesis ("Sound the Trumpet! Christ's Second Coming to the Earth," www.keepbelieving.com).

Many Bible students believe that Christ's return will occur in two stages. This is usually called the "Pre-Tribulation Rapture" view. That is, we believe Christ will come before the Tribulation to resurrect dead Christians and to "rapture" or lift off the earth living believers. Those Christians who are raised or raptured will be taken to heaven (the "Father's house" of John 14:1-3) where their works will be judged (II Corinthians 5:10). This "Judgment Seat of Christ" will be followed by the "Marriage Supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:7-10). While this is going on in heaven, the horrors of the seven-year Tribulation (the "70th week" of Daniel 9:24-27) will unfold on the earth. The Antichrist will be revealed and he will commit the "abomination that causes desolation" (Matthew 24:15) at the midpoint of the Tribulation. The last three-and-a-half years will be marked by a succession of judgments that result in the near-total destruction of human society. When humanity, having chosen to follow the Antichrist, has become a rotting corpse ready for final judgment (Matthew 24:28), Jesus will return from heaven with the saints and angels at his side. He will defeat the Antichrist and establish his kingdom on the earth (Revelation 19-20). His coming at the end of the Tribulation is often called the "Glorious Appearing" (Titus 2:13).

The difference between the Rapture and the Glorious Appearing of Christ can be put this way. In the Rapture, Christ comes for his saints, at the Glorious Appearing, he comes with his saints. The Rapture takes place in the air, the Glorious Appearing on the earth. In the Rapture believers go from earth to heaven, at the Glorious Appearing they go from heaven to earth. At the Rapture Jesus comes to reward his people, at the Glorious Appearing he comes to judge the earth. At the Rapture he claims his bride, while at the Glorious Appearing he comes with his bride. The Rapture takes place before the Tribulation; the Glorious Appearing takes place after the Tribulation. The one marks the beginning of the Tribulation, the other the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom. At the Rapture believers are saved from the "Wrath of the Lamb," at the Glorious Appearing Christ appears to bring an end to the "Wrath of the Lamb." There are no signs of the Rapture while there are many signs of the Glorious Appearing of Christ at the end of the Tribulation.

John 14:1-6

The Way

Brian Bill March, 2016

In a video message to churchgoers, one of the most-recognized religious leaders in the world made this stunning statement: "Many think differently, feel differently, seeking God or meeting God in different ways. In this crowd, in this range of religions, there is only one certainty that we have for all: we are all children of God."

A popular pastor and best-selling author unveiled his belief in universalism when he said this: "There may be many ways to Jesus."

On Monday I listened to a so-called pastor preach these words: "The Christ is you and he lives in you. He's your travel guide to the steps along the way to enlightenment."

And here are some common quotes that many Americans and some Christians hold to:

- It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere.
- Good people go to heaven.
- My God wouldn't send anyone to Hell.
- Good works will get you to heaven.
- Whatever works for you is true for you.
- It's arrogant to believe there's only one way to heaven.

Dr. Howard Hendricks used to say, "A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew." I'll make sure there's no mist up here if you'll make sure there's no fog out there. You may not agree with everything I'm going to say but could I ask you to not shut down? I urge you to understand and apply what you're going to hear...because your eternity literally depends upon it.

In John 14:6, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Here's the big idea, the main point, the sermon in a sentence: If I believe the Bible, I must say that Jesus is the only way. Let me make it more

personal. If you do not believe in, and receive Jesus Christ, as the only way to heaven, you will spend eternity in the neverending fires of hell.

That's quite an opening, isn't it? What I just said is politically incorrect but it is biblically correct. We could call this tough truth...and gracious good news.

We shouldn't be surprised that our culture and even some religious leaders reject the truth of Christianity. What is shocking is that according to a 2008 Pew Forum poll of 35,000 Americans, "57% of evangelical church attenders believe many religions can lead to eternal life." This study found a "growing pluralistic impulse toward tolerance..." Many were so stunned by these findings that the Pew Forum went back and did further polling. Unfortunately, the results were confirmed.

And things have only gotten worse since 2008. The "nones," a category that includes people who self-identify as atheists or agnostics, now make up 23% of adults, up from 16% just eight years ago. 7.5 million Americans have "lost their religion" since 2012. A new book summarizes the spiritual state of this growing segment of the population. Here's the title: Not THAT Kind of Christian. The subtitle says it's for "Nones, Dones and Prodigal Sons."

My aim today is lofty and perhaps unattainable. I want each of you to agree with this statement by the time we're finished: If I believe the Bible, I must say that Jesus is the only way.

Ray Pritchard says there are at least six challenges when preaching that Jesus is the only way.

1. Many of us already know the answer to this question.
2. Most of the world gives a different answer than we give.
3. A number of churches give a different answer than the one we give.
4. Some who agree with our answer don't like to talk about it openly.
5. Many people react negatively when we say that Jesus is the only way to heaven. Sometimes they hurl bitter invectives at us, using words like arrogant, bigoted, intolerant, exclusive and narrow-minded. They may call us hatemongers.
6. There are some who would ban us from saying publicly what we believe. That's certainly the case in some parts of the world where Christians are being persecuted and is increasingly becoming prohibited in our pluralistic culture.

We're not insulated from this in our community. It's tempting to think that the Quad Cities is saturated with churches that are getting the gospel out. Not so much. In a recently released Barna study, our community is #27 on the list of America's top churchless cities. There's only one other Midwestern city that ranked higher (or lower) – Flint, Michigan (how sad about their water situation). That means that God has placed us in the second most churchless metro area in the Midwest! Let's continue to live on mission for Him as we present Jesus as the only way to the Father.

Last week Jason Crosby did a great job preaching on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, pointing out that the word "good" shows that Jesus is in a category all by Himself. He is the good shepherd.

As we focus on the fifth "I Am" statement of Jesus, we discover that the disciples are distraught and filled with fear because He has just announced that He is leaving them in chapter 13.

What Jesus Offers

Jesus gives us at least four assurances in John 14.

1. Peace (John 14:1).

The disciples were upset and so Jesus looked at them with tenderness and said in verse 1: "Let not your hearts be troubled." The tense here means to "stop letting your hearts be troubled," indicating that they were already wiggling out and falling apart. The word "your" is plural as Jesus moves from talking to Peter to the entire team. "Troubled" literally means, "to be stirred up."

In the second half of verse 1, Jesus makes another claim to deity: "Believe in God; believe also in me." He's saying something like this: "You trust in God who is invisible and that's great; now it's time to trust in me, even though I will be leaving you for awhile." The only way to have peace in the midst of troubled times is to trust in Christ.

2. Place (John 14:2, 3a).

For those who know Jesus, death is not an eerie journey to an unknown destination. Believers are assured that there is a place

where all wrongs will be made right, where all imbalances will be straightened out. Look at verse 2: “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” The Greek word for “rooms” here means to “abide” or “remain,” and refers to something that is not temporary, but permanent. Friends, our place here won’t last but we’re headed to a place that is everlasting

I mention this thought in almost every funeral message I give: We often think that this is the land of the living, and that when we die we go the land of the dead. The opposite is really true – this is the land of the dying, when our life here is over, we are transferred to the land of the living – either to a place of eternal joy or to a place of eternal torment. There are really only two possible destinations.

When Jesus said that He’s going ahead to prepare a place for them, He’s drawing on a very familiar image. In those days it was customary for travelers to send someone ahead to find lodging and make arrangements in a distant city – they didn’t have GPS on their phones or a Travelocity app. That’s what happened on the night of the last supper when Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead of the rest to get the upper room ready.

It’s interesting that Jesus has prepared a room for us even though there was no room for Him when He was born. Despite the fact that we kicked Jesus out of our world, Jesus invites us into His. Jesus said that there is a place for those who believe in Him. In fact, He left the disciples in order to get it ready for them, and for us.

Jesus gives us peace and He calls us to another place. The third assurance is to trust the promise of Jesus.

3. Promise (John 14:3).

Jesus calms his frantic followers in verse 3, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” Jesus is saying, “I’m not just going to show you the way to the place I’ve prepared, or just give you a map. I promise to come back and take you to that place so that we can be together forever. Then you’ll finally be home.” Jesus reinforces this promise in John 14:18: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

Some additional cultural context is helpful here. When a son wanted to get married, he and his father would add a room on to the Father’s house. When the addition was finished, the son would go and get his bride for the wedding and then they would move into the room prepared for them. Likewise, Jesus is preparing a room for His bride, the church, right now. When the time is right He will gather us and bring us to the Father’s house.

Jesus guarantees that if we put our full confidence in Him, we’ll be with Him forever. It’s his promise. The Bible is full of the promises of God and not one of them has ever been broken. Psalm 145:13: “The Lord is faithful to all His promises and loving toward all He has made.”

Let’s trust His peace, let’s focus on the right place, let’s claim His promises and then, let’s commit to follow His plan.

4. Plan (John 14:4-6).

In John 14:4, Jesus said, “And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas spoke up for the rest of the timid team: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas gets a bad rap for doubting but I see him as one who was searching. He wasn’t afraid to ask questions, and you shouldn’t be either.

In verse 6 Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only life. There is no other plan but the person of Jesus. There is no way to get to heaven unless we go through Him.

Listen. Jesus is very inclusive in the sense that everyone is invited to a relationship with Him as John 6:37 states: “...and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” But, His claims are extremely exclusive in that there is no other way to Heaven except through Him.

How does this mesh in a pluralistic society like ours that values variety and excludes exclusive truth claims? Though Christianity still dominates by sheer numbers, the U.S. now has a greater diversity of religious groups than any country in recorded history. Did you know that there are now more Muslims in America than there are Methodists?

It’s helpful to remember that the world of the biblical authors was filled with paganism and pluralism as well. In the midst of all this doctrinal diversity, the Bible makes some rather startling claims that run counter-cultural to the pluralistic mantra of religious tolerance.

If I believe the Bible, I must say that Jesus is the only way. John 14:6 is more than sufficient but here are 8 other passages that give us overwhelming evidence that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

- In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus made it clear that the way is narrow and restrictive: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”
- John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”
- John 5:23: “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”
- John 11:25 will be our text for our five Easter services in three weeks: “Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”
- Peter boldly states in Acts 4:12: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”
- Acts 17:30-31: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”
- 1 Corinthians 3:11: “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”
- 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”
- 1 John 5:12: “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

These passages are extremely exclusive and overwhelmingly clear: Jesus is the only way to heaven. His statements of divine authority are incompatible with the homogenizing views of religious pluralists. The claims of Christ are outrageous but they happen to be what G.K. Chesterton called “the wild truth.”

Let’s dive more deeply into John 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

- When Jesus uses the phrase, “I AM,” He is once again claiming the name of Yahweh for Himself from Exodus 3:14. He is God in human flesh. He is the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Gate, the Good Shepherd, the Way and the truth and the life, the Vine, the Alpha and Omega, and the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus claimed to be God, a claim that no other religious leader has made – not Mohammed, Buddha or Confucious. No one else did the miracles He did, lived a sinless life like He did, died like he died as our substitute and rose again on the third day.
- Notice that this verse begins with the word “I.” In fact, eleven times in just six verses, Jesus uses the personal pronoun – I, me, or my. We are not saved by a principle or a force but by a person. Jesus did not say that He knew the way, the truth and the life, or even that he taught these great principles. He declared Himself to be the embodiment of the way, the truth and the life. While answering all of life’s questions, Jesus doesn’t offer a recipe, or a bunch of rules or rituals to follow; instead He gives us a relationship with Himself. His plan is wrapped up in a Person.
- Jesus doesn’t say, “I am a way, and a truth and a life,” but rather, “I am the way (that is, the only way), I am the truth (that is, the only truth), and the life (that is, the only life).”
- All three concepts are active and dynamic. The way brings to God; the truth makes us free; and the life produces relationship. Without the way there is no going, without the truth there is no knowing, without the life there is no growing.
- The context indicates that the idea of “the way” predominates. The word “way” is used three times in verses 4, 5 and 6. We could put it like this: “I am the way that reveals the truth about God and gives life to those who believe.” Literally, “I am the way because I am the truth and the life.”
- There is only one avenue to salvation. With Christ removed there is no redemptive truth, no everlasting life and no way to the Father. While other religions offer systems of thought that try to bridge the gap between man and God, Jesus is the only one who has succeeded in bridging the divide.

Since every word of this astonishing statement challenges the fundamental beliefs of our culture, let’s drill down on each phrase.

1. Jesus is the way. Jesus is categorically stating that only one way is right and every other way is wrong. Jesus does not merely show the way; He is Himself the way. This has a twofold meaning. He is the way from God to us and also the way from us to God. The only way to get to God is through Jesus.

If I believe the Bible, I must say that Jesus is the only way.

Incidentally, the fact that Jesus is the only way was so central to the understanding of early Christianity in the Book of Acts, that believers were known as being part of “the way.” It’s one of the earliest names given to the Christian community, used six different times in Acts.

The way to heaven is not through a religious system or by following a set of religious rituals. It’s not within you and it’s not by your sincere efforts. Proverbs 14:12: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”

In Mark 12:14, we read that even the enemies knew that Jesus was the only way to the Father when they said: “you truly teach the way of God.”

2. Jesus is the truth. The word “truth” in Scripture is used in two ways: true as contrasted with false, and genuine as opposed to fake. Jesus is authentic and trustworthy. When we look at Jesus we come face-to-face with certainty and reality. The Bible describes truth as not just something that is simply intellectual; it also has a moral dimension to it. John 3:21 refers to doing the truth: “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light...”

Truth is the scarcest commodity in the world. We hear people say, “that might be true for you, but it’s not for me.” Researcher George Barna has discovered that nearly 75% of Americans do NOT believe in absolute truth. Here’s the sad part about that. Without the clarity and consistency of absolute moral truth, we are reduced to doing what seems right, what feels good, what produces the least resistance, and what provides the greatest personal fulfillment.

Listen. It’s not mean or bigoted or narrow minded to say that Jesus is the only way if it’s the truth. It would be mean and bigoted and narrow minded to not tell people that Jesus is the only way and the only truth and the only life!

Jesus rises above our cultural confusion and shouts out, “I am the truth. Get to know me and you will discover that which is totally true and transforming.” Truth is a very exclusive thing because it implies an objective standard. It is not something that changes with the whims of emotion or time or culture. What was true 100 years ago is true this year because, as Hebrews 13:8 states: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Friend, if you’re searching for truth, ask your questions. Research the relevance of the Bible. Seek after truth. There’s an apologetics conference coming up in Bettendorf (there’s more information in the bulletin). Winston Churchill once said, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened.”

Do you remember that scene from “A Few Good Men” when Jack Nicholson said to Tom Cruise, “You can’t handle the truth?” Can you handle the truth? Don’t run away when it’s right in front of you. Pilate voiced the question on many minds today. Even though Jesus was standing right in front of Him, he queried in John 18:38: “What is truth?” He didn’t take the time to find out. Friend, you will find what you’re looking for in Christ as John 8:32 declares: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

3. Jesus is the life. All through the gospel of John life describes the principle of spiritual vitality. Just as spiritual death leads to separation from God, so life implies communion with Him. We are dead without Him. We become alive when we surrender ourselves to Him. John 5:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

I like what Albert Mohler writes: “If all we need is a teacher of enlightenment, the Buddha will do. If all we need is a collection of gods for every occasion...Hinduism will do. If all we need is a tribal deity, then any tribal deity will do. If all we need is a lawgiver, Moses will do. If all we need is a set of rules and a way of devotion, Muhammad or Joseph Smith will do. If all we need is inspiration and insight into the sovereign self...Oprah will do. But if we need a Savior, only Jesus will do.”

Application - I can think of three ways we can put this powerful passage into practice.

1. Place your faith in Jesus. He is the only way! Look again at the last part of verse 6: “...No one comes to the Father except through me.” That little word “except” means that apart from Jesus there is no way to be saved. You cannot get there by trusting yourself. And you cannot come to the Father by jumping through any religious hoops either. The only way to come is to go through Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. 1 Peter 3:18: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” Are you ready to do that right now?

Go back to verse 1 where Jesus says, “Believe in me.” The word “believe” is an imperative. And to believe means to rely on and trust in Him.

Jesus is the way that must be followed; He is the truth that must be believed; and He is the life that must be lived. Be like Thomas and ask your questions and then when you find what you’re looking for, cry out like he did in John 20:28: “My Lord and my God!” Can

you say the same thing?

A couple weeks ago a young mother here at Edgewood entered through the door of salvation. That same week a Muslim woman in our community received Jesus as the way. This past Wednesday a woman on the phone told me she needs to get saved. What about you?

2. Tell others about Jesus. Brothers and sisters, we don't have to make Jesus more palatable to people. He is truth and can stand up to thorough investigation. Our job is to tell others about Him, without caving into the culture or watering down the way to heaven.

The truth that Jesus is the only way should make us bold...and it should also break us. We must hold to this tough truth...but it should tenderize us and put tears in our eyes about the fate of the lost. Instead of holding it over someone's head as a hammer, we must help people believe and receive. This truth is the most loving truth ever given by God.

I was so moved last week when one of our Life Groups met a refugee family from Thailand at the airport. They furnished an apartment for them and are now helping them get acclimated to the community. Why are they doing all this? Ultimately its because they want to help this family understand that Jesus is the only way.

You can hear this I AM statement from Jesus and conclude that it is bigoted or beautiful, limited or loving, intolerant or invitational.

If Jesus is truly the only way, the unkindest thing would be keep it to ourselves.

If Jesus is truly the only way, the most loving thing is to share it with others.

We have an opportunity Easter weekend to invite people to one of 5 different services. We're offering all these service times so our guests will have a number of options to choose from. Last Easter 1700 people attended four services. We're hoping for even more this year. But that depends in large part on each of us asking someone to join us. Will you make the ask, even if it feels awkward?

→ Play Video: "Awkward Invitation"

Here's how I see it. It's awkward to ask people to come to a service but it will be even more awkward if we don't. We have invite cards to make it easier for you.

3. Stand up for truth no matter how hard it will be. One pastor puts it like this: "To say less than Jesus said is to be disloyal to Him. To say something contrary to what He said is to be disobedient to Him."

The truth of John 14:6 answers three key questions that everyone has.

- How can I be saved? He is the way!
- How can I be sure? He is the truth!
- How can I be satisfied? He is the life!

Do you believe this? Before you answer too quickly, settle the fact that you will be called intolerant, narrow-minded, bigoted, arrogant and even hateful. You will be offensive to a pluralistic, all-roads-lead-to-heaven culture.

Be bold about Jesus...with a smile on your face. If people reject us, let it not be because of our rudeness. Don't lose your cool... speaking the truth in love is always the best rule. Listen. The exclusive truth claims of Jesus do not mean that we should demonstrate an exclusive spirit.....

In order to help you stand "out there" I wonder if you're ready to stand "in here" as an expression of your belief today? Please stand if you are ready to make this statement: Since I believe the Bible, I must say that Jesus is the only way.

John 14:6

What Jesus Would Say to a Muslim

Brian Bill 10/24/10

I'd like you to picture hundreds of Muslims bowing to the ground in prayer. What kinds of feelings well up within you? Now imagine an image of some angry followers of Islam. How does that affect your emotions? Do you feel afraid or do you get angry yourself?

In a recent Christianity Editorial (October 2010) called, "Mosques in Middle America," the editors write this: "Debate over the so-called Ground Zero mosque has stirred an excess of angst over the Muslim presence in America." Is there reason to be angry and

afraid? While I'm going to steer away from politics because I don't want to lose my job at NPR, here are some things that have hit the news just this month that deal with Muslim extremists.

* Muslim cleric Anjem Choudary, appearing on an ABC News town hall meeting, said this: "We do believe as Muslims the East and the West will be governed by Sharia. Indeed, we believe that one day the flag of Islam will fly over the White House."

* According to the Washington Post, the attempted Times Square bomber, who just received life in prison, told the judge: "We are only Muslims...but if you call us terrorists, we are proud terrorists, and we will keep on terrorizing you...the defeat of the U.S. is imminent."

* And the group behind the failed Christmas Day bombing has released the second installment of its new magazine, "Inspire," featuring a man from North Carolina who says he is "proud to be a traitor to America." Samir Khan, now believed to be in Yemen, says: "We pledge to wage jihad for the rest of our lives until either we implant Islam all over the world or meet our Lord as bearers of Islam."

One reason we're tackling this topic is that almost every day there's a story about Islam. From Bill O'Reilly's viewpoint causing an exodus on "The View," to National Public Radio firing Juan Williams on Wednesday night for his comments about Muslims, to that crazy pastor threatening to burn the Quran to the strong opinions about the Ground Zero mosque to the interfaith dialog in Normal this past Wednesday called, "Islam Among Us: How Do We Respond?"

That's a good question. What should be our response to the fastest growing religion in the world? I'll never forget a conversation I had with a missionary from Africa about 20 years ago when I was on staff at a church in the suburbs. We were in the workroom at church (I was talking, not working) and he asked me if I knew what the number one threat to Christianity was. I mentioned a couple things that came to mind and then he said that Islam was on the march throughout Africa and would soon make its way to Europe and America. I think I laughed when he said it because at the time Islam seemed so insignificant. John Ockers proved to be a prophet, didn't he?

Did you know that there are over 1.2 billion Muslims across the globe today, making up over 20% of the world population? In America, there are approximately 5 million Muslims, meaning there are twice as many Muslims than Episcopalians in our country. In 2001, there were 57 mosques in Illinois alone, and there are over 1,400 in the U.S. today. Islam is a missionary religion, meaning that they are committed to spread their faith and way of life all around the world. This came home to me in a chilling way when I was listening to a Muslim podcast in which the speaker referred to those who are not practicing Islam as the "not-yet Muslims."

While I'm certainly no expert on Islam, I have studied it in Bible College and seminary and these past couple weeks have read a number of books, listened to many different podcasts, some by Muslims themselves, and I've read large sections of the Quran for myself. I've also contacted four different people who live and minister among Muslims and will share some of their insights a bit later. My aim is to take a missional, not a militant approach.

Parents and grandparents, this is really important for us to learn because our children and grandchildren are growing up in a totally tolerant and accepting atmosphere, with no regard for what is true and what is false. In fact, we could say that our culture is tolerant of everything except for the exclusive truth claims of Christianity. Our children must hear biblical truth from home. It's a much more diverse and politically correct world than what most of us were raised in. One example of this nationally took place on a newscast I watched earlier this month. When reporting about Christianity, a well-known commentator referred to "The Bible" with disdain in his voice and on his face. And then, in the very next sentence, with obvious reverence and a nod to political correctness, he referred to "The Holy Quran."

Next week we will look at what Jesus would say to a Wiccan. By the way, many studies have shown that Wicca is the fastest growing religion in America. In preparation for this sermon I've interviewed two Wiccans on two different occasions and have even invited them to come to church on Sunday to hear what the Word has to say about Wicca. In two weeks, our topic will be Atheism and then we'll conclude our series by looking at Mormonism.

While two-thirds of Protestant pastors believe Islam is a dangerous religion according to Lifeway Research, my purpose today is not to spread fear but to grow our faith by equipping us so that we can connect people to Christ (this is part of our mission statement). We also want to help Christ-followers see the truthfulness of Christianity and to establish each of us in our faith more deeply and more securely.

I should say that it seems a bit presumptuous for me to know exactly what Jesus would say to these different groups of people. My aim is to not guess what He would say but to rely on and relay what Jesus has said specifically in the gospels and in the rest of the Bible, because the Living Word has revealed Himself in the written Word.

My outline in these messages will be simple. I will first give a synopsis of each of these worldviews so that we will know what they

believe. Then we'll allow the Word to speak so that we'll be equipped to know how to behave in order to reach them with the life-changing message of the gospel. My aim is not to be politically correct, but biblically correct.

Core Beliefs of Islam

Islam, which means "surrender or submission," began about 600 years after Christ was born. Adherents to Islam are called Muslims. The key figure in this faith is Muhammad, who Muslims believe to be the final prophet. As a merchant living in Arabia he purportedly had a number of visions over a period of 23 years. These visions became the Quran, which is the holy book of the Muslims. There are six core beliefs of Islam that are held by Muslims from all nationalities (much of this information comes from "[Breaking the Islam Code](#)" by J.D. Greear).

1. Allah.

This is an Arabic term meaning, "the deity." In the midst of rampant polytheism in Muhammad's day, the message of Islam is that there is only one God. The unforgivable sin in Islam is shirk, which is to worship Jesus as God. The "Allah" of Islam is in direct contrast to the God of the Bible. Let me be clear that they are not identical. Those who say they are the same have to sidestep many Scriptures, including 1 John 2:23: "No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."

2. The prophets.

Muslims believe that there are 25 primary prophets, beginning with Adam as number one and Jesus as number 24. Muhammad is number 25 and the final prophet. This is important to understand because while Muslims honor Jesus, because Muhammad came after him, what Muhammad says trumps Jesus.

3. Angels and Demons.

Muslims engage in a whole series of rituals designed to avoid the curses of demons and invite the blessings of angels.

4. Holy Books.

While Muslims give credence to sections of the Bible (the Torah, the writings of David, and the gospels), they believe that they have been corrupted and that the Quran has corrected them. Technically speaking, since they believe the Quran was given by the angel Gabriel in Arabic, translations into other languages are not authoritative. Interestingly, they believe that the Arabic words of the Quran have supernatural power whether the hearer understands them or not. Just as they believe that Muhammad is more important than Jesus, so too, they believe that since the Quran came after the Bible, it is the final revelation.

That sounds good but is in direct violation of Revelation 22:18: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book." Galatians 1:8 adds: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"

The Quran is divided into 114 chapters, known as "suras." It's not arranged in any chronological or narrative order, which makes it very confusing to read. The only thing I was able to observe is that the beginning chapters are excruciatingly long, while the final chapters are extremely brief. It's filled with rules and warnings and laws, with no narratives or plot. I found it to be a downer to read and couldn't wait to pick up my Bible again! Another book that is followed is called the Hadith, which is a collection of the sayings and examples of Muhammad himself, which has become the standard for how Muslims should live. If you listen carefully, you'll hear Muslims quote both the Quran and the Hadith as authoritative for their lives.

5. The final judgment.

Images of paradise, especially for men, are very prominent. Muslims also believe in hell. Even with all their devotion, a Muslim can never be sure of where he or she will spend eternity because one's ultimate destiny is subject solely to the capricious will of Allah. According to surah 3:157, the only way to know for sure that you will spend eternity in paradise is to die in jihad.

6. Predestination.

Muslims believe that Allah has decreed everything that will happen and testify to this with a frequent phrase, inshallah, which means, "If God wills."

The 5 Pillars of Islam

Along with established beliefs, a Muslim is also governed by expected behavior, known as the five pillars of Islam.

1. The Confession. Muslims continuously recite a simple statement that is also quite comprehensive in scope. It goes like this: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." To become a Muslim, you must simply repeat this confession three times.
2. The Prayers. Practicing Muslims face Mecca five times a day for prayer. These prayers are very important as a way of earning merit. If they can pray in a mosque, that's even better because these prayers are worth 25 times as much as prayers said at home or out in the market.
3. Fasting During Ramadan. This is the name of the ninth month on the Islamic calendar and Muslims are not allowed to touch food or water from sunup to sundown.
4. The Giving of Alms. Muslims are expected to give 2.5% of their overall estate to the poor each year.
5. The Pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Muslim is expected to take a pilgrimage to their holy city once in his life, with many saving all their lives in order to have this experience. A trip to Mecca counts the same as 50,000 prayers in a mosque.

What Jesus Has Said

There is so much that Jesus would say to a Muslim that I've decided to focus primarily on what is recorded in the Gospel of John. This gospel reveals its purpose right near the end in John 20:31: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

To make it easier to follow along, let's start in the beginning and just work our way through a number of passages. I'm not going to make any comments and won't take many breaths because I want us to hear what Jesus said about Himself and how what He has said should mess with a Muslim. Incidentally, Jesus is mentioned 25 times in the Quran and Muslims give special recognition to the Gospels.

John 1:1-5: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

John 1:10-14: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John 3:3: "In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

John 3:16-18: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

John 3:36: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

John 5:18: "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."

John 5:24: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

John 5:43: "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him."

John 5:46: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me."

John 6:29: "Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'"

John 6:40: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 8:19: "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

John 8:58: "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

John 10:30: "I and the Father are one."

John 11:25: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

John 14:6: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

John 17:3: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

When I asked one couple who is associated with our church and has been living in an Islamic country for the last two years, what they think Jesus would say to a Muslim, I received this great answer: "If Jesus were to talk to these people, he would explain that they could never pay enough or do enough good to receive a pardoning for their sin. Only his blood could set them free, and only a perfect substitute could remove their guilt and punishment...I think that Jesus would remind them that there really will be a day of judgment, and that they need to get ready. He would also tell them that He loves them and wants to have a relationship with them every day on this earth as well as for eternity."

Law of Non-Contradiction

I listened to a podcast debate this week between a Christian and a Graduate from Bradley University who is a Muslim. This Muslim, who has his PhD in Religious Studies, admitted that Islam and Christianity are mutually exclusive. And yet, many Christians want to believe that it doesn't really matter what you believe. But friends, the law of non-contradiction says that two contradictory propositions cannot both be true. This was backed up by an article I read from Douglas Groothuis of Denver Seminary in which he said: "Neither Christianity nor Islam can logically endorse the other religion's distinctive claims and practices without denying its own."

How then can we reach a Muslim with the gospel?

1. Your number one resource is the Bible.

I was listening to another podcast this past week in the car that featured an expert in evangelism to Muslims. It was very helpful. At the end of the interview, he was asked for a list of resources. I got my pen out and searched for some paper to write down what he was going to say (I had to steer with my knees so this wasn't easy). As I was poised with my pen, he said something that took me back a bit. I thought he was going to list some books or websites or other podcasts. Here's what he said: "The number one resource is the Bible. It's imperative for Christians to get grounded in the Bible and in theology."

We must read it and study it and know it and then encourage followers of Islam to read it for themselves. When Muslims read the Bible, they become intrigued and are especially attracted to Jesus. I love what Martin Luther once said, "The Bible when attacked should be treated like a lion in its cage. Rather than attempting to defend it, unleash it!" Since Muslims believe Jesus to be a prophet, one idea is to point out that prophets have to tell the truth. You could then go back to the list of verses from the Gospel of John to show what Jesus said about Himself and the way to salvation. Some other ideas from the Old Testament is to use the idea of the scapegoat, the bull offering and the cities of refuge as jumping off places to talk about Jesus.

By the way, when handling your Bible, be sure to use a copy that you have not written in for that would be offensive to a follower of Islam. Also be sure to not let it drop below your waist, and if you stack it with other books, make sure you put it on the top. To fail to do those things is a sign of disrespect in their eyes (www.godwardthoughts.com).

2. Make sure that you love Muslims.

Do you have any hatred in your heart toward Muslims? In my research for this message, I listened to a Muslim message called, "Dealing With Extreme Christian Evangelicals." He argued that the great source of anger toward Islam is coming from evangelicals as they spew out "lava of hatred." Friends, followers of Islam are made in the image of God and Muslims matter to Him. It's time for us to converse and not quarrel, to treat them with respect not contempt. Check out 1 Peter 3:15: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Check out this story from a woman many of you know because she's been back to PBC on many occasions: "People are not convinced by knowledge, debate, or hostile action (like the pastor in Florida who wanted to burn holy books). Instead it is godly living and love that makes a personal impact. When I was a child, we lived in such an area. SIM had a hospital there. A religious leader came for treatment. As he was waiting, he saw one of my parents' colleagues who was also waiting, give his chair to a poor family with a sick child. The leader was amazed that such an educated person would do something like this and continued to watch how my parents' colleagues responded to different situations. As a patient he sometimes deliberately made things difficult for the doctor and nurses, yet they continued to be gracious. During the daily chapel services he would stop his ears so that he wouldn't hear. One day a persistent fly would not leave. As he tried to shoo it away, he heard a verse of Scripture quoted. As he closed his ears again, that verse continued in his thoughts. With time and much thought he decided to follow the way of the Bible. Years later he was one of the strongest evangelists in the region."

One hundred years ago, the missionary Samuel Zwemer was known as the Apostle to Islam. His whole approach could be summarized with this phrase: "A ministry of friendship." He once said that you can say anything to a Muslim provided you say it in love and with a smile. That reminds me of a story. Apparently the sun and the wind were having an argument. "You have no power," said the wind, "you are just stuck up there in the sky, bound by the forces of gravity, impotent and immobile." Just then a man with a coat walked past. The sun said to the wind, "If you are so strong and mobile, see if you can blow the coat off the man's back." The wind blew furiously, but the man just pulled the coat all the more tightly around himself. "Stand back," said the sun, "and let me see what I can do." The sun poured out its warm rays upon the man who soon became uncomfortable and duly removed his coat.

If we desire to see Muslims remove their opposition to the Gospel and shed their beliefs and start following Christ, we too will only succeed when they feel the warm rays of Christian love and compassion rather than the cold winds of arrogance and point-seeking confrontation.

3. Tell Muslims about Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we don't have to make Jesus more palatable to people. In fact, 1 Corinthians 1:18 says that the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Jesus is truth and can stand up to thorough investigation. Our job is to tell others about Him. By the way, the exclusive truth claims of Jesus do not mean that we should demonstrate an arrogant spirit....

Roy Oksnevad, director of the Institute of Muslim Studies at Wheaton College said this in an interview in Christianity Today (3/1/2000): "One former Muslim has said Islam had the rules and discipline she wanted in her life, but lacked the power to live the life the rules stipulated: 'As a system of personal discipline, Islam has few equals. As a means of earning God's favor, it's a spiritual treadmill.'"

One idea is to reference Luke 8:40-48 where Jesus heals a bleeding woman. To the Muslim, cleanliness is the path to touching God but Jesus showed that touching Him is the path to cleanliness. When the unholy touches the holy, the unholy does not defile the holy; the holy purifies the unholy.

For Muslims, Allah is a force but not a friend. He's far away, unpredictable, and impossible to please. There is no statement in the Quran that says "Allah is love." It does say that "Allah loves" two times but his love is conditioned on whether an individual keeps his laws and standards. One author points out that to the Muslim, Allah is the distant one, the cold judge and the hater of infidels. Most feel disconnected from their deity, they know they need purification, they live with a sense of shame that they're not doing enough and they seek an intercessor. We could say it like this: Islam is the ultimate religion of works-righteousness while Christianity is all about gift-righteousness. In Islam, people obey and hope to be accepted. In Christianity, I am accepted, therefore I obey. But remember this, you and I cannot argue a Muslim into the kingdom because, according to J.D. Greear, "The roots of Muslim beliefs are not found in their minds, but in their hearts."

Philip Roberts of Midwestern Baptist Seminary developed a plan for witnessing to Muslims that rests on three realizations:

- * Muslims rarely hear a truthful presentation of the gospel**
- * Few Christians understand Islam**
- * Evangelistic efforts should be defined in terms of relationships, not transactions**

4. Live your life for Jesus.

Because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, those of us who know Him should have our lives shaped by Him. Are you living for Him right now? Do you need to come back if you've been drifting? Many Muslims say the number one thing that keeps them from Christ is the lifestyle of Christians. One Christian who lives among Muslims said this: "They are contemptuous of Christians because they think they are worldly..." J.D. Greear says that according to Muslims, "Christians are morally loose and do not show respect for God."

Some in the media talk about the need for Christians to apologize to Muslims. I'm not quite sure what they're referring to but if we're going to apologize, the real apology we should make is that we have not been living according to the standards of Scripture. I don't know what you think about the Ground Zero mosque controversy but the true "Ground Zero" for Christians is that we be grounded and growing in our faith.

Momentum Among Muslims

One Christian scholar has identified three primary misunderstandings related to Muslims.

- * They're all terrorists. They make up only a very small percentage.
- * They're all theologians. Most do not follow the 5 Pillars and many follow "Folk Islam"
- * They're unreachable. Many exciting things are happening in this regard.

One friend who lives in a country where the dominant religion is Islam sent me an email recently in which he said this: "Well as far as trying to reach a Muslim...it's hard, but not impossible. One of the best things going for us is that a devout Muslim wants to have a relationship with God."

Another friend of ours, who lives in another part of the world, gives six reasons why a Muslim is more open than is commonly believed.

- * He privately doubts his own standing with God because no one can fulfill all of Islam's requirements.
- * He lives in fear because Islam offers no assurance of salvation.
- * Although he prays a lot, he doesn't have any personal relationship with God and doesn't expect God to meet his needs.
- * His faith is fragile because it has never been challenged or tested.
- * He doesn't really understand his own religion and therefore has a hard time explaining it and defending it.
- * He is very open to spiritual conversations.

Far too many of us think a Muslim can never come to Christ. But, it's happening all around the world, and I believe it will speed up as the return of Christ nears. Matthew 24:14 says: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Some believe the greatest harvest in history is already starting to happen.

Here's a report I read just this past Thursday from the Christian Post: "Iran may be 'closed land politically,' one ministry leader told the Lausanne Congress, but it is also 'the most open nation to the Gospel in the entire world. Betrayed by the government, disillusioned with the religion, depressed by the prospects of the future, Iranians when they come to know the Lord Jesus Christ are completely transformed.'"

According to those I've talked to, it seems like God is using four ways to point people to the only Way.

How It's Happening

1. Dreams, visions and miraculous interventions.

In Acts 2:17 Peter is preaching and quotes from the Book of Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." We know that God used dreams with Abraham and Joseph in the Old Testament and Joseph and Peter in the New Testament. A survey of over 600 ex-Muslims reports that over 25% had dreams or visions that played a vital role in their conversion. Among African Muslims, over 40% report that they came to Christ through "visions, dreams, angelic appearances or hearing God's voice." We get a bit uncomfortable with this in the west but for the Muslim, they give great credence to dreams (to learn more, see morethandreams.org).

One of our PBC friends sent me this story. "One in my mentoring group...came from the country with the largest number of adherents. She grew up in a family very devoted to their faith. Her father died when she was young. As a university student when she received news that her mother had become a follower of "Issa"[Jesus] she was very angry and refused to go home in order not to associate with an infidel. She sought to be more devoted in practicing her faith. One night she had a dream. A very kind-looking man told her, "I am the way, truth, and the life." She awoke and wondered what that dream could have meant. Sometime later she received a New Testament. While reading the Gospel of John she came across the same passage. Then she knew whom she had seen in the dream. At that point she decided to become a Christ follower."

2. The Back to Jerusalem Movement.

Chinese house churches are planning to send at least 100,000 evangelists from China through many predominately Muslim nations all the way back to Jerusalem.

3. The explosion of technology.

The world is indeed flat, isn't it? Using radio, satellite television, DVDs, CDs, thumb drives, the Internet and smart phones, the gospel is racing around the world.

4. Faithful messengers.

Did you know that only 6% of the western Christian missionary force is working with Muslims? We need to do what we can to change this, and we are. About 25% of PBC's "sent ones" are ministering in this context. I came across a study of 650 believers from a Muslim background. This study involved people from 40 different countries and 58 different ethnic groups. Do you know what the number one reason was that they listed for why they had come to faith in Jesus? It was because of the lifestyle of Christ-followers.

Related to this, one person who has a heart for Muslim missions has said, "It's not strange for a Muslim to hear the gospel more than fifty times before it starts to make sense for him." I love how one paraphrase captures the meaning of 1 Thessalonians 1:8: "The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore -- you're the message!"

Right before I finished this message, I received an email from a friend who has spent a lot of time with Muslims. Here's what he said. "What would Jesus say to a Muslim?" I think he might tell them, "I am alive and I love you."

We started the sermon with images of the followers of Islam bowing toward Mecca. Can you imagine what it's going to be like when men and women from all over the world will be bowing before the Messiah on the throne in heaven? Close your eyes as I read from Revelation 5:6-14:

"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.' Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped."

John 15:1-5

The Vine

Brian Bill March 12-13, 2016

[Bring up 4 baskets with varying amounts of fruit in each one]

When I was growing up our neighbors had a vineyard. I can remember playing football in our backyard and stopping to eat so many grapes that I would get a stomachache. I also have memories of throwing grapes at my sisters – they left great stains on their pretty dresses! For some reason the owner of these grapevines let us gorge on as many grapes as we wanted. We'd pick pails of them when they were ripe and make grape juice, grape jelly, grape pies, grape brownies, grape fillets, grape lasagna and grape casseroles. We included grapes in everything! They became condiments or the main course, depending on how big the harvest was.

Over time, the owner of the grapevines got sick and was no longer able to take care of his vineyard. The vines became overgrown

and the grapes got smaller. Each year the harvest dropped significantly, until only grape cadavers were available (that's what raisins are, by the way).

Now, in contrast to our neighbor's negligent vineyard, the largest grapevine in the world is over 240 years old, located in England, called simply the "Great Vine." [Show PPT slide]

This vine grows in a greenhouse, where a man and his wife, who serve as the vine keepers, have the responsibility of caring for this magnificent plant. This competent and caring couple do everything they can to keep the vine alive so that it will produce fruit – amazingly, this one grapevine still yields between 500 and 700 bunches of grapes each year!

Please turn in your Bible to John 15:1-5 and follow along as I read: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Last week we drilled down into John 14 where Jesus declared that He is the only way to the Father. The focus was on salvation; today we're going to look at our sanctification. We learned about coming to faith and now we're going to be challenged to be fruitful. We're moving from knowing Christ to growing in Christ. Here's our big idea today: If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.

The sermon last week was strong, wasn't? There's no watering down what Jesus said. If we believe the Bible, we must say that Jesus is the only way. A new Edgewood member posted something on Facebook this week that made me smile: "I'm looking forward to the sermon this weekend and I think I'll have a girl from work with me. She wanted to make sure our pastor wasn't a 'feel good' pastor. I knew what she meant and told her to buckle up for a truth filled sermon..." I take that as a compliment.

When Jesus says that He is the Vine, He is employing an image that is very familiar to His followers. He often used elements from nature to illustrate His teaching – water, seeds, soil, wheat, fig trees, flowers and birds. Grapes were common everywhere and have always been central to Israel's agriculture and economy. In fact, the grapevine was the emblem of Israel, much like the Bald Eagle is for us. Grapes appeared on coins during the period between Malachi and Matthew. At the time of Jesus, a golden vine hung over the entrance to the Temple.

In our culture, it would be as if Jesus were walking through a field of corn or soybeans and drawing life lessons from them. But the image of the vine and its fruit has far deeper spiritual symbolism. The grapevine represented Israel's fruitfulness in doing God's work on earth. Psalm 80:8: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." Unfortunately, His people neglected to keep the vine nourished and, as a result, they ended up going wild and losing their fruit. We see that in verses 12-13: "Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it."

God's Grape Expectations

God has always had "grape expectations" for His followers. He is so sold on fruitfulness that He breaks out into a sad song in Isaiah 5:1-4. Instead of producing sweet grapes, His people had offered only sour substitutes: "Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

This lament continues in another refrain in Jeremiah 2:21: "Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" God's people had become like Zombie grapevines – that sounds like the title to a horror movie! Actually, it was horrible – they were filled with hypocrisy, greed, and all kinds of evil instead of the fruits of righteousness, justice, and mercy.

God's desire has always been for His people to be fruitful. This goes all the way back to Genesis 1:28 when He said, "Be fruitful and increase in number." In fact, a Christian who does not produce fruit is a contradiction in terms. According to John 15:16, we have been chosen to bear fruit "that will last." We just sang about that a few minutes ago: "Like a tree planted by the water we will never run dry. Its time for us to more than just survive, we were made to thrive."

In an unforgettable display of God's expectations of fruit for us, Matthew 21:19 tells us that one day Jesus went for a walk "and seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once." It is unacceptable and unnatural for a follower of Christ to be unfruitful.

Now, let's set the context for today's text. Next weekend is Palm Sunday in which we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into

Jerusalem as depicted in John 12:13: “They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!’” Amidst the excitement, Jesus drops a bombshell and tells them that He is going to die. He then gathers His disciples together in a quiet place, in the upper room for one last supper. Lamb is served for the Passover meal because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Bread is broken because He is the bread of life and the fruit of the vine is consumed because He is the true vine.

He then provides comfort to the distraught disciples in John 14:1 by saying, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” Later in this chapter He promises that the Holy Spirit will be their encourager, teacher, and comforter. Look now at the last phrase of the last verse of chapter 14: “Rise, let us go from here.”

During this time of year there would have been a full moon casting light on a variety of vineyards on the lower slopes of the hill as they’re walking to Gethsemane. It’s likely Jesus stopped and held up a vine filled with blossoms of a promising harvest and said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.” This is a remarkable revelation and quite a contrast as the scene changes from palm branches in the midst of a noisy crowd to the leaves of a vine on a quiet night.

Characters in the Vineyard

There are three characters in this extended allegory.

1. Jesus is the true vine (John 15:1a). The word “vine” literally means, “root,” or “trunk.” It’s the part that comes out of the ground and is often not much to look at. This is a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:2: “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.”

In contrast to faithless and fruitless Israel, Jesus is the fulfillment of all that they were not. We could translate it this way: “I myself am the vine, the real one.” The word “true” means, “genuine and real.” This claim of Jesus is a manifestation of His Messiahship.

2. The Father is the farmer (John 15:1b-2). The “vinedresser” is literally, “one who tills.” The gardener’s primary task is to grow grapes. In order for that to happen, the ground must be cultivated and fertilized, pests must be controlled, weeds must be pulled, the roots must receive water, the vines must be cared for, the grapes must be cleaned, and pruning must take place. A vine needs a gardener in order to produce grapes.

A vineyard is planted for a different purpose than a flower garden. We plant flowers because they’re pretty. A vineyard is planted in order to get grapes. The goal is not flowers, but fruit.

3. We are the branches (John 15:2-5). Our job is simple. If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful. And the only way for that to happen is if we stay tenaciously and faithfully connected to the foundation of the trunk.

A Walk in the Vineyard

Are you ready to buckle up? I see four levels of fruitbearing in our passage that are demonstrated with these four baskets.

Basket 1 (John 15:2a) “does not bear fruit” NO FRUIT

Basket 2 (John 15:2b) “does bear fruit” MEAGER FRUIT

Basket 3 (John 15:2c) “bear more fruit” MORE FRUIT

Basket 4 (John 15:5) “bears much fruit” MUCH FRUIT

One author believes that 50% of all Christians bear little fruit and only about 5% bear a lot of fruit. Do you think that’s true?

Here’s the principle. God the Gardener loves us so much, and is so committed to displaying His glory, that He actively cultivates our lives so that we will move from no fruit, to meager fruit, to more fruit, to much fruit. Friend, which basket represents your life right now? If today were harvest day, how many grapes would be in your basket?

Here’s the good news. More is always possible because you and I were created for this very purpose. According to Matthew 7:20 fruit bearing is a sign of spiritual life: “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

4 Fruit Baskets

Let’s look first at the basket with no fruit.

John 15:2 has been the cause of a lot of confusion because it seems like its saying that a Christian can lose his or her salvation: “He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit.” Verse 6 adds: “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” Let me say it clearly. If you’re truly saved, you’re totally secure. Eternal life is eternal. John 10:28-29: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of

my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

The simple explanation comes from the context. Just hours before, Jesus announced that there was a traitor on the team. In John 13:10 Jesus said, "And you are clean, but not all of you," referring to Judas. A couple chapters later in John 17:12, Jesus said, "Not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction." Judas had no fruit because he had no faith. His real god was greed. As a result, he was cut off and thrown into the fire. John the Baptist shook up the religious crowd when he said this in Matthew 3:10: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

This is similar to what we read in Romans 11:20 where Israel is pictured as an olive tree and some branches are broken off because of unbelief. In their place, believing Gentiles are grafted in. This is shocking to many Jewish people because they think they're good to go. But, if they don't confess Christ, they will be cut off.

Listen. Some of you are holding on to your church background even though you might not have Christian belief. You can be connected to a church and not be converted. I talk to some who assure me quickly that they've been Baptist all their life but there doesn't appear to be any fruit. Let me say it this way. If you don't have any fruit (pick up basket), it might be because you don't have saving faith. You may think you're a Christian but you're not following Christ. A true Christian will bear fruit.

Let's focus now on the other three baskets. How do we move from little fruit to a lot of fruit? How do we go from meager fruit to more fruit to much fruit? If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.

Finding Fruit

There are three ways to grow more fruit according to this passage.

1. Prepare for Pruning.

Notice the last part of John 15:2: "...every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." [Hold up Baskets #2 and #3] Pruning is done so that those who bear a meager amount of fruit will bear more fruit.

New shoots, called "sucker shoots," must be sliced off because they can end up sucking the life out of the vine, causing grapes to not grow. I'm told that most new grape growers fail because they don't prune enough. Good pruning creates a strong root system, improves the health of the vine and most importantly, increases the yield.

A watched a video this week about a vineyard in California that covers 30 acres and learned that it takes 500 man-hours to prune 13,000 vines. The wife of the gardener of the Great Vine in England spends about three months a year scraping branches with a knife in order to remove loose flakes of bark. She does this because grapevines have numerous parasites. Pruning must take place in order for grapes to grow. Dead wood must be ruthlessly removed and live wood must be cut back drastically. I saw this near our house this week when a whole row of bushes were totally cut back because they were getting out of control. You and I have been reborn in order to reproduce but the only way for that to happen is through a painful purging process.

Bruce Wilkinson describes what happened when he moved to the country one spring. The fence that he shared with his neighbor had a large grape vine on it and he and his family were looking forward to enjoying some juicy grapes that fall. A couple days later he noticed his neighbor was hacking away at the vine with some large shears so he went outside and asked, "I guess you don't like grapes?" The neighbor replied that he loves grapes. Seeing the confusion on his face, the gardener explained, "Well, son, we can either grow ourselves a lot of beautiful leaves filling up this whole fence line. Or we can have the biggest, juiciest, sweetest grapes you and your family have ever seen. We just can't have both."

Let's go back to the purpose of a vineyard. The goal is grapes, not lush leaves or creative colors. Everything else must be sacrificed for the sake of the harvest. Are you being pruned right now? If so, ponder these points:

- God does not prune us indiscriminately. He knows what He's doing because He always follows a precise plan. Since He's working to make us more like Christ, He only removes what is necessary and avoids unnecessary injury.
- Pruning involves pain. The Father's pruning knife is sharp but it is not designed to ultimately damage or destroy us. He uses all sorts of unpleasant things to prune us – circumstances, failures, ruptured relationships, illnesses, and trials in order to get us to bear more fruit.
- Pruning can last a long time. The pruning process doesn't continue for one day, or for one week, or one year. We really can't say, "Well, I've been through that, and I'm glad there's no more pain coming my way." In fact, the longer a grapevine is alive, the more pruning it needs. Some of us who are older in our faith may need more pruning than we think we do.

Is God pruning you right now? If so, remember it's not ultimately for your pain but for your gain and for His glory. David realized this when he wrote in Psalm 119:67, 71 "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word...It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees." Do you want to be more fruitful than you are right now? The only way for that to happen is to go under the knife.

2. Deal with discipline.

Look at John 15:3: "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." In the natural course of time, a branch will grow rapidly but will not necessarily go where it should. Left to itself, it will head to the ground, where it will become coated with dust and eventually get covered with mud and mildew. A gentle gardener will pick up the branch, wash it off, and tenderly tuck its tendrils back into the trellis where it can do what it was created to do – bear fruit.

Friend, are you playing around in the mud of sin? Allow the heavenly gardener to clean you off and pick you up. Sometimes He sends discipline our way in order to get our attention. These painful measures are designed to bring us to repentance so that we can get back to the business of bearing fruit. This has been referred to as "the best good news you didn't want to hear."

Deal with the discipline that God may be sending your way and remember that the Gardener corrects in order to redirect. Hebrews 12:11: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." The Gardener has plans for you, and His actions are intended to move you towards the place He wants you to be. Sometimes He disturbs our slumber so He can shock us with growth.

He also uses the Bible to get our attention. Listen to Hebrews 4:12 in the New Living Translation: "For the Word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are." We see this in John 15:3 where Jesus says that He uses His Word to cleanse us.

You may wonder what the difference is between discipline and pruning. While they both hurt and they're both for our good, discipline primarily comes as a result of sin while pruning deals with the problem of self.

You don't have to stay where you are right now. You can fast forward to fruitfulness but you must run to Him, not away from Him any longer. God's discipline is always intended to be redemptive and restorative. He is more interested in propelling you toward fruitfulness than He is in punishing you. Is there a meager amount of fruit in your basket? Don't spend a minute longer languishing in the muck and mire of sin. You are not stuck where you are with no way out. Allow Him to lift you up. If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.

I love the prayer found in Psalm 80: "Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine...Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name! Restore us, O Lord God of hosts!" (Psalm 80:14, 18-19).

3. Resolutely remain in Christ.

When we come to John 15:4-5, we see the first command in the passage: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." If we want our baskets to be full of fruit, then we must actively abide in Christ [Hold up Basket #4].

This is a call to vigilance. We must stay closely connected to Christ at all times. To "abide" means, "to stay," "to dwell or remain," or "to settle in for the long term." Jesus is saying something like this: "Live in such a manner that you are at home in Me and that I am at home in you." The word "abide" is used 11 times in John 15 and 40 times in the Gospel of John.

John 15:8: "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." This is not a suggestion but an imperative. When we settle in with the Savior we will demonstrate abundant fruitfulness and bring glory to God. Conversely, if we do not remain in fellowship with Christ, our baskets will be barren and we'll bomb out spiritually.

Listen, apart from Christ, you will not be able to grow fruit that remains: "For apart from me you can do nothing." 2 Corinthians 3:5: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God."

I was curious to see if there are any grapevines still growing in my old neighbor's backyard. I know the woman who lives in the house we grew up in so I asked her to send a picture of how things look 40 years later. What do you think I found? Nothing. Zero. Nada. No trace of any grapes or grapevines or grape cadavers anywhere.

If you have the courage to take a look at your life and can't find any fruit, you need to figure out why that is. Perhaps you're not saved or maybe you need to repent of some sin in your life.

The Christian life is a supernatural life and none of us can live it apart from a dogged dependence on Christ. We can do nothing apart from Him. All our attempts to produce Christian character will be fruitless and frustrating apart from cultivating a close relationship with the Vine. Have you been drifting spiritually? Are you neglecting the spiritual disciplines? A branch disengaged from the vine will dry up and decay. It's time to strengthen your attachment to Him. James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you..."

Here's the encouraging thing. Our job is not to produce fruit, but to bear fruit. Faithfulness is our obligation; fruitfulness is God's concern. It's not a matter of me trying to get some fruit to flourish; my job is to trust and obey and abide, and He will grow His fruit in me and through me. My responsibility is to stay as close connected to the vine as I can. When I am faithful, I will be fruitful.

The result of spiritual fruitfulness is that God will be glorified, we will grow and we will go with the gospel so that others will come to Christ.

One example of a woman who is both faithful and fruitful is Ruth Darr. Ruth's greatest thrill is to invite people to Edgewood and to see Jesus help them make a comeback in their lives: "The joy of my life is to help people come to Jesus or come back to Him if they've been straying." Ruth is struggling with failing eyesight. This motivates her: "I'm doing what I can while I can. I might lose my eyesight but will never lose my vision. That's a promise." You can see Ruth and her guests every Sunday in the second row. She also fills up a table with people during SecondWinders.

How about you? Will you take a yard sign and some invites and do what you can, while you can?

As the playwright George Bernard Shaw was nearing the end of his life, a reporter asked him a question: "If you could live your life over and be anybody you've known, or any person from history, who would you be?" Shaw thought for a moment and then replied, "I would choose to be the man George Bernard Shaw could have been, but never was."

Be the man or woman God has created you to be. He has formed you for fruitfulness. Prepare for some precise pruning. Deal with discipline. And resolutely remain in Christ. If you do, you'll have more fruit than you can handle.

It's time to ask Christ to take our lives and use them for His glory because apart from Christ the Vine we are nothing and can do nothing. When we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.

Closing Song: "Take My Life"

Here am I, all of me. Take my life, it's all for Thee.

John 16:20-24, Philippians 4:4

Journeying to Joy

Brian Bill June 15, 2001

Our family spent this past Wednesday at a Water Park up in God's Country. We had a blast! There were lots of smiles and laughter. The girls really liked the wave pool and we all enjoyed slides with names like the "Corkscrew," "Twister," and "Kamikaze."

After a while some of the rides became predictable and a bit dull so Emily and I decided to try out the "Dragon's Tail." This slide was huge and had three dips in it! We should have known better because there was no long line of people waiting to go down it.

As we were making our way up the steep staircase, we heard a guy scream when he was coming down. It made me want to go back to the bumper boats but I didn't want to lose face with my daughter. When we finally got to the top I nervously looked around and realized that I was going to have to do this. I asked the lifeguard how many people chickened out and went back down the stairs. She smiled and said, "A lot."

Emily confidently sat down in the chute and took off. As I watched her race down the tail of this monstrosity, I secretly hoped the water pump would break or a storm would suddenly appear so they'd have to shut down the slide. When that didn't happen I laid back, crossed my arms and feet, and said a prayer. I immediately knew I was into something that I had no way out of. I started screaming. My heart was racing and I stopped breathing. I would have given anything to get off that slide!

When I got to the bottom Emily was laughing and I was crying (I'm glad I was soaked so she couldn't see my tears!). My swimsuit was stuck in my teeth! Other than the last 30 seconds of sheer terror, I had a great time at the Water Park. It was one of the most enjoyable things we've ever done as a family.

This morning we're going to take a plunge into the pool called "joy" as we continue in our series based on the Fruit of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control..."

It's safe to say that joy is one of the most elusive fruits for us as believers. Like the Dragon's Tail, it's not a very popular fruit and doesn't get near enough use today. Part of the problem is that joy is often misunderstood.

We tend to equate "happiness" with joy but they are two totally different ideas because they each spring from a different source. One comes from the world around me. The other originates directly from the Spirit of the Living God. Happiness is conditioned by and often dependent upon what is "happening" to me. If people treat me good, if things are going well in my life, then I'm happy. If my circumstances aren't favorable, then I'm unhappy – that describes me as I was flying over the back of that dangerous dragon!

Joy, on the other hand, throbs throughout Scripture as a profound, compelling quality of life that transcends the events and disasters which may dog God's people. Joy is a divine dimension of living that is not shackled by circumstances. The Hebrew word means, "to leap or spin around with pleasure." In the New Testament the word refers to "gladness, bliss and celebration."

To have the fruit of joy ripen in our lives is to recognize the journey involved in getting there. It takes time, diligence, patience, and hard work to make a grapevine produce grapes. Fruit is not instantaneous because it has to overcome weather, bugs, weeds, poor soil and neglect. Likewise, in our journey to joy we're faced with the waves of apathy, the currents of pessimism, the deluge of doubt and the waterfalls of despair. There is no way we can manufacture this fruit on our own.

If we want to see this fruit ripen in our lives, we desperately need the Holy Spirit to prune away whatever it is that hinders our joy and then empower us to make some choices that move us closer to a lifestyle of rejoicing. We need to guard against three common Joy Busters and we need to cultivate some Joy Builders into our lives.

Joy Busters

Before Paul wrote to the church at Galatia about the Fruit of the Spirit in chapter 5, he asked a very penetrating question in Galatians 4:15: "What has happened to all your joy..." That question needs to be asked in the church today. What has happened to all my joy? What has happened to all your joy? William Barclay has said that "a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces." Let's look at three common joy stealers that often give us long faces.

1. Unsatisfied expectations. Do you ever feel like you're just going through some joyless routines in life? If the truth were known some of us are discontent with the way our lives are progressing. It could be that your expectations for your marriage have not been met. Or, maybe your kids aren't living like they should. Perhaps you don't have everything you want – a bigger house, a nicer car, and a better job.

I'm convinced that a spirit of discontentment can rob many of us of joy. Listen to how Paul discovered the secret of being content with what God had given him in Philippians 4:12: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

I find it interesting to note that Paul calls contentment a "secret." There's a mystery about it. He also had to "learn" how to live with unsatisfied expectations. Likewise, we must learn to live with plenty or with little. Contentment doesn't come when we have everything we want but when we want everything we have.

2. Unresolved conflict. Our joy evaporates when we allow conflict between ourselves and another person to go on. When someone's offense against us occupies our mental and emotional attention, we have little left over for the Lord. Anger clouds the eyes of our heart and obscures our view of God, draining away our joy.

Hebrews 12:14-15 challenges us to not allow relational ruptures to fester because bitterness can set in: "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

We addressed this last week when we established that love keeps no record of wrongs. If you're still itemizing people's mess-ups, the fruit of joy will be squashed in your life. Paul recognizes the link between joy and unity in Philippians 2:2: "Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

3. Unconfessed sin. This third joy buster is perhaps responsible for chasing more joy out of lives than any other. Guilt can gut your joy faster than anything I know. Sin can send joy far away.

David understood this very well when he attempted to ignore the promptings of the Spirit. Take a look at Psalm 32:1-5: "Blessed is

he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' -- and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

I love how this Psalm ends. After David owns his sin, his joy returns. Notice verse 11: "Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" Did you catch that? He was not able to rejoice and experience the joy of the Lord until he confessed his sins! That's very similar to what David wrote in Psalm 51:7-8: "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice."

Before we move on to some positive joy builders, I want to give the Holy Spirit an opportunity right now to do some pruning in your life. Let's take a couple minutes as I walk through these joy busters. Allow God's Spirit to prompt you to acknowledge confess, and repent.

- Do you have some unsatisfied expectations that have led to a spirit of discontent? If so, determine to do whatever it takes to learn the secret of wanting everything you have and not necessarily having everything you want. When you do, you'll begin to experience joy in even the small things of life. Confess your discontentment to Him right now.
- Are you involved in some conflict with someone? If so, confess it to God and make plans to meet with that person face-to-face so that you can be reconciled and get back on your journey to joy.
- Is God's hand heavy upon you right now because of some sin that you've not confessed and repented of? Don't keep silent any longer – it will only chew up your joy. Acknowledge your transgression and taste the joy that was once yours. Then you'll be truly glad and rejoice in the Lord again.

Friends, I have some great news this morning. Lost joy can be restored. As a result of some discontent, some conflict, and some open sin, David had tuned out spiritually. His joy was a long-lost memory. And yet, he boldly prays in Psalm 51:12, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation..." God honored his prayer, and He will honor yours.

Joy Builders

Billy Sunday once said, "The trouble with many men is that they have got just enough religion to make them miserable. If there is not joy in religion, you've got a leak in your religion." God not only wants to restore our lost joy, He also wants us to cultivate those things that will build lasting joy into our lives so that we don't have any leaks in our religion. The Bible gives us at least six ways to experience this joy.

1. Recognize God as joyful. We can be helped greatly in our journey towards joy if we learn to see the Almighty not as a taskmaster, but as the God of the Universe with a smile on His face. When I first discovered Zephaniah 3:17 I had to read it several times because it was such a new thought for me. Listen to how God feels about you: "The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." [Read again]

God delights in you and breaks out into song when He thinks about you! That's hard to believe, isn't it? I love how the Living Bible paraphrases this verse: "Is that a joyous choir I hear? No, it is the Lord himself exulting over you in happy song."

Psalm 104:31 says, "May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works." Isaiah 65:18-19: "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people..."

Friend, if we have little or no joy in our lives, it could very well be because we don't know God well enough because joy is one of His character qualities. When we recognize God as joyful we will be even more drawn to Him. He is not an aloof judge just waiting for us to mess up so He can unleash His fury. He has created us to be His delight. He finds great joy in you! He exults over you in happy song.

As we view God this way, we will discover that He takes great pleasure in us. He is the Good Gardener who toils over us with constant care. He waits patiently for His fruit to ripen and with great joy He longs to gather in the harvest. Since there is enthusiasm in everything He undertakes and sweet satisfaction in all He does, His joy can be transmitted directly to us by His Holy Spirit who lives within us. That's exactly what Nehemiah discovered in Nehemiah 8:10: "...The joy of the LORD is your strength."

I pray that we'll experience the Lord's joy as well.

2. Rehearse God's attributes in worship. God delights in us and finds great joy in His creation – then when we celebrate His attributes in worship we allow our joy to flow back to Him. The Westminster Confession states it well: our chief end is to glorify God

and enjoy Him forever. We've been designed to respond in worship through both reverence and rejoicing.

Psalm 66:1-4: "Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious! Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name.'"

Our collective worship of God on Sundays should be the culmination of our individual and private worship during the week. We make room in our lives for God's joy through the traditional disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, Scripture memory, meditation, fasting and singing. Then, whatever service you come to on Sunday, it's our prayer that you come ready to revere God and ready to rejoice. Our two worship teams are committed to plan services that focus on the holiness and awesomeness of God and provide elements that lead us into joyful exuberance. As we rehearse who God is by celebrating His attributes, the fruit of joy will begin to blossom in our lives.

When David focused on God's character in Psalm 28, he couldn't help but break out into joy. Listen to verse 7: "The Lord is my strength and shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to Him in song."

3. Reaffirm your commitment to others. The first two joy builders are vertical and have to do with how we view God and how He views us. If we're serious about drinking deeply out of the rivers of joy, we must also make sure that we are doing OK on the horizontal dimension by living in biblical community with others. We can't do it alone. Romans 12:15 challenges us to "rejoice with those who rejoice..." We're not able to do this unless we're connected to others. If you're not in fellowship with believers, your joy will leak out.

When contemplating whether or not it would be better to die and spend eternity with His Lord, the Apostle Paul concludes that it would benefit the church greatly if he hung around for a while. Look at Philippians 1:25-26: "Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

Here's the point. As I connect with you and you connect with me, our joy will overflow. We need each other. If we're not attending church on a regular basis, or coming and not interacting with others, we could be jeopardizing the joy of other people. When we live in loving relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we'll be more joyful and we'll be helping others jack up their joy. The best way I know for this to happen is for everyone at PBC to be involved in a small group. I'm convinced that if we want to get larger we must first get smaller. As we gather with other believers for accountability, growth, prayer, and study, God will use each of us to raise the joy temperature around here.

Men, on this Father's Day, let me challenge you to consider joining with a group of guys that get together every Tuesday morning at Burger King. We also have 12 different small groups that meet on various nights of the week. Let me encourage you to join with others on your journey towards joy. They need you, and you need them. If you'd like more information you can pick up a pamphlet in the hallway after the service.

4. Reignite your passion for evangelism. One of the best ways to build joy into your life is by talking to others about Jesus. Philemon 6: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

Luke 15 records for us how much rejoicing takes place when the lost are found. When the lost sheep is recovered, verse 5 says that the owner "joyfully puts it on his shoulders" and then goes home and calls his friends and neighbors together and declares in verse 6, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. I tell you in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents..." Jesus reminds us in John 4:36 that we can be filled with glad joy when we participate in the process of evangelism: "Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together."

Not only do we appreciate God's gift of grace in our lives when we tell others about Jesus, we also get to see the inexpressible joy of those who experience the new birth. Even though I had a blast at the Water Park on Wednesday, it was nothing like the joy that splashed into my life on Tuesday night. While I was grilling burgers with my brother-in-law Shawn, he told me that he had "crossed the line" of faith and had prayed to receive Christ recently. His joy was all over his face!

As you know, PBC had the privilege of sending a team of three evangelists to Kenya for a week of intensive witnessing and church planting. I'm going to ask Ken and Kathy Marley to come up right now and share with us what they saw God do. While they're making their way up here let me share what Phillip Hansen told me on Monday (he's not here this morning because he's at 5-day club training this week). He told me that there were 387 conversions on three different sites!

He then explained to me that the emptiness in people's lives was very profound when he saw people who weren't Christians. In that

culture, people are shamed and shunned when they don't keep all the religious regulations of Islam. But, once they're converted, they're filled with jubilation! Instead of being downcast, their faces reflect the joy of Jesus.

5. Release your problems to the Lord. One of the hallmarks of Christian joy is that it can be experienced in the midst of intense sorrow and loss. Often we define happiness as the absence of something undesirable, such as pain, suffering, or disappointment. But Christian joy is the proper response to the presence of something desirable: God Himself.

In Acts 16, the authorities beat Paul and Silas. After they were severely flogged, they were thrown into prison. In order to make sure they didn't escape, they were put in the inner cell and had their feet fastened in stocks. If that were me, I'd be more scared than I was when I flew down the Dragon's Tail! Verse 25 says that Paul and Silas "were praying and singing hymns to God..." This word for praying is not the word used for making requests but rather the word used for praise, or worship. Instead of asking God to get them out, they turned this tough situation into an opportunity for rejoicing.

This reminds me of what Matthew Henry, a Bible scholar from the 1700's wrote in his diary after some thieves robbed him and took his wallet: "Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because, although they took my wallet, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because, it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."

The only way to have an attitude like this is to release our problems to the Lord. Because He's in charge we can have joy – no matter what happens. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 7:4: "...in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds." James 1:2 challenges us to "consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds."

This takes a conscious decision. We're commanded to work at it. While we can't manufacture joy we can give our problems to the Lord by leaning on Him with everything we've got.

6. Remain close to Jesus. As we established last week, the only way to experience the fruit of the spirit is to be obedient to Christ and submit to the Spirit on a daily basis. To discover joy we must abandon the search for it and go looking instead for the one who is Himself joy. Joy is the flag that flies over the castle of our hearts announcing that Jesus is in residence today.

John 15:10-11 puts it this way: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

If we want the kind of joy that is complete, lacking nothing, then we must remain close to Jesus. Apart from Him we can bear no fruit. Jesus said it clearly in John 15:4: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

Conclusion

The movie industry lost some credibility last week when it was discovered that Sony Pictures Entertainment created a fictitious film critic named David Manning and had him say some nice things in ads about two new movies. This pretend person called one movie "another winner" and referred to the male lead in the second film as "this year's hottest new star."

People made fun of Sony for doing this while others were very angry that they'd stoop so low. I can't help but think that some of us are trying to just write "copy" for the fruit of joy in our life. People can see fake fruit. Are you a fraud or are you a fruit-bearer? Are you a charlatan or a true Christian? Are you playing charades or are you praising Christ? The only way to have real joy is to nurture your relationship with Jesus and keep in step with the Spirit on a daily basis.

Let me briefly mention three application steps.

1. Guard yourself against those joy busters that crash into your life like a tidal wave. Be vigilant. Ask someone to hold you accountable so that you learn the secret of contentment, so that you keep short accounts with people, and to help you get into the habit of regular confession of your sins.

2. Identify one joy builder that you need to work on. Pick one that is weak for you.

- Recognize God as joyful
- Rehearse God's attributes in worship
- Reaffirm your commitment to others
- Reignite your passion for evangelism
- Release your problems to the Lord

- Remain close to Jesus

3. Read through the Book of Philippians every day for a week. The word “joy” or “rejoice” is used 19 different times in this short book. As you read it, ask God to ripen the fruit of joy in your life.

In closing, let’s allow Romans 14:17 to penetrate our lives: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

John 16:7-14

Engage With The Holy Spirit

Brian Bill - October 22-23, 2016

Eric Metaxas mentioned in a recent Breakpoint Commentary that if Americans took a theology exam, their only hopes of passing would be if God graded on a curve.

LifeWay Research released results of a survey last month in which 3,000 participants were asked a set of 47 questions about foundational Christian beliefs. Here a few highlights, or should I say, lowlights...

- 69% of Americans agree there’s only one true God—one in essence, three in person: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Evangelicals, by definition, believe trusting in Jesus is the only way of salvation. Yet two-thirds of evangelicals—more than Americans as a whole—claim Heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with loved ones. Nearly half agreed that, “God accepts the worship of all religions including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.”
- But if evangelicals sometime misunderstand doctrines about Jesus, the third member of the Trinity has it much worse because 56% believe the Holy Spirit “is a divine force but not a personal being.”

Our topic this weekend is, “Engaging with the Holy Spirit.” As part of my preparation my mind went back to a book I read a couple years ago called, “The Forgotten God: Reversing our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit” by Francis Chan. Here’s something he said: “From my perspective, the Holy Spirit is tragically neglected and, for all practical purposes, forgotten. While no evangelical would deny His existence...there are millions of churchgoers across America who cannot confidently say they have experienced His presence or action in their lives over the past year. And many of them do not believe they can.”

Pastor J.D. Greear believes evangelicals generally fall into one of two extremes.

- Some seem obsessed with Him, relating to Him in strange, mystical ways. Their experiences with the Spirit seem to coincide with an emotionally ecstatic moment.
- Other Christians react to that perceived excess by neglecting His ministry altogether. They believe in the Holy Spirit, but they relate to Him the same way they relate to their pituitary gland: grateful it’s in there; know it’s essential for something; don’t pay much attention to it.

Let’s be honest and admit that many Baptists fall in this second category.

There’s no doubt the Holy Spirit is the most misunderstood and ignored member of the Trinity. I recognize that we cannot possibly cover everything the Bible says about Him in one message so we’re going to ponder the promises that Jesus gives us in John 14-16. We’ll look into four passages that will help us understand and engage with the Holy Spirit. After learning about the person of the Holy Spirit we’ll conclude with ways we can live in the power of the Spirit.

Here’s some brief background to put these texts into context. Jesus has just announced that He will be leaving His disciples and they are now distraught and no doubt disappointed. They are extremely unsettled and so the Savior takes three chapters to assure them that they will not be left alone.

Before we jump in, I want to draw your attention to the word “Helper” that is used to describe the Holy Spirit in all four of these passages in John 14:16; 14:26; 15:26 and 16:7. “Helper” literally means, “One who comes forward on behalf of and as the representative of another; one who is called alongside to assist.” Its meaning is rich and deep and can be translated with words like: “comforter, counselor, attorney, encourager, adviser, pleader, proxy and advocate.”

Let's start in John 14:16-17 – “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

- Notice the entire Trinity is involved here – Jesus asks the Father who gives another Helper, the Spirit of Truth. I love how God is described in our Articles of Faith – “...That in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - equal in every divine perfection and executing distinct but harmonious offices in the great work of redemption.”
- The word “another” means, “one of the same kind or quality.” The idea is that of “sameness.” Jesus is saying the Holy Spirit will be like Himself and will take His place.
- The Helper will be us forever. In the Old Testament the Spirit is mentioned nearly 100 times and came upon people to enable them to accomplish God-given tasks and then would depart. That's why David prayed in Psalm 51:11: “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.” We don't have to worry about that now because the Holy Spirit comes in at conversion and stays forever. In John 14:18, Jesus says, “I will not leave you as orphans.”
- He is the Spirit of truth.
- Those who don't know Christ cannot receive the Holy Spirit.
- Believers “know” Him, meaning He is personal, not just a mystical force like in Star Wars or an impersonal power. He's not a power to experience but a Person to know.
- Related to this, the Holy Spirit is a “He” not an “it.” We see this grammatically. The Greek word for Spirit (pneuma) is neuter in gender, yet the Bible uses masculine pronouns “He” and “Him” to refer to the Holy Spirit. He's not an “it,” He's a He!
- The Holy Spirit not only dwells with us, He is now in believers. I like how one pastor puts it: “He has always been a God who is close and present but only since Jesus returned to heaven has He taken up residence inside of us. And that makes Him closer than ever.”

Turn now to John 14:26 – “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

- Notice the Trinity again – the Father sends the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus.
- One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to teach believers. He brings new truth to the disciples and also helps them remember all that Jesus has said in the past. BTW, that's why the Holy Spirit was so involved in the inspiration of the Scriptures. We're taught and we're reminded as we study the Word of God. 2 Peter 1:21: “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Now let's look at John 15:26 – “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

- Here we see the Trinity at work again – Jesus will send the Helper who comes from the Father.
- He is the Spirit of truth – we need truth in a world filled with lies and error, don't we?
- The Helper proceeds from the Father. The Nicene Creed, written first in A.D. 325, as a response to those who denied the divinity of Christ, was revised in 381 in reaction to a heresy that denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. No doubt they had this verse in mind when these words were formulated: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified...”
- The Holy Spirit bears witness about Jesus. The Helper doesn't promote Himself but loves to point people to Christ. In John 16:14, Jesus says that “He will glorify me.”

Turn now to John 16:7 – “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” The word “nevertheless” is used as a contrast or antithesis to what the disciples are feeling. Jesus then says something to get their attention: “I tell you the truth...” Jesus always told the truth but it's as if He's saying, “Listen up guys. This is really important.”

What He says next is shocking: “it is to your advantage that I go away...” This word means, “useful, profitable or beneficial.” There

was no way the disciples were thinking that it was a good thing that Jesus was about to leave them. How could it be to their advantage that Jesus was going away? Of what benefit would it be for Jesus to be gone from them?

Jesus tells them why His departure would be profitable for them: “for if I do not go away, the Helper [there’s that word again], will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” Three times Jesus uses the word, “go” to help the disciples understand that He was about to leave them. But it would be to their advantage because the Helper could then arrive. His going is essential to the Spirit’s coming. To “send” means, “to dispatch and thrust out.”

Several years ago Beth and I had the privilege of going to Israel. It was a very moving experience to walk where Jesus walked. But as great as it was, you don’t have to go to the Holy Land to experience the Lord. Having the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life is better than walking with Jesus where He walked because now through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit He walks with us in our culture and context today!

Here’s a good question to ponder. Would you rather have Jesus right next to you or have the Holy Spirit within you? Jesus says that’s it to our benefit for Him to go away so that the Spirit could dwell inside us. I quote again from J.D. Greear: “When Jesus was on earth, his miraculous work was contained to wherever he was at the moment. Now that he is in us, his power is wherever we are. The Spirit inside us is better than Jesus beside us...”

I came across a very provocative quote by A.W. Tozer some time ago and have been pondering it again for the past couple weeks – “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”

Now, let me be quick to say that that the Holy Spirit will never be taken from us but it’s worth asking ourselves what is it that we’re doing in our own power. Would you notice if the Holy Spirit was no longer in your life? The Holy Spirit will not be withdrawn but we can withdraw from Him.

The Bible says there are at least two ways we can short-circuit the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives.

- We can grieve the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 4:30-31: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” To “grieve” means, “to make sad or sorry.” We can grieve Him by holding on to gross stuff in our lives.
- We can quench the Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:19: “Do not quench the Spirit.” To “quench” means, “to put out a fire.” When we ignore the Holy Spirit by continuously compromising our morals and biblical convictions, the fire of the Holy Spirit can be reduced to smoldering embers.

One of the best ways to make sure we’re not grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit is to keep short accounts with God and with others. When you mess up, own it. When you sin, confess it. When you’ve wronged someone, make it right.

One of my pastor friends posted these words this week: “Unconfessed sin in the life of the believer is like an open wound that rots progressively and fills the air with such a pungent odor that God’s presence is repelled. He waits to restore relationship...until the believer has asked him to forgive the sin, cleanse the wound, heal it, and restore the fullness of relationship.”

One of the best examples of keeping short accounts with others happened Wednesday night in the National League Championship Series when Cubs player Anthony Rizzo apologized to the home plate umpire. Apparently, Rizzo was a bit exasperated when a pitch was called a strike when he thought it was a ball. He had started to head to first base but had to return to the batter’s box. When he did, he turned to the ump and said, “My fault on that.” The umpire responded, “You’re good, bro...No worries. You’re competing. I understand. Don’t worry. And you know what’s the best of it, you come back and you tell me that. That’s how good of a guy you are. Are you kidding me? Thanks.” Is there anyone you need to go back to today?

We’ve learned about the Holy Spirit and now we must live by the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:25: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.” This is a military term meaning that we’re to march in a straight line, taking our orders only from Him. As I yield to the Spirit I will experience His power and people should notice. I like what Francis Chan writes: “I don’t want my life to be explainable without the Holy Spirit. I want people to look at my life and know that I couldn’t be doing this by my own power.”

Living by the Spirit

Here then are some ways we can keep in step with the Spirit.

1. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. It’s so easy to fill our lives with things that don’t satisfy, isn’t it? Some of us are drinking deeply of substances that end up controlling us. Check out Ephesians 5:18: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be

filled with the Spirit.” This is a command that literally means, “Keep on being filled with the Spirit.” I’m reminded of what the great preacher Charles Spurgeon did before he climbed the stairs to the pulpit every time he preached. For every step he would take, he would say these words, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Ask Him to fill you every day and many times during the day.

2. Be purified by the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit should have a purifying affect in our lives. Before Christ came God’s Spirit dwelt in the tabernacle and now He dwells inside His people and within His church. If you are born again, your body is now the temple of God!

God displays His beauty and glory today through believers, and as such, we must treat our bodies carefully and make sure they are dedicated to His purposes. This is spelled out clearly in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” The way we live should declare to the world that the Holy Spirit is present within us. Or to say it another way, the world will learn about God based upon the way we are living. That’s a weighty responsibility and a holy charge.

God also dwells in His church according to 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you [plural] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

Listen to this quote from Francis Chan: “If it’s true that the Spirit of God dwells in us and that our bodies are the Holy Spirit’s temple, then shouldn’t there be a huge difference between the person who has the Spirit of God living inside of him or her and the person who does not?” By the way, if you want to go deeper into living by the power of the Holy Spirit, Francis Chan has some video teaching on the “Forgotten God” on Right Now Media.

3. Serve according to the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has given you According to 1 Corinthians 12:7, every believer has been given at least one spiritual gift that is to be used to build up the body of Christ: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Discover the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you and then unleash them for God’s glory and the growth of His church.

I saw some servants here on Thursday setting up for the Parenting on Purpose seminar (BTW, over 60 attended!). I went up to Ruth McAnally and asked, “Were you just serving?” Her answer was quick, “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?” She got me there.

I’m told that we had over 23 babies and toddlers last weekend! Suzy Crosby, who heads up the Nursery, tells me that we’ve had a “baby boom” and there’s more babies that were just born and others still to be born that are headed to the Nursery soon. Would you consider serving in this way?

4. Demonstrate the Fruit of the Spirit. Those things that naturally flow out of us are found in Galatians 5:19-21: “...sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy...” Sounds like the presidential debates, doesn’t it?

It’s important to distinguish between the gift of the Spirit which happens at salvation; the gifts of the Spirit, which have to do with service; and the graces of the Spirit, which relate to Christian character. Unfortunately we have sometimes elevated the gifts of the Spirit over the graces of the Spirit. Building Christian character must take precedence over displaying special abilities.

Is the Fruit of the Spirit ripening in your life right now? Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

5. Pray in the Holy Spirit. Before you get nervous and think I’m talking about something that only charismatics practice, consider Ephesians 6:18: “Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.” To pray in the Spirit means to follow His lead and to pray in His power.

I was very moved recently when I received an email from Pastor Kyle that he sent to the staff and to the deacons. I have his permission to share it. The heading is, “Can’t sleep.” Here’s what he wrote: “Hey all, I woke up a little after 2 this morning and I couldn’t go back to bed. I began to pray for the church and students in particular that God would reveal Himself and pour out His Spirit on them. With the high school retreat coming up, I threw out some of the other ideas I had and prayed for what God wanted to share. I feel like He showed me Psalm 24 that focuses on a generation seeking after Him. He also showed me the connection with Psalm 51 and how this begins with confession. I need to understand this first and foremost and I desperately want students and singles to understand this as well.

Would you prayerfully consider fasting and praying for the next few weeks up until and during the retreat that God would come down and reveal Himself to students, especially on the retreat? There are different things we can fast from. I will fast from food one day a week and any social media that is not connected to work or ministry in order to have more focused prayer. If anything, please just pray with me.”

The students are having (had) an “Exile Night” on Saturday in which they put themselves in the place of persecuted Christians. They learned what it’s like to live knowing you could be killed for your faith at any time.

6. Go with the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s fascinating to me that Jesus held his disciples back from witnessing until they had the Holy Spirit. We see this in Luke 24:48-49: “You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father [the Holy Spirit] upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

The cool thing is that when we witness, the Holy Spirit is at work. When we proclaim Christ, we do so with the power the Holy Spirit gives us.

Invitation

Could you bow your heads? I want to speak to two different groups of people.

1. Christians who need to surrender. If you’re saved, you have all of the Holy Spirit. But here’s a question: “Does the Holy Spirit have all of you?” Have you been living in your own might and do you think you’re always right? Have you been saved by grace but now you’re trying to do everything in your own grit or through your own wit? Paul addressed this in Galatians 3:3: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

- Surrender everything to Him right now.

2. Non-Christians who need to get saved. If you’re not saved, you are in a very precarious position. There will be a final exam one day and you will fail it if you don’t put your faith in Jesus Christ. Listen to what the Holy Spirit is doing right now according to John 16:8-11 and be open to respond to Him: “And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” The word “convict” means to prove one is wrong and He does it in three main areas.

- Concerning sin, because they do not believe in me. Admit you are a sinner. According to this verse, the biggest sin is to not believe in Christ.
- Concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father. Jesus is our standard for righteousness. Admit that you are unrighteous.
- Concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. Where sin and unrighteousness meet, judgment follows. If you do not believe in and receive Jesus Christ, you will be judged forever in a place called Hell.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ paid the price for all of your sins and when you repent and receive Him into your life you will be declared righteous and will avoid the judgment you deserve.

God doesn’t grade on a curve but He does grade on Christ. He aced the exam and when you accept Him, His score of perfect righteousness will be credited to your report card. How cool is that?

Listen to these words of Jesus from John 3 – “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

Ask Jesus to save you right now so you can be born again of the Spirit.

Lead in Prayer of Salvation.

If you surrendered or were saved just now, would you raise your hand so we can rejoice with you?

Doxology - The word doxology comes from the Greek doxa, (“glory” or “splendor”) and logos, (“word” or “speaking”). We’re going to conclude by declaring a doxology to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Benediction – “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Brian Bill on Apr 2, 2003

Summary: "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'" In the midst of His pain and recognizing that He is about to die for the

Final Words of a Family Man

In the days before expectant fathers were allowed in the delivery room, four dads-to-be gathered in a Minneapolis hospital waiting room while their wives were in labor. The nurse arrived and announced to the first man, "Congratulations, sir. You're the father of twins." The man was very proud and said, "What a coincidence. I work for the Minnesota Twins baseball team."

The nurse returned in a little while and spoke to the second man, "Dad, you're the father of triplets." The faltering father replied, "Wow, that's an incredible coincidence. I work for 3M."

An hour later, the nurse came back with some news for the third man, "Way to go! Your wife just gave birth to quadruplets." The man was stunned and had to sit down. When he gathered himself he said, "I don't believe it. What an incredible coincidence! I work at the Four Seasons Hotel."

Just then the fourth guy fainted and crashed to the floor. The nurse rushed over to him and gave him some smelling salts. When he was finally able to speak, he kept muttering the same phrase over and over again: "I shouldn't have taken that job at 7-Eleven. I shouldn't have taken that job at 7-Eleven."

This morning we're focusing on the ultimate family man. While Jesus never married and had natural children, He was committed to His family. We see this especially in His dying moments as we listen to the third cry from the Cross recorded in John 19:25-27: "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'" As we've been learning in this series based on the Seven Shouts From the Savior, it's no coincidence that Jesus spoke the words that He did. These anguished expressions perfectly reflect His person and purpose.

- Forgiveness (Luke 23:32-34)
- Salvation (Luke 23:39-43)
- Family (John 19:25-27)
- Loneliness (Matthew 27:45-46)
- Suffering (John 19:28-29)
- Triumph (John 19:30)
- Reunion (Luke 23:44-46)

Four Apathetic Soldiers

Before we reflect upon the four hurting women gathered near the cross, I want to set the scene by focusing not on four expectant fathers, but on four apathetic soldiers. Please turn in your Bible to John 19:23-24: "When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did."

Have you seen the commercial about the tourist on a cruise ship who is sightseeing for whales? As he looks down, fumbling with his camera, everyone else sees a great white whale fly out of the water. As the amateur photographer looks up, he sees the excited look on everyone's faces and says, "What? Did I miss something?"

In a similar way, a whole group of guys missed something that Good Friday morning. Jesus had been placed under the supervision of four Roman soldiers who had beaten Him, marched Him to Golgotha, crucified Him and were ultimately responsible to make sure He was dead. They were so close to the foot of the cross and had somehow missed it. How is that possible? I think there were at least three reasons.

1. Familiarity. By the time of Christ, crucifixion had become the favorite method of execution in the Roman Empire. Historians tell us that Rome had already crucified more than 30,000 people in and around Judea. Crucifixions had become methodical to these four soldiers. It's what they did for a living so they had become numb to it.

This was not just a problem in the first century. The Cross today has largely lost its impact because it's so familiar. It's amazing to realize that the instrument of execution in the first century has become a fashion statement today. We've sanitized and beautified what was once loathed and feared. Friends, some of us are no longer moved by what Jesus did on the cross because we've simply become too used to it. Those of us who have been Christians for a while can become numb and even bored by the cross. It's not proximity that makes us believers. Sometimes those who grow up closest to the cross end up rejecting Him completely.

2. Prejudice. A second reason the soldiers missed what was happening is because the Romans hated the Jews and the soldiers stationed there would have found great pleasure in executing a Jewish man. That's why they mocked Him with the robe, put a crown of thorns on Him and spit on Him. Do you remember the pictures of that U.S. soldier who was beaten and killed and dragged through the streets of Somalia? Those who murdered him didn't know him. He was just a convenient scapegoat for their hatred of America. A similar sentiment was probably behind the kidnapping and murder of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter, who was killed in Pakistan sometime this past month.

Maybe you're not moved by the Cross because you're prejudiced against the people the cross represents. Perhaps a preacher has turned you off. Or a church has rubbed you the wrong way. Maybe you've been hurt by the hypocrisy of a Christ follower. Whatever it is, I encourage you to look beyond imperfect Christians and see Christ Himself.

3. Materialism. Roman law granted the soldiers the right to the clothes the executed man was wearing. John 19:23 tells us that they took the wardrobe of Jesus and divided it into four equal shares. By the way, we imagine Christ wearing some kind of loincloth when He hung on the cross. That's how most movies show Him. In actuality, Jesus would have been stripped of every last article of clothing. We don't like to think of this because it's embarrassing, and even offensive. The humiliation of crucifixion was accentuated by the shame of nakedness and harkens back to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were exposed by their sin and tried to hide their bare skin from God (see Genesis 3:10).

The contrast between what Jesus had when He lived with His Father in glory and what He has now is striking. As He hangs on the cross He has absolutely nothing to His name. He went from dazzling glory to stark nakedness. He suffered this shame so that He could clothe us with His righteousness.

These four pieces of apparel would consist of his sandals, his headgear, his outer garment, and a belt. It was fairly easy to divide these items up. But there was one more piece of clothing left. It was called the undergarment and it was worth more than anything else Jesus owned. It was most likely made out of linen or wool and was woven in one piece from top to bottom.

John 19:24 tells us that the soldiers did not want to divide this tunic into four pieces because it would have destroyed its value. And so they rolled the dice to see who would end up with it. Imagine with me what this scene must have looked like to Jesus. As He looked down past his bloody feet He saw common soldiers playing their part in the world's most uncommon drama. As far as they're concerned, it's just another Friday morning and He's just another criminal.

They were so busy looking down at the ground, thinking of material things that they never looked up to see the Savior of the world. They divided up used clothes while ignoring the eternal riches Jesus was offering them. They heard the first two shouts from the Savior offering forgiveness and salvation, but were too locked in to their loot to pay any attention to Him. Is it possible that you're focused more on material things than on eternal realities? Don't gamble your life away on things that won't last.

No Coincidences

While the four new fathers expressed surprise at the coincidences surrounding the births of their babies, there are no coincidences surrounding the death of Jesus. Let me list just three things that happened on purpose.

1. The undergarment. According to history and Exodus 39:22, the high priest wore something very similar to the tunic Jesus was wearing. Leviticus 21:10 specifies that the high priest could never have his clothes torn. This reminds us that Jesus fits the role of the Old Testament priest, to be our go-between, our intercessor with the Father.

Hebrews 7:23-25: "Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

2. Fulfilled prophecy. It is also no coincidence that the soldiers divided up His belongings and gambled for his clothes. This was a predictive prophecy from Psalm 22:18 and is quoted in John 19:24: "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." According to Biblical scholars, there are 332 distinct prophecies in the Old Testament that have been literally fulfilled in Christ! (J.P. Free, "Archaeology and Bible History," Page 284).

3. A gift from mother. According to legend, His mother gave this undergarment to Jesus. This was something that mothers normally gave their sons when they left home. If this is true, then there seems to be a connection between what the soldiers were

doing and the third shout from the Savior. Right after we are told that they rolled the dice, verse 24 ends rather abruptly and pointedly: “So this is what the soldiers did.” Verse 25 begins with a focus on Mary: “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother...”

Chuck Swindoll writes, “Why now? She’s been there all along, watching and weeping. Why hasn’t He acknowledged or spoken to her? His outer garments were insignificant. But when they touched the tunic, they touched something very near to His heart—the garment made for Him by His mother” (“The Darkness and the Dawn,” 2001, 153-54).

4 Hurting Women

The harsh brutality of the crucifixion, the humiliation of Jesus, and the extreme apathy of the soldiers is softened by His words of comfort in the third cry from the cross. I don’t know about you, but when I’m in pain, I want other people to notice. It’s also really tough to think about someone else when we go through tough times. Jesus, in His dying moments, thought not of Himself, but others. Look at verse 25: “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.”

These women were related in some way to the Twelve and were among Jesus’ most loyal followers. These four women were “near” to the cross, not far away. They also “stood” strong instead of shutting down in their indescribable grief. It took courage for them to stand near the one who had been crucified. Let’s take a closer look at who these women were.

- His mother. The first time Mary is mentioned in the Gospel of John she is attending a wedding at Cana. Now she is preparing for a burial at Calvary. We can assume that she is a widow since we don’t hear about Joseph again after the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve. As the first-born son, Jesus was responsible to make sure she was cared for.
- His aunt. Mary’s sister was the mother who asked Jesus for special thrones for her two sons, James and John in Matthew 20:20. According to Mark her name was Salome. I’m sure the crucifixion scene provided another rebuke to her misplaced priorities.
- Mary, the wife of Clopas. We don’t know much about this woman except that she was married to Clopas. She was obviously a faithful follower.
- Mary Magdalene. This Mary was radically changed by Jesus, having had seven demons driven out of her. After her healing she traveled with Jesus and shared her material resources with His band of followers. After Jesus died, she was present when Joseph of Aramithea laid Jesus in the grave and on Easter Sunday she was the first one at the empty tomb.

Let me say that of the entire circle of 11 devoted disciples, only one male follower showed up at the cross. And that was after bailing on Jesus earlier. But there were four women! The majority of these same women show up at the resurrection site and become key players in the launch of the Christian church. Men, don’t ever underestimate the work and wisdom of a woman or the power of a praying wife. I don’t know why it is but it seems that daughters of Eve do a much better job of being faithful followers than do the sons of Adam. The entire fun family fellowship time last Sunday afternoon was planned and implemented by the Women’s Ministry team! I know I have greatly benefited from Beth’s vibrant faith as it splashes into my life. You go, girls!

Concern For a Mother

I love the care, concern, and compassion that flow from verse 26. This cry from the Cross, just like the first two, is totally unexpected: “When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son.’” Let’s put ourselves in the sandals of Mary for a moment.

- In Luke 1:32, Mary is told that she will conceive and give birth to the Son of the Most High.
- Mary breaks out into song in Luke 1:47, rejoicing in the fact that she too will have a Savior.
- After the shepherds saw baby Jesus and began spreading the word about His amazing birth, Luke 2:19 says that, “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”
- When Jesus was 8-days-old, He was presented in the Temple. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and blessed Him and then spoke some troubling words to Mary in Luke 2:34-35: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Having a Son who was the Savior would mean bearing a sword as well. Great privileges bring great sorrows.
- The first time this sword lacerated her life was when innocent babies were massacred because of Herod’s fear of the Messiah in Matthew 2:16. Her and her family had to flee to Egypt for safety.

· Then, when Jesus was 12-years-old He stayed behind in Jerusalem while His parents continued traveling. When they realized that Jesus was not with them, they returned and were astonished that He was teaching in the Temple. Jesus told her that He had work to do in His father's house. Luke 2:51 gives us insight into what Mary was thinking: "But his mother treasured all these things in her heart."

Take a closer look at John 19:26. Jesus saw and then He spoke.

· He saw. As Jesus looks at his mother, he sees the sword skewering her soul. He can feel her agony and pain. He sees the look on her face as the soldiers roll the dice for his clothes. She flinches as one of them holds up the tunic she had lovingly made for her son. She saw the child she bathed and fed being stripped and flogged. When the soldier eventually shoved the spear into Jesus' side, it had already filleted her heart. As Jesus looked at the woman who had given birth to Him, His eyes turned to the disciple whom He loved.

· He spoke. Jesus then said, "Dear woman, here is your son." In that culture, instructions given by a dying man were like writing them on a piece of paper. It's as if Jesus was preparing His will and executing it right on the spot. This oral testament, made in front of witnesses, was now binding. He knew he couldn't take care of her any longer and so he entrusts her to John. In those days there was no Social Security or pension plans. She was a widow and since Jesus is the oldest son He was responsible to take care of his mother in her old age. Jesus is fulfilling the most basic and sacred obligation that any son ever had by living out the 5th Commandment found in Exodus 20:12: "Honor your father and mother..." Even while performing redemption, Jesus was faithful to His responsibilities as a son.

Notice that Jesus does not refer to Mary as "mother." In fact, Jesus never called her "mother" in the Gospels. As He did in John 2:4, so again he calls her, "Dear woman." I can think of several reasons why He may have done this.

1. To reinforce separation. He referred to her as "dear woman" at the beginning of his public ministry at the wedding in Cana as He initiated the separation process from his mother. Now, in John 19, He purposeful calls her "woman" in order to complete the leaving process. To call someone "dear woman" was a term of great respect and affection but it's as if He purposely avoided calling her His "mother." She was available and faithful, but Jesus wants her to know that all earthly ties are now over. He was not disrespectful, but she needed to learn that He was a heavenly Son and she an earthly mother. She was the human vessel that God used to bring His eternal Son into the world.

2. To protect Mary. Using the word "mother" would have driven the sharp and painful sword predicted by Simeon even deeper into her spirit. In addition, by calling her "mother" the enemies of Christ may have inflicted ridicule and scorn on her. Jesus loved Mary too much to bring her more sorrow and grief.

3. To establish His role as Savior. Mary must now relate to Jesus not as her son, but as her Savior and Lord. The mother must become a fully devoted follower. She is not a co-redeemer, the Queen of Heaven, or contributor to salvation; she is one in need of redemption, just like we are.

4. To initiate adoption into family of God. The fellowship of family is forged under the Cross. You and I have the privilege of becoming members of His family, His brothers and sisters, if you will, when we determine to do what He asks of us. Just as John "adopted" Mary as his mother, so too we must be adopted into the family of God. Mary was not in the family of God just because she carried and cared for Jesus. She was adopted into God's family when she put her faith in Christ for forgiveness of sins and salvation.

Jesus went out of his way to make this point in Luke 8 when Jesus' mother and brothers came to see Him but couldn't get close enough because of the crowd. Someone told Jesus that his mothers and brothers were outside and that they wanted to see Him. His response is instructive in Luke 8:21: "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Jesus is exalting obedience, not putting down his mother and brothers. As He steadfastly marched toward His appointment with death, He redefined His family in spiritual terms. Salvation is not determined by bloodline, but by the application of His shed blood on the Cross. When we hear the Word of God and live it out we give evidence that we've been adopted into His family.

Response of John

Look with me at John 19:27. After telling his mother to look to John for support, Jesus now turns to the disciple whom He loved and says, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." It was an incredible honor for a disciple to be given a role in the teacher's family. Here John is given the responsibility and privilege to care for Mary. This is amazing because we know that Mary had other children, but we also know that they were very suspicious and unkind toward Jesus. That is, until after the resurrection when we find them with the other followers of Christ in the upper room in Acts 2:14: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

The disciple John models two wonderful qualities. First, he came back to Jesus. Even though he had bailed like the others when

Jesus was arrested, he returned. And, when he came back, he found grace at the Cross. Second, he was willing to do whatever he was asked: "From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." He models obedience. He immediately took her home to a house in Jerusalem and according to legend, took her with him when he later moved to Ephesus. John did not question Jesus by saying, "What about your brothers and sisters? Can't they take care of your mother?" His obedience was immediate, joyful and sacrificial and is a good example for us to follow.

Caring For Others

While others were indifferent to Christ's final act of sacrificial love, Jesus was not indifferent to the needs of those present. The same is true today. He knows all about your needs. When He hung on the Cross, He thought of others. He forgave the unforgivable, He saved a terrorist, and He cared for His mother. And His care continues today in at least five ways.

1. By restoring those who have drifted away. John bolted when things got tough. But, he didn't stay away. He returned to Jesus and wasn't scolded or shamed. In fact, He was given grace and recommissioned for ministry. Friend, have you walked away? Have you backslidden? It's time to come back. Allow His divine grace to melt your heart!

2. By giving us the opportunity to take His place. John was asked to care for Jesus' mother. In a real sense, we are called to be His hands and feet for widows and children, especially in this age of fractured families. Jesus prayed to His father in John 17:18, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." We are His brothers, sisters and mothers today. Widows need someone else's son to take care of them. Single mothers benefit from surrogate fathers for their children.

Author Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four-year-old child whose next-door neighbor was an elderly man who had recently lost his wife. When the little boy saw the man cry, the boy went into the man's yard, climbed up on his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing. I just helped him cry." Is there anyone you can help cry?

3. By launching a caring community called the church. It's important to remember that the church was founded by a family man. The church is not a building, but a group of people who have been redeemed and given entirely new relationships. We're called to relate to each other as "brother" and "sister," doing whatever we can to care for one another. One of our six key purposes as a church is to provide an environment where caring relationships can be cultivated. Acts 2:42 says that the first followers were "devoted to the fellowship." Are you devoted to this body of believers? Are you transparent and vulnerable with others? Are you looking for ways to care for your brothers and sisters? Some of you have disengaged or unplugged from people. The church is here to help you connect with God and with others. Take advantage of it!

4. By modeling how to honor our parents. Jesus fully discharged the obligation of every relationship that He sustained, either to God or man. When He honored his mother, he gave us an example to do the same. Here are some ways you can live out the 5th Commandment:

- Tell your parents you love them. Make a phone call. Send an email. Write a note. Or make a visit and say, "I love you." Someone has said, "If you're too busy to love your parents, you're too busy."
- Ask God to help you think of ways to honor them. Do your parents have a need right now? Is there something practical you can do for them? When God nudges you, then do what He's asking you to do before it's too late.
- If you can't honor them while they're alive, you can remember them after they die. The best way to honor someone is to never forget him or her. Talk about them. Live out their legacy.
- If you're unable to speak good about your parents, you can honor them by refusing to speak evil of them. Some of you have not had very good parents. Maybe you've never met your dad or your mom. Maybe they didn't do their job very well. You can still honor them by forgiving them and refusing to talk bad about them. Silence can be a form of honor for those who deserve nothing else.

5. By adopting people into His family today. If you have never put your faith in Christ, don't gamble your life away in the shadow of the cross. Don't allow yourself to become apathetic through familiarity, prejudice, or materialism. No one gets in automatically by birth. The only way to be adopted is by the second birth. When we're born the first time we enter our human family. When we're born again we become adopted members of God's family. Have you done that?

One day a first-grade teacher showed her class a picture of a family. One little boy in the picture had different colored hair than the other family members. One child suggested that he was probably adopted. Just then a little girl said, "I know all about adoptions because I was adopted. To be adopted means that you grew in your mommy's heart instead of her tummy."

If you've not been adopted into the family of God, you can be if you will just put your faith in Christ. You will then grow in God's heart and become the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today

John 17:1-5

The Glory-Driven Life

Brian Bill 7/14/10

To follow-up with turning 50 last week, someone sent me this story. A young couple invited their elderly pastor over for Sunday dinner. While they were in the kitchen preparing the meal, the minister asked their young son what they were having. "Goat," the little boy replied. "Goat?" replied the startled man of the cloth, "Are you sure about that?" "Yep," said the boy. "I heard Dad say to Mom, 'Today is just as good as any to have the old goat for dinner.'"

We're beginning a three-part series today called, "What Jesus Wants For You" from John 17. This chapter divides easily into three sections. Jesus prays for himself in verses 1-5; He prays for His disciples in 6-19 and He concludes by praying for all believers, including us, in verses 20-26. Martin Lloyd-Jones preached 48 sermons on this chapter but we're going to spend just three weeks in it.

Here are some introductory comments.

* While there are some 650 prayers recorded in the Bible, none match the splendor and majesty of this one, which is the longest recorded prayer in Scripture.

* This is truly the "Lord's Prayer" because it's prayed by Jesus. The other prayer in Matthew 6, commonly called "The Lord's Prayer" is probably better titled, "The Disciples' Prayer."

* Jesus prayed this prayer out loud for the benefit of others. When Beth and I lived in Rockford we led a small group made up of a lot of new Christians. Invariably, when we would pray together as a group, one of the husbands would pray an "imprecatory prayer" against his wife, for all of us to hear. It would go something like this: "God, would you help us to forgive and not keep bringing stuff up just because a husband might not do what he's supposed to do around the house and would you help those who spend too much money shopping to stop doing that and begin listening their husbands." I think that's the only time that I've actually interrupted someone's intercession. Jesus didn't do that but He often prayed for the benefit of other people and it's our privilege to overhear this prayer. We also see this practice in John 11:42 when He prayed to His Father: "I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

* The setting for this prayer comes right after Christ's words of comfort regarding the sending of the Holy Spirit and takes place either in the Upper Room or on His way to Gethsemane. In John 13-16, Jesus talked with His followers; In John 17 He talks with His Father. Preaching and prayer always go together (see Acts 6:4).

A Prayer God Will Answer

We've all experienced the agony of unanswered prayer. That reminds of the preacher's 5 year-old daughter who noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day, she asked him why. "Well, Honey," he began, happy that his daughter was so observant. "I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." To which she replied, "Then how come He doesn't answer your prayers?"

When Jesus prayed, His requests were granted. Let's see how Jesus lived the glory of God-driven life. Please turn in your Bibles to John 17:1-5 as we draw out some prayer principles that if followed, can revitalize our own prayer lives. But first, listen with awe and reverence as I read the opening lines: "After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: 'Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.'"

1. Consider changing your prayer posture. Look at the opening words of verse 1: "After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed." Granted, there are times when you and I should pray with our heads down, like the man who cried out for mercy in Luke 18:13: "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" but there are other ways to pray as well. Moses raised his hands, Daniel knelt, others bowed and some fell on their faces.

While there are many postures for prayer in the Bible, Jesus liked to look up when He prayed. This might feel awkward or odd for us because we've been taught to bow our heads and close our eyes. But brothers and sisters in Christ, we can look up because we have been justified and now enjoy a righteous standing before God because of what Christ has done for us. Psalm 123:1: "I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven."

2. Call out to God by name. God goes by many different names in Scripture but the favorite one that Jesus used was "Father." As Pastor Jeff reminded us a couple weeks ago, we can call out to Him as Father only when we are His children. In this prayer alone, the name "Father" is used six different times.

About a month ago I sent out a note on Facebook asking for people to make some sermon suggestions. I received a ton of responses. I really liked this one: "Praying for needs as a church and equipping the body to continue that prayer through the week. The prayer email is a great resource. That has enriched my prayer life. But we don't pray together at church!"

In commenting on John 17, one person said this: "So let us learn from our chapter at least this – to pray."

We're going to hit the pause button in preaching right now and transition to a time of prayer. Let's break our time into three phases.

Phase #1: First, take out the full-page insert from your bulletin. You'll notice that there are names of God and His attributes listed for each letter of the alphabet. Using this sheet as a tool, go through the alphabet and silently choose one of these possibilities for each letter and pray them back to God.

Phase #2: This next phase may feel a bit awkward for some of us but here's what I want you to do. Go through the alphabet again and pick a characteristic or attribute of God and pray it back to Him, out loud and without using the insert. If you get stumped, simply go on to the next letter.

Phase #3: And now, I'd like to pray for you, using the first five verses of John 17 as a guideline.

Now that we're finished praying, let's debrief. What were some of your thoughts related to our time of prayer?

R.C. Sproul, summarizing John Calvin's understanding of prayer, said this: "The chief rule of prayer is to remember who God is and to remember who you are. If we remember those two things, our prayers will always and ever be marked by adoration and confession."

By the way, this insert is designed for you to use as a tool for your family so that you can grow in your appreciation for the expansiveness of God's character. We did it as a family about a month ago, just going through the alphabet of attributes as a prelude to our prayer time.

3. Align yourself with God's timetable. How many of you like Daylight Savings Time? How many of you are hurting because you missed that hour of sleep? How many of you just woke up? We see how God's redemptive calendar has unfolded in the next phrase of verse 1: "...the time has come." Our timing is not always God's timing, is it? If you're like me, you want things to happen according to your calendar and your clock.

I take great comfort in knowing that God has a time in which He accomplishes His activities. And, as someone has said, "He's never late and seldom early because He's always on time." I was reminded of this recently when I read Genesis 21:2 during my Quiet Time: "Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him."

Let's take a walk through some passages that show how God's countdown clock moved closer to the exact time that His Son was scheduled to die on the cross. This helps us see that God is writing history; He's doing what He planned to do a long time ago.

* Jesus was born on time. Galatians 4:4: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son..."

* His mother couldn't change the time. When Jesus was at a wedding reception and the wine had run out, Mary wanted Jesus to do something about it. Check out what Jesus says in John 2:4: "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come."

* No one could kill Him before His time. Look at John 7:30: "At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come."

* The death of Jesus was scheduled, not an accident. Jesus was not killed against His will because He came in order to die and thus bring glory to the Father. We see this expressed the night before the Triumphal Entry in John 12:23: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

* When the hour came, it couldn't be changed. Jesus said this to those who had come to arrest Him in Luke 22:53: "Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour - when darkness reigns."

Are you struggling with God's timing today? Line yourself up with His calendar and His clock.

4. Go after God's glory. We see this in the last part of verse 1: "...Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." Drop down to verse 4: "I have brought you glory..." and to verse 5: "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had..." This is really what Christ's life was all about and should be our only aim as well. Let me ask you some questions. What is it that drives your life? Success? Fear? Work? Family? Money? Possessions? Recreation? Guilt? Need for approval? Resentment? Anger? Materialism? Sports?

I want to propose that there should be only one thing that drives our life and that's the glory of God. Here's what I want us to hold on to today and every day: Live the glory of God-driven life. Or to say it another way: The greatest good we can do is to always seek God's glory. Friends, you and I exist for one primary purpose and that is to give glory to God.

I love the answer to the very first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.

The word "glory" is one of those religious words that we use often but may not know what it really means. Let me take a shot at explaining it. It literally means, "To be heavy or weighty" and has to do with "reputation, fame, splendor and prestige." It's also related to the word "magnify" which means that when we give God glory we're really helping people see how big and beautiful He really is.

The opposite of giving glory to God is selfishness. If I'm interested in taking credit or focusing just on myself, then God doesn't get the glory. And according to Isaiah 42:8, God is not interested in sharing His glory with others: "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another..." Isaiah 48:11 says: "For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another."

The Greeks equated "glory" with "opinion." When someone had a high opinion of someone, they were giving him or her glory. The Hebrews on the other hand, would think of the brilliance of God's Shekinah glory, as the sum of all His attributes. To put it all together, to give God glory means that our opinion of him is heavy and weighty and He is brilliant in His beauty. One thing to keep in mind is that God already has glory innately; we simply acknowledge and magnify what He already has.

Charles Ryrie puts it this way: "God's glory is His reputation. To live for God's glory means to live so that God's reputation is enhanced (heightened in quantity and quality) and not diminished in any way."

I read part of a sermon written by Thomas Watson, a Puritan from the 1600s, to the staff this week. I want to share some of it because it's so helpful. In answering the question, "How shall we know when we aim at God's glory?" Watson offered three answers (puritansermons.com).

- * When we prefer God's glory above all other things.
- * When we are content that God's will should take place, though it may cross ours.
- * When we are content to be outshined by others in gifts and esteem, so that His glory may be increased.

Our role then, to borrow from Watson, is to respond with appreciation, adoration, affection, and subjection. In particular, when people look at us, they should see the weightiness and beauty of God on full display in our lives because Colossians 1:16 says that we have been created by God and for God. One clue that we care about God's glory is when we can say along with Isaiah 26:8: "...Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts." I pray that I can live out the truth of Psalm 115:1: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory."

5. Embrace eternal life. Take a look at verses 2-3 where Jesus defines eternal life for us, which is actually the only specific definition found in the Bible: "For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Simply put, eternal life is defined as a relationship of "knowing," which is both intellectual and experiential. It's also in the present tense, which means we should "keep on knowing." There are two different words for "know" in the Greek, one has to do with observation and the other has to do with an active relationship. It's the second one that's in mind here. Too many Americans have made observations about God but they've never encountered Him in a personal relationship through His Son Jesus Christ.

I came across something this week that I posted on the blog (www.pontiacbible.org) and got a lot of comments about it. Some churches are considering using a hologram of their pastor to appear at their multi-site campuses. This holy hologram would do the preaching but the pastor would be present somewhere else. One person left this comment: "I guess it would be a problem if the congregation were all holograms too!!! How would we shake your hand after the service?" Another person posted this: "Real fellowship requires interaction between believers...I think technology makes things so impersonal sometimes! I for one need social

interaction with 'live' people! How can we be there for one another if we aren't really 'there'?"

Friend, a relationship with God the Father through the sacrificial death of His Son is designed to be personal, but you must receive Him into your life in order to experience eternal life. You see, eternal life is not just quantitative, meaning that it will last forever. It is also qualitative; when we have a relationship of knowing, you and I can experience abundance right now. That's what Roy Koenig shared yesterday at the Men's Breakfast. He received some help from AA but he said it wasn't until he was saved that God gave him complete freedom.

Do you know that it's possible to be religious and yet never have a relationship with God? Flip back to John 8:55 where Jesus says: "Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word." And, even close proximity to the person of Christ does not guarantee that you know Him personally. We see this in the tough words Jesus had for one of his own disciples in John 14:9: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?" There's a point in which propositional truth must become personal truth.

Have you entered into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ? If you have, are you growing in your knowing of Him? Hosea 6:3: "Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him."

6. Rest in His finished work. I talked to someone this week who told me that he has to keep trying and working in order for God to accept Him. Not true. What Jesus accomplished on the cross is complete and totally finished. Look at John 17:4: "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." Right before Jesus died, He cried out in John 19:30, "It is finished," which means that the debt has been paid, the mission accomplished.

Jesus is obviously looking ahead a few hours to the finished work on the cross but I think His words "completing the work" refer to something else very significant. Jesus' strategy for reaching the world was to pour himself into people. Men were His method. People were more important than programs. Related to that, begin praying about who God wants you to invite to our Good Friday and Easter Sunday services here at PBC.

7. Gaze into the glory to come. In John 17:5, Jesus can't wait to go back to the glory He had with the Father before He voluntarily laid it aside to come to the earth and then die for our sins: "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." Jesus is praying for full restoration of his pre-incarnate glory and fellowship. The cross is the way home to the Father, the gateway to glory, where Jesus will be restored to the "full blazing glory that He knew before He humbled himself" (John MacArthur).

Friends, if you know Jesus Christ relationally, there is glory to come for you as well. Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Summary

1. Consider changing your prayer posture.
2. Call out to God by name.
3. Align yourself with God's timetable.
4. Go after God's glory.
5. Embrace eternal life.
6. Rest in His finished work.
7. Gaze into the glory to come.

Taking it Home

1. Work at doing everything for God's glory. 1 Corinthians 10:31: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." This means that it's not just church-stuff but everything. How you do your job. How you interact with people you disagree with. How you treat your spouse. How you talk to your kids. How you talk to your parents. How you spend your free time. I wrote this down: Instead of just living for TGIF, let's instead develop a TGBTG mindset – To God Be The Glory. I hear people say all the time that they're just living for the weekend. It's time for us to live for His glory.

2. Is there anything you're doing right now, that does not bring glory to God? Have you said anything to someone that does not bring glory to God? If so, confess it as sin and ask Him to help you turn it around for the Almighty's glory. Here's a good question to ask when you're faced with a decision: Can I do this activity or say what I plan to say to the glory of God? If you can't do something for God's glory, than you shouldn't do it.

3. In this situation (fill in the blank) I want God to be glorified more than anything else. I was challenged this week by John 11:4 because it reminded me that even in sickness and in sadness and in stress, God can still have the glory, if we don't short-circuit the process: "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

4. Parents, teach and train your children to live the glory-driven life. You may even want to have them memorize the first question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That's what we're going to work on as a family this week.

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.

5. It's impossible to live for the glory of God without complete surrender, declaring Him sovereign over every area of our lives. Have you ever surrendered to Christ? Is there something you're holding back?

In his book, "It's Not About Me," Max Lucado writes that we live in a me-centric world where everything revolves around my happiness, my wants, my pleasure, me. Up until 450 years ago, everybody believed that the universe, and the sun, and the planets revolved around the earth. Then, in 1543, Copernicus told them that the earth wasn't the center of the universe. 50 years later, Galileo said that the planets revolved around the sun. They were so opposed to this idea, that they threw him in prison, and kicked him out of the church. The very idea that we weren't the center of the universe was unthinkable!

God has a very important lesson in all of this...the world doesn't revolve around you...or me. God's priority isn't your comfort, happiness or pleasure. The truth is...it's not all about you or me...it's all about God and His glory.

The Joy-Filled Life Series

Contributed by Brian Bill on Mar 21, 2010 (message contributor)

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(rate this sermon)

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Scripture: John 17:6-19 (suggest scripture)

Tags: Separation, Joy, Sanctification, Prayer How To, Saturate (suggest tag)

Denomination: Baptist

Summary: Because we are secure, we can be satisfied with Christ, which should lead us to live a separated life, sanctified for His purposes so that we can saturate this world with His Word.

John 17:6-19

The Joy-Filled Life

Brian Bill 3/21/10

Some of you may know that I'm half Irish so St. Patrick's Day has always been a pretty big deal for me. I grew up eating corned beef and cabbage on this special day and my Swedish wife Beth has humored me over the years by making this meal in mid-March every year, even though the rest of the family doesn't really care for it. This past Wednesday when I came home from the office, I went straight to the kitchen to see what she was preparing. I was disappointed when I saw ham in the crock pot and broccoli in the microwave but I didn't say anything.

A few minutes later I wandered into the dining room and saw a huge plate of corned beef and cabbage, complete with onions and potatoes just for me! She had stopped by a restaurant in town and picked up carry-out for me! I gave her a big hug and immediately imbibed in this Irish delicacy before anyone else sat down at the table. I thanked her for honoring my Irish heritage and then asked her why she never celebrates my Polish roots. She just shook her head and said, "I have nothing to say."

The disciples had just finished a meal filled with memories as their minds went back to the Passover, when God had rescued Israel from bondage. Only this dinner was different because Jesus brought new meaning to the bread, saying that it represented His body

and to the cup, which symbolized His blood. Shortly after the meal ended, either in the Upper Room or on the way to Gethsemane, Jesus moved from preaching in John 13-16 to prayer in John 17.

Last week we focused on the first part of this powerful prayer in verses 1-5. We discovered seven prayer principles as we listened in to Jesus praying for Himself:

1. Consider changing your prayer posture.
2. Call out to God by name.
3. Align yourself with God's timetable.
4. Go after God's glory.
5. Embrace eternal life.
6. Rest in His finished work.
7. Gaze into the glory to come.

The main take-home for me was this one phrase that I've been pondering all week: If you can't do something for God's glory, then you shouldn't do it.

In our section for today, we're going to hear why Jesus prays and what Jesus wants for His followers. One obvious observation is that the length of this section suggests that Jesus had greater concern for His disciples' destiny than for His own.

Why Jesus Prays

Let's listen to our Lord praying in John 17:6-10: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them."

These verses shed some light on why Jesus prays for His followers.

1. Because they now know the Father (John 17:6a). The word "revealed" literally means "to render apparent." John 1:18 says this about Jesus: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Before Jesus came, it was impossible to know God because of His holiness and our sin but now He is both accessible and knowable through the sacrifice of His Son.

2. Because they accepted and obeyed God's Word (John 17:6b-8a). I love how gracious Jesus is in His description of them. They knew that they had failed many times but Jesus focuses on their faithfulness: "They have obeyed your word...I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them." This makes me smile a bit because the disciples were pretty dull most of the time and yet Jesus is gracious with how He describes them. He could have pointed out all their failures but instead celebrates their successes, which is a good parenting tip by the way. By spotlighting their potential, Jesus wanted His disciples looking forward, not back.

3. Because they believed that Jesus was sent by the Father (John 17:8b). We see this in the last part of verse 8: "They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me." Though the disciples doubted and wavered and even bailed on Jesus when things got rough, Peter spoke for them in John 6:69: "We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

4. Because they belong to the Father (John 17:6b, 9). Jesus thought of His followers as "love gifts" from the Father: "They were yours, you gave them to me...I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me."

5. Because they bring glory to Jesus (John 17:10). That's an amazing thought, isn't it? This phrase at the end of verse 10: "And glory has come to me through them" can be translated, "I stand glorified in them." That leads me to ask a question: Does glory come to Jesus through me?

What Jesus Prays

We now know the reasons why Jesus prays. Let's look now at the specific requests He makes for his followers. As I studied for this sermon, I came across a very helpful outline from Pastor Alan Carr (see www.sermonnotebook.org). I'm going to adapt a portion of it here so we can clearly see what it is that Jesus wants for you and me. I'm also indebted to Rich Stevens for letting me borrow a book called, "When God Prays" by Skip Heitzig (Tyndale, 2003).

1. He wants you to be secured (11-12). Notice that the word "protect" is used twice and then we see the phrase "kept them safe" in

verses 11-12: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me..."

Jesus has kept his followers safe and secure and now that He is returning to His glory in heaven He is handing them back to the Father for safekeeping. Jesus knew that with His departure that Satan would shift His sinister schemes to the disciples. God's name represents His nature and so Jesus knows with confidence that they will be protected. This word means "to be on guard," and was used to describe a mother hen protecting her chicks. John Calvin writes, "He brooded them under His wings as a hen doth her chicks, but now when He departeth He prayeth His Father to cover them with His safeguard."

Pastor Jeff did a great job a few weeks ago reminding us that born again believers are eternally secure (see 1 John 5:11-13; John 10:28-30). I love 2 Timothy 1:12: "Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."

Take a look at how Jesus addresses His request: "Holy Father." This captures both God's transcendence and His tenderness. It balances the idea of ultimate purity with intimate paternity. He is mighty and majestic and He is also my daddy. I must have a proper sense of fear and yet He is dear to me. I commend this model to you because this title reminds us to be both reverent and still confident in our requests.

Notice that the heart of Jesus is for harmony among His followers: "so that they may be one as we are one." The unity in the Trinity is the model for unity between brothers and sisters. We are designed to function as a community of unity, not in isolation or aggravation with each other. We'll talk more about this next week.

The phrase in John 17:12 shows that Judas was not secure because He had never believed or received: "None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled." The Scripture He is referring to here is likely Psalm 41:9: "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."

2. He wants you to be satisfied (John 17:13). Because we are secure in our salvation, we can and should experience satisfaction. Check out verse 13: "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them." It's interesting that Jesus is not talking about us having happiness or experiencing just a little bit of joy once-in-a-while but instead desires that we have the "full measure" of His joy. Wow! That's difficult to comprehend, isn't it? It's the idea of being completely full and was used in the world of fishing: "to cram a net full." Jesus wants us to be crammed full of joy.

Before we think that we just have to plaster a smile on our face all day, Jesus defines what it is that brings Him delight in John 15:10-11: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Remember, we don't have to manufacture joy on our own. Our job is to abide in Christ and to allow the full measure of His joy to flow through us.

I've quoted this statement from John Piper before because it's so good: "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." Piper adds, "If your aim is to glorify God, you will do it most by being satisfied in him."

If you were here last week, you were given an insert to use as a tool to help with your prayer life. Anyone care to share how helpful this was for you and your family to pray through the "alphabet of attributes" this week? There are additional copies available at the Resource Center.

Today we want to give you another tool that we think will be a very practical help to your prayer life. Just as Jesus wants us to experience the "full measure of His joy," we're to also exhibit some additional fruit in our lives. We find this in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Using the insert we have provided in your bulletin, I'd like you to spend some time praying right now. First, go through the Fruit of the Spirit, one-by-one, and ask God to grow each individual fruit in your life. For instance, you could pray, "God, I want to be more loving. Please grow this in my life. I also am in need of joy because I'm so crabby most of the time, etc."

When you're finished praying this for yourself, then I want you to pray this for your spouse, your children, or for your parents. When we're finished with this time of silent prayer, I've asked Ken Fulkerson (1st service) and Marty Cotter (2nd service) to pray this passage for each of us.

3. He wants you to be separated (John 17:14-16). Jesus wants us to know that we're secure and He wants us to experience satisfaction through our relationship with Him. There's a third request that Jesus has – He wants us to be separated: "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it." Jesus doesn't want to take them out of the world, which is a descriptive phrase that means "to sail away." Instead, he is committed to

protect us from the wiles of the evil one. We are in the world, but we're not to be of the world.

D.A. Carson reminds us that this prayer of Jesus teaches what we should pray for: "The spiritual dimensions of this prayer are consistent and overwhelming. By contrast, we spend much more time today praying about our health, our projects, our decisions, our finances, our family, and even our games than we do praying about the danger of the evil one. Materialists at heart, we often discern only very, very dimly the spiritual struggle...Certainly the church will not produce many spiritual giants when it fails to discern its chief enemy."

2 Corinthians 4:4 says that Satan is "the god of this age" and 1 John 5:19 adds that "...the whole world is under the control of the evil one." 1 John 2:16 declares that the things of the world are diametrically opposed to God: "For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world."

The word "world" occurs 40 times in chapters 13-17 and in this chapter alone, it's used 18 times and refers to the ethical and moral system that stands in rebellion to God. Unfortunately, many Christians try to get as close to the world as they can. This is dangerous as James 4:4 states: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Skip Heitzig is right when he observes: "The most miserable Christians I know are the worldly ones. They are like fish trapped in a net - still alive but bound up, immobilized, and unproductive - and headed for destruction if they don't break free."

I was listening to the radio on Tuesday, the day before St. Patrick's Day, and heard a report about the state of faith in Ireland. While there are still a lot of beautiful church structures, for the most part they are empty. One researcher said that the main culprit is the religion of rampant consumerism, where the new clergy is made up of marketers and advertisers. I was intrigued by this status update on Facebook this week: "I've decided I agree with a quote from Francis Schaeffer...something like, 'Show me the world today, and I'll show you the church in one decade.' Only, I don't think we're a decade behind anymore...more like...a day. So I'm pondering what it means: 'Be in the world, but not of it' and wondering..." how to prepare my children to take a stand without bearing a "holier than thou" spirit. . . hmmm.

Friends, if we don't get serious about living separated lives, the church in America is in trouble as well, if it isn't already. If we don't focus on fortifying our families, they will continue to crumble. We'll follow the path of Europe where faith and family are just relics of a religious past. By the way, we will begin a new sermon series on April 18th called, "Hope for Your Home" and Pastor Dick will be leading a new discipleship class on marriage beginning that same day during the second service.

I don't have time to go much deeper into this right now, but let me pass along a helpful tool to help families make wise choices about movies and music and other forms of media like TV, gaming, and videos. Simply go to www.pluggedin.com to read reviews from a Christian perspective.

4. He wants you to be sanctified (John 17:17, 19). Our security leads to satisfaction and separation. The fourth request Jesus has is for our sanctification. Look now at verses 17 and 19: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth...For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." If there's ever been a churchy-sounding word, sanctify certainly is. Let me see if I can unpack it. To be sanctified means "to be set apart or dedicated" and speaks of allegiance and consecration for the purposes of sacrifice. In this sense, Jesus is set apart as a priest, preparing to offer up a sacrifice, which is His own body as stated in Hebrews 10:10: "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Through the sacrifice of His body we are sanctified.

Sanctification happens through the Word. The only way to live set apart is to constantly immerse yourself in the Scriptures. Reading and studying the Bible is not optional. As someone has said, "Sin will keep you from this book and this book will keep you from sin." Psalm 119:11: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Jesus' heart is to set us apart!

5. He wants us to saturate the world (John 17:18). Listen carefully. We are to be sanctified by the Word so that we saturate the world. Sanctification in John's Gospel is always for a mission and the success of that mission is impossible without sanctification. Listen to verse 18: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." How was Jesus sent into the world? He was sent with love. He was sent incarnationally. And He was missional, meaning He was always on mission.

During the reign of Oliver Cromwell, the British government ran out of silver to make coins. Cromwell responded to the need by sending his men across the nation to see if they could uncover more of the precious metal. They returned shortly without much to speak of, reporting that the only silver they could find was in the statues of the saints that were on display in the multitude of cathedrals around England. "Good!" replied Cromwell. "Then we will melt down the saints and put them back into circulation!" Friends, we are not meant to be cloistered in cathedrals but instead to be out in circulation so that we can saturate the world with the Word. That's why Jesus says that we're "the salt of the earth" in Matthew 5:13. We can't do much good if we just stay in the saltshaker.

In November of 2008, I shared my heart with the Elders. As part of the process of ascertaining God's vision for PBC, I've given some thought to the first part of our mission statement: "The mission of PBC is to connect people to Jesus..." I see that our focus should be in two directions.

* Incarnational or Missional. We must instill within our people (beginning with us) that we are called to be ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) and as such we must approach everything we do as agents of God's mission in the world. Here's a definition that I like: "Every disciple is to be an agent of the kingdom of God, and every disciple is to carry the mission of God into every sphere of life." For example, a factory worker is really a missionary disguised as a factory worker. A teacher is a missionary disguised as a teacher. A farmer is a missionary disguised as a farmer. We could call this "go and tell" evangelism.

* Attractional. We must design our Sunday services and each of our programs in such a way that they attract unbelievers and evangelize the lost. Care must be taken to make sure that people can see and savor the offer of salvation in a way that is both winsome and culturally-relevant (1 Corinthians 14:24). We could call this "come and see" evangelism.

I don't see this as an either/or but a both/and proposition. Check out Acts 5:42: "Day after day, in the temple courts [attractional] and from house to house [missional] they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news..."

To say it another way, we must equip our people and design our programs in such a way that we end up connecting people to Jesus, both in this community (local) and on the continents (global). Related to this, whether emphasizing a missional or an attractional approach, we must make sure that our congregation is connected to the needs of our community (i.e. responding to the flood, ministering in light of the prison situation, etc.) and to the needs of the world. In addition, as we put "family first," we must train our people and design our ministries to specifically assist families in the community.

Incidentally, with Easter coming up in two weeks, we encourage you to use the card in the bulletin to invite people you already know [that's missional] to one of our Easter Sunday services [attractional] that will be designed for you to use as a tool in reaching those who are disconnected from Christ.

I came across a study from the Religion News Service this week that reported that less than half of U.S. adults link Easter directly to the Resurrection of Jesus, even though most describe Easter as a religious holiday. "The Easter holiday in particular still has a distinctly religious connection for people but ... the specifics of it are really fading in a lot of people's minds," said David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group. Let's do what we can to introduce people to the power of the Resurrection so that we see renewed lives this Easter!

Let's see if I can tie this all together. Because we are secure, we can be satisfied with Christ, which should lead us to live a separated life, sanctified for His purposes so that we can saturate this world with His Word.

How Will You Respond?

Jesus is praying for you because there's a spiritual war raging all around. When you declare your allegiance to Him, you can no longer remain neutral. How are you going to respond?

1. Isolation.

At times in church history, the pull of the world was so strong that some believers retreated to monasteries and others did even more unusual things. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, never changed his vest or washed his feet. He was outdone, however, by Simon Stylites, who spent the last 36 years of his life on top of a fifty-foot pillar. Another guy named Anatole from France didn't want to go to that extreme so he donned a simple garment and sat on a chair atop his kitchen table. Everything went well until his family returned home. They thought he had lost it and told him so. They made life miserable for him so he quit his vigil. Reflecting on his attempt at isolation, he remarked, "I soon perceived that it is a very difficult thing to be a saint while living with your own family!"

2. Insulation.

It's pretty tough to isolate so some people choose to insulate themselves from the problems and pain of those who don't yet know Christ. These people spend almost all their time with other Christians and when they do have conversations about lost people their words are filled with judgmentalism. As Stan Wiedeman said at our Anniversary Celebration, we have to stop thinking "us vs. them" and move toward "us for them."

3. Imitation.

I'm afraid this is where the majority of believers end up. Instead of fighting the world, this person just wants to fit in.

4. Infiltration.

This is the heart of Jesus. He wants us to be secured, satisfied, separated and sanctified so that we saturate the world with the Word of God. We're called to live incarnationally and missionally.

John 17:11, John 17:20-23 Be United With One Another

Brian Bill on Mar 18, 2003

One Sunday a minister was giving a children's sermon to all the kids in church. A bright-eyed three-year-old girl was listening intently as he explained that God wanted them all to get along and to love one another. She was tracking with her pastor until he said, "God wants us all to be one." To which the little girl replied, "But I don't want to be one. I want to be four."

This girl was on to something. Many of us don't want to be one either. It's much easier for us to splinter into four groups, or forty groups, or even four hundred different groups. While it's difficult to get an exact count because the number keeps going up, there are thousands of denominations and religious groups in the United States alone. As we continue in our "Body Building" series by looking at several of the "one another" statements from the New Testament, this morning we're focusing on how we can be united with one another.

In his book called, "Gentle Thunder," Max Lucado, tells the following story with wit and style, as only he can (pages 139-140): Some time ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible. "Are you a believer?" I asked him. "Yes," he said excitedly. I've learned you can't be too careful. "Virgin birth?" I asked. "I accept it," he replied.

"Deity of Jesus?" "No doubt."

"Death of Christ on the cross?" "He died for all people."

Could it be that I was face to face with a Christian? Perhaps. Nonetheless, I continued my checklist. "Status of man?" "Sinner in need of grace."

"Definition of grace?" "God doing for man what man can't do."

"Return of Christ?" "Imminent."

"Bible?" "Inspired."

"The Church?" "The Body of Christ."

I started getting excited. "Conservative or liberal?" He was getting interested too. "Conservative." My heart began to beat faster. "Heritage?" "Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention." That was mine! "Branch?" "Pre-millennial, post-trib, noncharismatic, King James, one-cup communion."

My eyes misted. I had only one other question. "Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?" "Fiberglass," he responded. I withdrew my hand and stiffened my neck. "Heretic!" I said, and walked away.

Though humorous and extreme, Lucado identifies a common problem. Many of us are quick to divide over just about anything. As someone has said, "to live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that's another story." The Bible is filled with a focus on family togetherness. God's people are designed to fit as pieces of a puzzle in order to form a united picture of divine love. When we are unified, we display the personality, purposes, and power of God.

Here's a brief survey of some Scripture passages that lift up the spiritual standard of a cohesive community of faith.

Judges 20:11: "So all the men of Israel got together and united as one man against the city."

2 Chronicles 30:12: "...The hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD."

Psalms 133:1: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

Jeremiah 32:38-39: "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them."

John 10:16: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to

my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

Acts 4:32: “All the believers were one in heart and mind...”

Romans 15:5-6: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Corinthians 1:10-11: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

How are we doing in our quest for unity within the community of faith? Are we united as one person? Are we living together with singleness of heart this morning? Are we one in mind so that we're in agreement with fellow Christ followers? These are tough questions to answer, aren't they? Left to ourselves, we don't automatically drift toward unity. In fact, our default setting is disunity. History is littered with a lack of harmony among humans.

The good news is that we're not the first group of believers to display dissonance. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, demonstrated more discord than accord. James and John caused envy and jealousy when they wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom. Matthew was a tax collector who had sold out to Rome and Simon the Zealot hated IRS agents. On the night before Jesus selflessly gave His life, an argument arose among those who should have known better.

In the final moments before His arrest, Jesus could have prayed for His own strength. He could have requested that the eleven would support Him. His intercession to the Father could have been filled with a desire to make the disciples better teachers or servants or givers or leaders or administrators. Instead, His prayer was dominated by a single thought the unity of his followers.

Please turn to John 17. As you turn there, let me set the context. In chapter 13, Jesus washed the disciples' feet as a demonstration of servanthood and then challenged them with a new command in John 13:34: “...Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” In chapter 14, He comforts the disciples by telling them that even though He's about to leave, they can join Him in heaven if they put their faith in Him. In the meantime, Jesus is going to send the Holy Spirit so that they will not be orphaned. As He's walking through a vineyard in chapter 15, He reminds them that apart from Him they can do nothing. In chapter 16, He teaches them more about the Holy Spirit and the peace that He will bring to their lives.

Then, on the eve of His excruciating death, He utters an appeal for unity. John 17:1 begins, “After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed...”

This is the true “Lord's Prayer.” The other prayer that we commonly refer to as the “Lord's Prayer” is actually a model for us to follow, or we could call it the disciple's prayer.

This is the longest prayer of Jesus. This prayer is long in two ways its Jesus' most protracted prayer recorded in Scripture and it's the longest in the scope of time it covers because it extends all the way to today. Look at verJohn 17:e 20: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” That's you and me.

This prayer is saturated with urgency. You can almost hear the agonized intensity as Jesus pleads with His Father to make His followers one. In fact, He asks for our unity four different times! This chapter has been called the “Holy of Holies” of the New Testament because we're allowed a glimpse into what motivated the Master.

This prayer was prayed aloud for the disciples' benefit. His followers couldn't help but be moved and convicted about their disregard for unity as they heard Jesus pour out His heart to the Father. Because it was prayed out loud, the Apostle John was able to record it so that we can read it today.

We need supernatural strength to be united with fellow followers. If the early Christians struggled to maintain unity, and we do as well, its obvious that we need God's help in this area. The very fact that Jesus prayed for unity indicates that we can't accomplish this on our own. The last hours that Jesus had with his disciples ended in a prayer meeting.

We could summarize this prayer by saying that Jesus is committed to His church presenting a witness of oneness to the world. Jesus prays essentially about three matters:

- John 17:1-5 For Himself...that He may be glorified.
- John 17:6-19 For the disciples...to be protected and sanctified.
- John 17:20-26 For the church...to be unified.

Let's look first at verse 11 as Jesus prays for His disciples: “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I

am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-the name you gave me-so that they may be one as we are one.” Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers behind in a very tough world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they are going to face. He knows how the Deceiver will work to divide His disciples and so He prays for their protection by appealing to the power of God’s name.

Notice that He refers to God as “Holy Father,” indicating that the Father is far above the wickedness of the world. His “name” stands for all of God’s resources, power and abilities. Psalm 79:9: “Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name...” We should pray the same way, as we make requests for the glory of God’s name, not necessarily for the comforts of His children. Because of who the Father is, Jesus is asking Him to stand guard over those who have put their faith in Him by unleashing His arsenal of protective oversight.

Jesus is appealing to passages like Isaiah 17:8-9 as He prays for His followers: “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.” Satan’s strategy throughout church history has been to destroy unity within the body of Christ. If he can attack our oneness, then our power will be diffused and our message will be obliterated or blurred. That’s why Jesus prays for our protection.

I have seen how Satan works to sever relationships among Christians. His number one mission is to divide us because he knows that a “house divided cannot stand.” I’ve watched as the Deceiver has destroyed disciples and attacked assemblies. I’ve prayed for protection and I’ve attempted to get Christians to reconcile with each other. Having said that, I’ve contributed to my share of conflict in churches and messed up ministry teams over the years as well. I’ve come to the conclusion that I must do whatever it takes to maintain unity within the church, and must make sure that I’m not the cause of unnecessary clashes between fellow Christ followers.

This protection that Jesus prays has a purpose in mind: “so that they may be one as we are one.” In the original this is even more forceful. The meaning is this: “so that they may constantly be one...” Notice that He ties this request for oneness to the type of relationship that He has with the Father. Just as Jesus and His father are one in essence and purpose, so too, his disciples share the same fundamental nature as brothers and sisters of the same Father. And we share a similar purpose with Jesus to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Using the relationship between the Father and the Son as an example, our union with one another is to be close, holy, and complete.

This request is amplified in John 17:20 when Jesus expands His intercession to include you and me: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” It’s amazing to me that Jesus is praying for people who have not even been born yet. This reminds me of Psalm 22:31: “They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn--for he has done it.” His prayer was looking ahead to the church of today, to every believer from the crucifixion up to this very moment and beyond.

Notice that belief comes through the hearing of the message, just as it always has. The disciples were faithful in spreading the word and millions of people have come to Christ in every generation because of that. Likewise, you and I must never forget that salvation of souls is inextricably tied to the giving of the good news. Romans 10:14: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

And so, we’re included in Jesus’ request for unity. In John 17:21-23, we see that this request for oneness is made three different times, with increasing intensity: “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

We see this gradual growth toward absolute unity in each verse.

In John 17:21, He prays, “That all of them may be one...”

In John 17:22, “...that they may be one as we are one.”

And in John 17:23, “May they be brought to complete unity...” The word “complete” derives from a root that conveys the idea of “end” or “aim.” Jesus is praying that our aim should be oneness. We know we’ve arrived when we’re experiencing unity with other believers.

Several things jump out at me in this passage.

1. The parameters of oneness include all believers (John 17:21a). He doesn’t want us to just get along with a few people, or even with everyone in this church, but “that all of them may be one.” His prayer is much deeper than “us four and no more.” True believers in Christ are one, no matter what name is on the church sign. We’re redeemed by the same blood and going to the same

heaven. That means that we share a common unity or community, with believers in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Let me add three cautions at this point:

We should skewer extreme separatism. Some believers refuse to acknowledge that there are true Christians in other churches. Some groups criticize and label people just because they don't hold to the same outward standards as they do. Just this week I was listening to a sermon in which the pastor called my alma mater, Moody Bible Institute "liberal." That's amazing to me. Saying Moody is liberal is like saying that the Bears had a football team this year.

We should eschew ecumenical sloppiness. The push for ecumenical uniformity among churches should also be avoided. There are doctrinal differences and biblical distinctions that must be maintained. Earlier in this same prayer, Jesus established that sanctification can only come about when it is based on the Word of God when He prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth" (John 17:17). Truth alone must determine our alignments. Frankly, we are not all headed in the same direction and we do not serve the same God. Only those who are born again are really our brothers and sisters in the faith. Sadly, many churches have pursued "ecumenical union" at the expense of biblical truth. You can tie two cats together by their tails and throw them over a clothesline and have union, but there certainly won't be much unity.

We should be united but not necessarily uniform. It's possible to be diverse and yet not divided. As we learned last week, we're all distinct pieces of the puzzle, and variety is valuable. We have different gifts, abilities, personalities, thoughts, and opinions. We're not called to be the "same," we're called to be one. We can have harmony even though we're not homogeneous. Don't expect everyone to be exactly like you and to think the way you think. It's impossible within a diverse church.

2. The pattern for oneness is linked to the unity within the Trinity (John 17:11, 21c, 22). In John 17:11, Jesus prays that his disciples would experience the oneness that exists in His relationship with the Father. In verse 21, He prays, "May they also be in us..." And, in John 17:22: "...that they may be one as we are one." The unity that Christ wants us to have is so intimate, so personal, and so vital that it is patterned after, and based on, the relations that exist in the Godhead. It is a oneness not only of faith, hope and love but of life itself. Ephesians 4:4-6 captures how this truth is tied to the Trinity: "There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

3. The purpose of oneness is to accelerate evangelism (John 17:21b) Look at the last part of John 17:21: "...so that the world may believe..." Notice that we're not just to enjoy unity for our own sakes. Sure, it's fun to be on the same page with those around you, but oneness should always accelerate evangelism. The most winsome witnessing is unity within the church. God's redemptive plan is that the world may believe and the way this is accomplished today is through the unified oneness of the body of Christ. When unity is fractured within a church the bridge between believers and the world is effectively blown up. A disunited Christian community denies by its behavior the message that it proclaims.

One who is seeking truth is attracted to the oneness and harmony that should be evident in churches. When that unity is absent, they can smell it and will be turned off. I'm convinced that dissension and disunity have hindered more revivals than we can even imagine. Lost people are not looking to be part of another organization that is battling over irrelevant issues. When a pre-Christian looks at believers who are throwing verbal bombs at each other, she may say, "If they can't even agree on the truth among themselves, how could they possibly teach me the truth?"

4. The practice of oneness puts God's reputation on display to the world (John 17:22-23). John 17:22 says that we have been given the glory that was given to Christ. The word "glory" represents the visible manifestation of all of God's attributes. It's what we see when we look at God. 2 Peter 1:4 tells us that we "participate in the divine nature." 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

Friends, when we are united, the world will stand up and take notice of God because they will see Him glorified in us. Matthew 5:16: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Oneness gives credence to our claims. Specifically, according to John 17:23, the world will know two things:

- God's Mission: He sent His Son to be Savior of the World. The world will not believe the Father sent the Son until we demonstrate spiritual oneness.
- God's Message: He loves people. People will be attracted to the love of God when they see it manifested in our lives and in our church.

His mission and message are summed up in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world [His message] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life [His mission]. That means that when I violate true Christian unity, I am hindering the gospel and ruining God's reputation. His mission and His message get lost in a cacophony of discordant

sounds.

After listening to what I've said so far you might think that I question whether Jesus' prayer has ever been answered. Actually, his request was fulfilled immediately after His return to heaven. The church in Jerusalem exhibited a profound unity. After seeing Jesus hang from the Cross and be resurrected from the dead, they experienced extravagant oneness. Acts 4:32: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had." And this unity had an eternal impact on the lives of the lost because according to Acts 2:47, people were becoming Christians every day: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Steps to Unity

This prayer for unity has been answered throughout church history. Let's bring it closer to home. The final question from the Women's Bible Study this week says it well: "What can you personally do to foster unity within the Body of Christ?" By the way, I talked to a high schooler last Sunday who picked up a copy of these questions from the hallway and used them to do a Bible Study with his dad last Saturday night as a way to prepare for the sermon. I encourage you to do the same each week.

Before I list some action steps that you and I can take to foster unity, let me remind you that unity is received, not achieved. We don't have to earn it because it's been earned for us on the Cross. You and I don't have to create it because Jesus already did that when He prayed for us. He attained unity; you and I must maintain it.

1. Be a grower. Some say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. While that might be true in human relationships, in our relationship with God, absence makes the heart wander. And when we wander we often go to war with others. Are you growing in your walk with Christ? If you find yourself out of sync with someone, ask yourself some honest questions: "Am I walking with Christ? Am I fully surrendered to Him right now?"

2. Be a unifier. Instead of judging, gossiping, or slandering others, search for specific ways that you can be a unifier. Proverbs 6:19 says that the Lord finds detestable "a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." Stop being abrasive and cut others some slack. It's like the Chinese proverb that says, "Do not remove a fly from your friend's forehead with a hatchet." Watch your words. And when you hear someone skewering another believer, speak the truth in love and send him or her to that person instead.

3. Be a forgiver. Some of you are filled with bitterness because you've refused to forgive someone for something they've done or said to you. It's time to repair your relational ruptures, whether they're in your home or in the house of God. Keep short accounts with people. Be like the young child who was overheard reciting the prayer given to the disciples: "And forgive us our trash passes, as we forgive those who have passed trash against us." Are you passing trash around this morning? Get rid of it before it starts to stink.

4. Be a worker. Are you willing to live out the truth of Ephesians 4:3? This verse doesn't allow us to be nonchalant about unity: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." What one thing can you do this week to keep the unity of the Spirit? In that relationship you're thinking about right now, have you made every effort, or have you just sort of tried?

Are you willing to be an answer to Jesus' prayer today? The Navigators, a Christ-centered ministry devoted to discipleship, has developed a relational covenant that they use with all their staff members. I'd like to close today by reading this covenant to you. When I'm finished, I'm going to ask you to stand if you are ready to make it your own.

We personally and corporately agree and commit to:

- Pursue reconciliation and, when possible, resolution in all interpersonal conflicts.
- Talk directly to those with whom we experience conflict rather than talking about them to others. We want to "talk to people, not about people."
- Be edifying in our discussions about others.
- Hold each other accountable when we violate this commitment.

If you're willing to be an answer to Jesus' prayer, will you please stand right now? Are you ready to be united with one another? We are His church. It's time to stand up and be one with each other.

John 17:20-23
The Unity-Centered Life

I get a kick out of amusing road signs. Here are some that I came across recently.

- * One yellow caution sign shows a curve ahead with a bunch of other squiggly lines going in all sorts of directions. The words underneath read, "Good luck."
- * Another one filled with dents and holes contains these words: "Notice: Do Not Throw Stones at This Sign."
- * A construction sign placed in a closed lane of a highway announces: "You'll Never Get to Work on Time. HaHa!"
- * Another sign has an arrow pointing to the left with this confusing caption, "Keep Right."

And here are some "church signs" that made me chuckle.

- * There Are Some Questions That Can't Be Answered by Google
- * Don't Let Worries Kill You – Let the Church Help
- * You Have One New Friend Request From Jesus – Confirm or Ignore?
- * What is Missing From CH__ CH? U-R.

As I pondered the pluses (and minuses) of publicity like this for the church, I wrote this down: The best advertisement is a witness of oneness to the world because when we're unified we display the personality, purposes and power of God.

In the final moments before His arrest, Jesus could have prayed for His own strength. He could have requested that the eleven would support Him. His intercession to the Father could have been filled with a desire to make the disciples better teachers or servants or givers or leaders or administrators. Instead, His prayer was dominated by a single thought – that His followers would have a witness of oneness to the world.

Please turn to John 17 as we finish up our short sermon series called, "What Jesus Wants For You."

- * In John 17:1-5, Jesus prays for Himself to be glorified. We discovered two weeks ago that if we can't do something for God's glory, then we shouldn't do it.
- * In John 17:6-19, Jesus prays for the disciples to be protected. We learned that because we are secure, we can be satisfied with Christ, which should lead us to live a separated life, sanctified for His purposes so that we can saturate this world with His Word.
- * In John 17:20-26, He prays for the church to be unified. On the eve of His excruciating death, He utters an appeal for unity. That tells me that we need supernatural strength to be united with fellow followers. If the early Christians struggled to maintain unity, and we do as well, it's obvious that we need God's help in this area. The very fact that Jesus prayed for unity indicates that we can't accomplish this on our own.

Let's go back and look at John 17:11 again: "...Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-the name you gave me-so that they may be one as we are one." This protection that Jesus prays has a purpose in mind: "so that they may be one as we are one." In the original this is even more forceful. The meaning is this: "so that they may constantly be one..." Notice that He ties this request for oneness to the type of relationship that He has with the Father. Just as Jesus and His father are one in essence and purpose, so too, his disciples share the same fundamental nature as brothers and sisters of the same Father. And we share a similar purpose with Jesus – to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers behind in a very tough world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they are going to face. He knows how the Deceiver will work to divide His disciples and so He prays for their protection by appealing to the power of God's name. Satan's strategy throughout church history has been to destroy unity within the body of Christ. If he can attack our oneness, then our power will be diffused and our message will be obliterated or blurred.

Many of us are quick to divide over just about anything. As someone has said, "to live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that's another story!" The Bible is filled with a focus on family togetherness. God's people are designed to fit as pieces of a puzzle in order to form a united picture of divine love. In a world defined by conflict, broken relationships, political division, dysfunctional families and fractured communities, such unity would indeed be a sign that God is at work because human effort alone can't make it happen.

Here's a brief survey of some Scripture passages that lift up the spiritual standard of a cohesive community of faith.

Judges 20:11: "So all the men of Israel got together and united as one man against the city."

2 Chronicles 30:12: "...The hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD."

Psalms 133:1: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

Jeremiah 32:38-39: "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them."

Zephaniah 3:9: "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder."

Mark 9:50: "...Be at peace with one another."

John 10:16: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

Romans 15:5-6: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:10-11: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."

Philippians 2:2: "Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

How are we doing in our quest for unity within the community of faith? Are we serving shoulder to shoulder? Are we living together with singleness of heart this morning? Are we one in mind so that we're in agreement with fellow Christ followers? These are tough questions to answer, aren't they? Left to ourselves, we don't automatically drift toward unity. In fact, our default setting is disunity. History is littered with a lack of harmony among humans.

The good news is that we're not the first group of believers to display dissonance. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, demonstrated more discord than accord. James and John caused envy and jealousy when they wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom. Matthew was a tax collector who had sold out to Rome and Simon the Zealot hated IRS agents. On the night before Jesus selflessly gave His life, an argument arose among those who should have known better.

I have seen how Satan causes conflict among Christians. The Deceiver's number one mission is to divide us because he knows that a "house divided cannot stand" (see Luke 11:17). I've watched as the Evil One has destroyed disciples and attacked assemblies. I've prayed for protection and I've attempted to get Christians to reconcile with each other. Having said that, I've contributed to my share of conflict in churches and messed up ministry teams over the years as well. I've come to the conclusion that I must do whatever it takes to maintain unity within the church, and must make sure that I'm not the cause of unnecessary clashes between fellow Christ followers because Jesus prayed that His followers would have a witness of oneness to the world.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Brooks was spot on when he wrote: "Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous."

Jesus Prays for You and Me

Robert McCheyne once said: "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me." I'd like you to close your eyes and picture yourself sitting with Jesus as He prays for you. Listen to Him as He prays in John 17:20-23: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

It's amazing to me that Jesus is praying for people who have not even been born yet. This reminds me of Psalm 22:31: "They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn--for he has done it." A truth has been rocking me recently. Beth and I are not just raising our daughters to follow Christ wholeheartedly; we are impacting the generation that follows them as well. Parents and grandparents – we must have a long-range vision for living our faith out at home as stated in Psalm 78:5-6: "He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would

know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.”

Let’s go back to John 17 where we see a gradual growth toward absolute unity in three consecutive verses:

* In John 17:21, He prays, “That all of them may be one...”

* In John 17:22, “...that they may be one as we are one.”

* And in John 17:23, “May they be brought to complete unity...” The word “complete” derives from a root that conveys the idea of “end” or “aim.” Jesus is praying that our aim should be oneness. We know we’ve arrived when we’re experiencing unity with other believers.

I see four assumptions about unity in this passage.

1. The parameters of oneness include all believers (John 17:21a).

Jesus doesn’t want us to just get along with a few people we happen to like, or with everyone just in this church, but “that all of them may be one.” His prayer is much deeper than “us four and no more.” True believers in Christ are one, no matter what slogan is on the church sign. We’re redeemed by the same blood and going to the same heaven. That means that we share a common unity or community, with believers in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Let me add three cautions at this point:

* Abandon extreme separatism. Some believers refuse to acknowledge that there are true Christians in other churches. Some groups criticize and label people just because they don’t hold to the same outward standards as they do.

* Avoid ecumenical sloppiness. The push for ecumenical uniformity among churches should also be avoided. There are doctrinal differences and biblical distinctions that must be maintained. Earlier in this same prayer, Jesus established that sanctification can only come about when it is based on the Word of God when He prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth” (John 17:17). Truth alone must determine our alignments. Frankly, we are not all headed in the same direction and we do not serve the same God. Only those who are born again are really our brothers and sisters in the faith. You can tie two cats together by their tails and throw them over a clothesline and have union, but there certainly won’t be much unity. It was Malcolm Muggeridge who said about the World Council of Churches: “They agreed on almost everything because they believed almost nothing.”

* Adhere to unity but not uniformity. It’s possible to be diverse and yet not divided. We’re all distinct pieces of the puzzle, and variety is valuable because we have different gifts, abilities, personalities, thoughts, and opinions. We’re not called to be the “same,” we’re called to be one. That means we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can have harmony even though we’re not homogeneous. Don’t expect everyone to be exactly like you and to think the way you think. It’s impossible within a diverse church. By the way, here’s some free marriage counseling. When you see your spouse or someone in the church acting differently than you do, and it’s not a moral issue, say this statement either silently or out loud: “Not wrong, just different.” It will save you from a lot of unnecessary conflict.

2. The pattern for oneness is linked to the unity within the Trinity (John 17:11, 21c, 22).

In John 17:11, Jesus prays that his disciples would experience the oneness that exists in His relationship with the Father. In verse 21, He prays, “May they also be in us...” And, in John 17:22: “...that they may be one as we are one.” The unity that Christ wants us to have is so intimate, so personal, and so vital that it is patterned after, and based on, the relations that exist in the Godhead. It is a oneness not only of faith, hope and love but of life itself.

3. The purpose of oneness is to accelerate evangelism (John 17:21b).

Look at the last part of John 17:21: “...so that the world may believe...” Notice that we’re not just to enjoy unity for our own sakes. Sure, it’s fun to be on the same page with those around you, but oneness should always accelerate evangelism. The most winsome witnessing is unity within the church. God’s redemptive plan is that the world may believe and the way this is accomplished today is through the unified oneness of the body of Christ. When unity is fractured within a church the bridge between believers and the world is effectively blown up. A disunited Christian community denies by its behavior the message that it proclaims. That’s why Jesus prayed that His followers would have a witness of oneness to the world.

One who is seeking truth is attracted to the oneness and harmony that should be evident in churches. When that unity is absent, they can smell it and will be turned off. I’m convinced that dissension and disunity have hindered more revivals than we can even

imagine. Lost people are not looking to be part of another organization that is battling over irrelevant issues. When a non-Christian looks at believers who are throwing verbal bombs at each other, she may say, "If they can't even agree on the truth among themselves, how could they possibly teach me the truth?" I came across this quote from Blaise Pascal this week: "Make people wish the gospel were true...and then show them that it is."

4. The practice of oneness puts God's reputation on display to the world (John 17:22-23).

John 17:22 says that we have been given the glory that was given to Christ. The word "glory" represents the visible manifestation of all of God's attributes. Friends, when we are united, the world will stand up and take notice of God because they will see Him glorified in us. Matthew 5:16: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Oneness gives credence to our claims. Specifically, according to John 17:23, the world will know two things:

* God's Mission: He sent His Son to be Savior of the World. The world will not believe the Father sent the Son until we demonstrate spiritual oneness: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me."

* God's Message: He loves people. People will be attracted to the love of God when they see it manifested in our lives and in our church: "...and have loved them even as you have loved me."

His mission and message are summed up in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world [His message] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life [His mission]. That means that when I violate true Christian unity, I am hindering the gospel and ruining God's reputation. His mission and His message get lost in a cacophony of discordant sounds.

Did you know that Jesus' intercession was fulfilled in Acts 4:32? Listen to the extravagant oneness they experienced: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had." And this unity had an eternal impact on the lives of the lost because according to Acts 2:47, people were becoming Christians every day: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Becoming the Answer

Pastor Jeff passed along a website this week called One Prayer (<http://2010.oneprayer.com>). I was very encouraged to read about their purpose: "We pray to Jesus asking Him to answer our prayers - what if we became the answer to His? In John 17:20-24, He prayed that we would be one, and One Prayer is an opportunity to see what can be accomplished when the Church works together." During the month of June, millions of Christians will unite in prayer and I've signed us up to join them.

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demands that Linus change the channel on the TV, threatening him with her fist if he won't do it but Linus is reluctant to do so: "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" Lucy holds up her fist and opens her hand: "These five fingers. Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." Linus, now visibly shaken asks, "Which channel do you want?" Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

Before I list some action steps that you and I can take to accelerate and organize some unity, let me remind you that unity is received, not achieved. We don't have to earn it because it's been earned for us on the Cross. You and I don't have to create it because Jesus already did that. He attained unity; you and I must maintain it. Since it's His heart that His followers have a witness of oneness to the world, let's be open to how He wants us to put this prayer into practice.

This prayer for unity has been answered throughout church history but let's bring it closer to home by seeking to answer this question: "What can I personally do to become the answer to Jesus' prayer and foster unity within Pontiac Bible Church?"

1. Be a grower. Some say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. While that might be true in human relationships, in our relationship with God, absence makes the heart wander. And when we wander we often go to war with others. Are you growing in your walk with Christ? If you find yourself out of sync with someone, ask yourself some honest questions: "Am I walking with Christ? Am I fully surrendered to Him right now?" Unity will only come when I allow Christ to live through me.

2. Be a peacemaker. Instead of judging, gossiping, or slandering others, search for specific ways that you can be a peacemaker. Proverbs 6:19 says that the Lord finds detestable "a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." Stop being abrasive and cut others some slack. It's like the Chinese proverb that says, "Do not remove a fly from your friend's forehead with a hatchet." Watch your words. And when you hear someone skewering another believer, speak the truth in love and send him or her to that person instead.

Over the years we've spent some time learning how to be peacemakers instead of peace-fakers or peace-breakers. It might be helpful to go over the sermons again: (see <http://www.pontiacbible.org/index.php?/Sermons/C106/>). The basic principle is that

whether you've been wronged by another believer, or you've been the one who has done wrong, as difficult as it is, to go and meet face-to-face and seek reconciliation (see Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17). Here's the deal: Initiate reconciliation whether it's your fault or not. It could be a legitimate gripe, or maybe it's unfounded. It doesn't really matter. If someone has a grudge against you, follow God's nudge and do what you can to make it right. And if you have something against someone, go and meet with him or her. Here are the summary statements from two of the sermons:

- * Every Conflict is an Opportunity. When we're faced with friction, look for ways to glorify God, seek the good of the other, and then get ready to grow.
- * Get the Log out of Your Eye. We can't judge someone's heart or motives because we all have sin sticking out of our eye balls.

Often the only way to make things right is to admit that you've been wrong. This information called "The Seven A's" from the Peacemaker website is very helpful (www.peacemaker.net):

- * Address everyone involved (All those whom you affected)
- * Avoid if, but, and maybe (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
- * Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
- * Acknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)
- * Accept the consequences (Such as making restitution)
- * Alter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)
- * Ask for forgiveness (Request release from the debt)

Are you willing to live out the truth of Ephesians 4:3? This verse doesn't allow us to be nonchalant about unity: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." What one thing can you do this week to keep the unity of the Spirit? In that relationship you're thinking about right now, have you made every effort, or have you just sort of tried?

3. Be a forgiver. Some of you are filled with bitterness because you've refused to forgive someone for something they've done or said to you. It's time to repair your relational ruptures, whether they're in your home or in the house of God. Keep short accounts with people. Be like the young child who was overheard reciting the prayer given to the disciples: "And forgive us our trash passes, as we forgive those who have passed trash against us." Are you passing trash around this morning? Get rid of it before it starts to stink. If we don't forgive, Hebrews 12:15 gives us a warning: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

4. Be a lover. We are called by Christ to love one another in John 13:34-35: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Love is not an option; it's a command. And when we do love, people will take notice and know that we're followers of the One who loves unconditionally. Is there anyone you do not love right now? Anyone you're avoiding? Giving the cold shoulder to? One pastor has spelled out three essential qualities for Christian love – mutual contact, mutual concern and mutual contribution: "Every great awakening, large or small, throughout the whole course of Christian history, has invariably begun by a breaking down of barriers between Christians first of all."

5. Be a server. One of the best ways to have a unity-centered life is to be involved in serving. In Ephesians 4:12 we read that pastors and teachers are to equip or "prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." That's the second half of our mission statement – to equip people to become growing and faithful followers. But it doesn't end there. As equipping and serving take place, notice what happens next in verse 13: "...until we all reach unity in the faith..." One of the best ways to build unity is to serve side-by-side with other servants. In an effort to help in this whole process, Nathan Hilt will be teaching a discipleship class beginning April 18th during the 9:00 hour on the topic of discovering and deploying your spiritual gifts.

6. Be a prayerer. During this series we have made some tools available to deepen our prayer lives individually, as families, and as a church. Can you take out your insert right now and follow along with this prayer based on Ephesians 6:10-18? "Dear Heavenly Father, You know that there are all kinds of battles all around me and Satan's mission is to prevent me from following You. I am going to choose today to be on Your side of the battle. My desire today is to claim victory over Satan by putting on the whole armor of God so I can stand firm against his schemes.

Today I put on the "Helmet of Salvation" reminding me that I am in Your family and on Your side. Fill me with the reality that as a Christian, Your Holy Spirit has taken up residency in my life; that my sins have been forgiven by Your precious blood shed on the cross. Thank you that I have the assurance that I have become a citizen of Your eternal kingdom and that I have an unimaginable

inheritance waiting for me in heaven.

Thank you that you have given me an offensive piece of armor to fight the enemy, the “Sword of the Spirit”, the Bible, which will help me discern right from wrong when I am attacked by Satan. Lord, I’m asking that Your Holy Spirit give me an insatiable desire for Your Word so it becomes my lifeline. Please give me insight as I study Your Word and the ability and wisdom to practice it and live it!

As I prepare for today, I don’t want to forget to arm myself with the “Belt of Truth” so I can distinguish between Your truth and Satan’s lies. Just as soldiers in biblical days needed a belt to keep their loose garments from tripping them, I need Your help to avoid getting tripped and falling on my face spiritually. Please help me to know Your truth, to be honest and free from deceit, a person of integrity throughout the course of my day. Please give me wisdom to make wise choices today.

A “got to have” piece of my armor today, Lord, is the “Breastplate of Righteousness”. Jesus, please protect my heart and character from Satan’s blows today. Help me to act in obedience to Your will in the face of opposition. Father, please make me more like Your Son, Jesus – MORE loving, holy, patient, faithful, grateful, kind, merciful, compassionate (you can go on....).

I can’t start this day either Lord, without the “Shield of Faith”. Just as the Roman soldiers of biblical days had a large shield that covered their entire body, I ask for Your protection from my head to my feet. Lord, I put my confidence totally in You. I ask for Your protection from evil thoughts entering into my head today; take away the desire for my feet to lead me where I shouldn’t be. Protect my heart with Your shield of faith as arrows of discouragement come my way in the forms of criticism, hardship, stress, and anxiety that are shot my way. Lord, as I face (you name it....is it illness, job loss, parenting problems, marital difficulties, etc.) may my reliance in Your faithfulness increase and help me to respond in obedience to Your will.

Lastly, as I get fully dressed for the day with Your armor, I need the “Shoes of the Gospel of Peace”. Thank you how You gave the visual of the importance of my “Gospel Shoes”. Just as a soldier’s shoes in Paul’s day had cleats on them bottom to allow him to move without slipping and sliding, I need Your “shoes” to help me to advance Your kingdom. Please give me the courage and the right words to share the Good News of Christ with others....to move forward into these situations with my confidence in You instead of retreating from them. May “I Love to Tell the Story of Jesus and His Love” become the cry of my heart. Get me ready today Lord to share the Good news of Jesus with my lost family members and friends.

Lord, I’m now ready to face this day with You by my side! In your precious Name I pray, Amen.

The huge redwood trees in California are incredible. They are the largest living things on earth and the tallest trees in the world, with some of them reaching 350 feet high and living more than 2,000 years. You would think that trees this large would have incredible root systems, reaching down hundreds of feet into the earth. But they don’t. They actually have a very shallow root system. What keeps them standing through storms is that their roots are intertwined and interlocked with other redwoods. Tied together, they can withstand anything. Friends, you and I are tied together as well.

If you’re willing to be an answer to Jesus’ prayer, will you please stand right now and would you lock arms with the person next to you? We are His church and we are His signs, or advertisements, because as His followers we have a witness of oneness to the world.

We’re going to close by singing a simple chorus that is really a prayer that comes right out of John 17: “Make us one Lord, make us one Holy Spirit, make us one; Let your love flow so the world will know; We are one in you.”

John 20:1-18

Women Who Worship

Brian Bill on Jul 9, 2004

While it’s nearly impossible to spell out everything a mother does, this Motherhood Job Description hits the highlights.

1. TITLE: Mother, Mom, Mama, Mommy.
2. SUMMARY: Long term, team players needed, for challenging permanent work in an often chaotic environment. Candidates must possess excellent communication and organizational skills and be willing to work variable hours, which will include evenings and weekends and frequent 24-hour shifts on call. Some overnight travel required, including trips to primitive camping sites on rainy weekends and endless sports tournaments in far away cities. Extensive courier duties also required.
3. RESPONSIBILITIES: The rest of your life. Must be willing to be hated, at least temporarily, until someone needs \$5. Must screen phone calls, maintain calendars and coordinate production of multiple homework projects. Must have ability to plan and

organize social gatherings for clients of all ages and mental outlooks. Must be willing to be indispensable one minute, and an embarrassment the next. Must always hope for the best but be prepared for the worst. Responsibilities also include floor maintenance and janitorial work throughout the facility.

4. PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE: None required, unfortunately. On-the-job training offered on a continually exhausting basis.
5. WAGES AND COMPENSATION: Get this! You pay them! Offering frequent raises and bonuses. When you die, you give them whatever is left. The oddest thing about this reverse-salary scheme is that you actually enjoy it and only wish you could do more.
6. BENEFITS: This job supplies limitless opportunities for personal growth and free hugs for life if everything goes right.

I wonder how many would apply for the post of motherhood if they knew in advance what they were getting into. Actually, I think there'd still be a lot of women signing up! I recognize that while this is a happy day for many of you, for some, this is a difficult day. Perhaps your mom has died and you miss her terribly. Or maybe you've always struggled with your mom and you don't have very good memories. Others of you are hurting as you watch your mother's health deteriorate. Some of you have experienced the pain of losing a child, while others have children who have strayed. This can be a trying time for single women and for married women without children. It's also possible that a few of you are birth moms and you've made the tough choice to give your child up for adoption.

While today is Mother's Day, I want to broaden the scope of this sermon to suggest that we must do a better job of honoring women in our church, in our homes, and in our society. Women played a key role in the Bible.

Here's a brief summary of just the events surrounding the death of Jesus:

- Women were the last to leave the Cross (Mark 15:47)
- Women were the first at the Tomb (John 20:1)
- Women were the first to proclaim the Resurrection (Matthew 28:8)

I want us to look briefly at two worshipping women who shared the same name, but had different job descriptions: Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Mary Magdalene, who as far as we know, was not a mother. Let's begin by noticing that their names were actually Miriam. That means that they were named after the sister of Moses, who most commentators believe was stationed at the Nile River to help rescue her baby brother (see Exodus 2:1-8). Miriam is referred to as a prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21).

Mary the Mother

First, we'll study the job description of Mary the Mother of Jesus rather quickly because most of us already know her life story. The biblical word translated "mother" is the Hebrew word "AME" (pronounced "ah-may"), and means, "the bond of the family" (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, 13). I see at least seven principles from Mary's role as a mother that can benefit those who are the adhesive in the home today.

1. Get ready to serve.

In the history of the church Mary has often been portrayed as a kind of misty, otherworldly figure. That's a shame because the Bible makes it clear that she was very real, with very real doubts, very real questions and very real faith. Nowhere is this seen with more clarity than in Luke 1:38 when she responds to Gabriel's remarkable birth announcement: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Without a doubt, servanthood is at the heart of motherhood.

A teacher at school put this question to little James in math class, "James, suppose your mother made a cherry pie, and there were ten of you at the table: your mother and father and eight children. How much of the pie would you get?"

"A ninth," was his answer. "No, no, James. Now pay attention. There are ten of you in the home. Don't you know your fractions?" "Yes, ma'am," he replied, "I know my fractions, but I know my mother even better, AND SHE'D SAY THAT SHE DIDN'T WANT ANY PIE."

2. Be prepared for a broken heart.

Some time later, after Jesus is born, Mary receives a prophecy from a man named Simeon that must have stopped her in her tracks. She had great expectations for her boy but she was about to be reminded that being a mother would mean being broken. We see this in Luke 2:35: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Mothers certainly know what it's like to suffer.

3. Recognize your role.

When Jesus was a 12-year-old, the Bible tells us that He and His parents went to Jerusalem as they did every year to celebrate the Passover. After the feast was over, Jesus stayed behind while His parents headed back home. Joseph and Mary thought Jesus was

in their traveling group, but after a day had passed, they panicked and began to look for Him. They hurried back to Jerusalem and searched for three days. Can you imagine the fear that must have gripped their hearts? Then, when they finally find him, He's amazing the teachers in the temple with His questions and His answers. Luke 2:48 captures the tension: "When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.'" The response of Jesus revealed more than just the angst of a pre-teen: "'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'" I love verse 50: "But they did not understand what he was saying to them."

Mothers, not only will you not understand everything that your children do; you will be constantly reminded that your children belong to the Father, not to you. Do everything you can to point them to kingdom priorities.

4. Trust God's timing.

When Mary was at a wedding in Cana, she tried to get Jesus to do something that He wasn't ready to do. She had an expectation for Him that wasn't in tune with the heavenly timetable. Jesus' response to His mother has a twinge of exasperation to it. Listen to John 2:3-4: "When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.' 'Dear woman, why do you involve me?' Jesus replied. 'My time has not yet come.'" As hard as it is to do, we must trust God's timing and not force our agenda upon our kids.

5. A relationship with Jesus is more important than family relationships.

In Mark 3 we read about a very interesting encounter. Verse 31 indicates that Jesus' mother and brothers arrived to where Jesus was teaching and they wanted a word with Him, because frankly He was starting to embarrass the family. Jesus redefined what is most important when He established that His spiritual family, made up of men and women and boys and girls who trust Him for salvation, is more important than His natural family. He looked at those seated around Him and said in verses 34-35: "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." While your family must take priority, it should never be your #1 focus. Do whatever you can to cultivate your relationship with Christ.

6. Stay with your kids through the tough times.

This principle was severely tested when Mary congregated around the cross to watch her son suffer and die (John 19:25). She hung in there with Him no matter what He went through. And, even though she had close contact with her Son for many years, she ends up at the Cross, just like we need to. In His last act of kindness, Jesus turns His mother over to the care of His beloved disciple John.

7. Be a worshipping woman.

After the resurrection, we read that Mary meets with others for prayer and worship: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). There is nothing like the power of a praying woman. No matter what happens, don't stop praying and meeting with others in groups like "Moms in Touch."

Mary the Provider

Now, recognizing that we're not all mothers, let's look at the job description of Mary the Provider. A couple introductory points need to be made about this Mary because she is perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood woman in the Bible. She is mentioned in all four gospels, fourteen times in all, more than any other woman except Mary the mother of Jesus.

Her last name was not "Magdalene" but was rather distinguished from other "Mary's" with the same first name by mention of her place of residence, in this case Magdala.

She is not the woman caught in adultery in John 8, a fairly common mistake that was repeated in the Passion of the Christ movie.

Also, she is not the woman in Luke 7 who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. This woman is unnamed and is associated as someone with a bad reputation. Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time in chapter 8, in a totally different context.

Contrary to the absurd thesis set forth in the bestselling DaVinci Code, there is no evidence that she married Jesus and that their bloodline continues in France today.

Jesus did a couple unusual things that set Him apart from other Jewish teachers. First, He recruited disciples, and He traveled throughout the country. He didn't have a "home." Second, his followers were both males and females. This would have been scandalous to many, but Jesus always elevated women above the cultural benchmark. In his book called, "Women: God's Secret Weapon," Ed Silvoso writes: "One of the main reasons Christianity spread so rapidly in the early years is because its message

restored honor and inner worth to half of the world's population; that is, women" (Regal, page 35).

Mary of Magdala is the first-named woman among Christ's followers. We're actually introduced to three women by name, and a number of other women, in Luke 8:1-3: "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means."

This passage begins with the phrase, "After this," indicating that Jesus is beginning another missionary campaign. With each journey, the crowds became larger, as Jesus systematically visits town after town to make sure people hear the good news.

Here's what we know about Mary.

1. Satan held her in bondage.

We're not certain what led to Mary having seven demons, but we do know that she was held captive by the evil one. Jesus referred to Satan as a "thief that comes only to steal and kill and destroy..." (John 10:10). Perhaps she had opened herself up by dabbling in the occult. We do know that she needed deliverance by someone stronger than she was. The number seven was the number of completion, which leads us to believe that she was overwhelmed by this dark presence in her life.

2. The Savior set her free.

The gospel of Mark indicates that the most frequently mentioned miracle of Jesus was exorcism. While Mary was set free from spiritual bondage, the other two women mentioned had also been miraculously healed. Each was beyond human help; only Jesus could provide the freedom they longed for. John 8:36: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." And because they were delivered, they couldn't depart from Jesus, wanting to be with Him as He traveled the countryside.

3. She served out of her means.

Mary and her companions were active contributors to the traveling team, as each one gave what they could to finance the journey. To give out of one's "means" refers to possessions or property. Because they had been healed, they now wanted to help. Humanly speaking, this ministry endeavor could not have happened without their financial partnership. While Jesus met spiritual needs, these women met needs that would not have been met in any other way. Like the widow who gave everything she had to Elijah in 1 Kings 17:13-15, these women offered their possessions for God's purposes. Jesus could have miraculously provided bread like He did on two other occasions but He didn't. I think this was in part to give these women the opportunity and privilege to partner with Him in ministry. By the way, no man is explicitly identified in the gospels as a financial supporter of Jesus.

We can draw at least three conclusions from this:

1. Ministry costs money. Even our Lord's ministry had some logistical and physical needs.
2. Those who give are partners in ministry. You are part of the "team" when you give out of your resources.
3. It's biblical to be supported in ministry. Some are called to "send" and others are called to "go." In the fourth century, a woman named Paula paid the expenses of Jerome, so he could translate the Bible in the language of the common people ("A Celebration of Women," Joann C. Webster, Watercolor Books, page 84).

This summer, over 20 young people will be serving as missionaries. This is unbelievable and unprecedented in the history of our church! These students will be serving in India, Kenya, Livingston County, Panama, and Memphis. And guess what? They all need people who will partner with them.

A short while ago, we found out that one of our students still needed \$1,000 and the balance was due in less than one week. We prayed fervently and passed the word. Amazingly, all but \$100 came in the day before it was due. Early that next morning, before the sun was even up, I was praying with someone who was getting ready to have surgery. As I was getting ready to leave their house, this couple asked how much money this summer missionary still needed. I told them and they immediately wrote a check for \$100! I wanted to call the student right then but it was only 5:30 in the morning. There are still others waiting upon God to provide their needed funds so that they can go and be used. Is God prompting you to help send them?

In July, ten students will be ministering in Memphis as they help to repair homes and engage in evangelism. They will be staying at a Christian College and speakers will challenge the weary witnesses at night. They are raising \$2,500 for the whole group. They would like as many people that could partner with them as possible. They are selling goodies in the Family Life Center between services today. On May 22nd, they will be having a car wash in the church parking lot from 12:00 to 4:00 PM. Check out the giving gauge outside of Pastor Jeff's office to see how the fund raising is going.

Mary went from bondage to freedom to voluntary servanthood. Friends, when we're hurting and then healed, we will want to do all we can to help others find healing.

Let's fast forward now to what happened when the resurrected Christ appeared to Mary in John 20. We know that she was one of the last ones at the cross and now she's the first one at the empty tomb. She had come with a group of other women to complete the task of preparing the body of Jesus for burial. They weren't quite sure how they were going to get into the tomb but an angel took care of that for them. Mary went ahead of the other women and got to the grave first.

When she saw that the stone had been removed, she mistakenly thought that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. She then ran to tell Peter and John the news. Peter and John take off for the tomb, with John outrunning old Pete.

Here are some principles that we can learn from Mary the Provider.

Jesus meets us right where we are. After John and Peter went back home, verse 11 tells us that Mary stood outside the tomb crying. In Verse 14 Mary turns around and sees Jesus but doesn't recognize Him. He then spoke words of comfort when he asked her the first of two questions in verse 15: "Woman, why are you crying?" Friend, Jesus knows all about those things that make you sad. He understands your fear and anxiety. Think of all the tears that have been shed through all the years of human history. Jesus doesn't always take away our tears but He stands on resurrection ground as the answer to our agony. And there's a day coming according to Revelation 21:4 when "He will wipe every tear from our eyes, when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..."

Jesus not only asks about her sorrow but He also wants to know about her seeking. He tenderly prods with a second question, "Who is it that you are looking for?" He doesn't ask her "what" she is looking for but "whom." Until we find Jesus, each of us are looking for someone as well. Sadly, some of us are on a search for something, when we should be looking for Someone.

Jesus knows us personally. It's kind of funny what takes place in the second part of verse 15: "Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.'" In verse 16, Jesus said just one word to her, "Mary." Actually, in the original He uses her Aramaic name, "Miriam." All Jesus had to do was speak her name she immediately turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni." This was a title of highest respect. It was like she was saying, "My master and my teacher."

Have you ever stopped to think that Jesus knows everything about you, and likes you anyway? He cares deeply for you, regardless of what you've done, or how you've been living. The Resurrected Christ is speaking your name this morning. Ed. Jane. Joe. Stephanie. Do you hear Him? Will you follow Him?

· Jesus gives us a message. After hearing her name, Mary drops to her knees and Matthew 28:9 tells us that she grabs on to His feet in worship. Now that she's found Jesus she doesn't want to let go. Jesus then gently rebukes her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." The phrase literally means, "don't cling to me." She was still going to have a friendship with Him, but it was going to be much deeper and richer once He ascended into heaven.

After reframing their relationship, Jesus then gives Mary a message: "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary was responsible to deliver the news about this new relationship. Verse 18 reveals that Mary did what she was told to do: "...she went to the disciples with the news, 'I have seen the Lord.' And she told them that He had said these things to her." We've been given a message as well.

One common character quality in both extraordinary Mary's was that they gave their all to Jesus. Let's conclude with three challenges.

Concluding Observations

1. Jesus elevated women and so should we. Husbands, don't demean your wives. Men, don't look down on women. Remember, it was the disciples who referred to the women's report about the empty tomb as "nonsense," when in fact the men were wrong (see Luke 24:11).

2. Become a spiritual mother to someone. The apostle Paul chose the metaphor of a mother to describe his ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2:7: "But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." Paul also urged older women to "train the younger women to love their husbands and children" in Titus 2:4. Women, there are other women around you who would love to be taught by you. I talked to a couple ladies recently who have a heart to begin this kind of ministry here at PBC.

Listen to this tribute to spiritual mothers, as found in the book, "The Celebration of Women" (page 166):

- I want to thank you Lord for the spiritual mothers in my life,
- Each had a different talent and was in my life for a different season.

- They prayed for me. They listened to me. They helped me.
- They cooked for me. They taught me. They gave me counsel. They cried with me.
- They gave me a safe place to rest. They gave me money when I was broke.
- They freed me from the prison of guilt and confusion.
- Without them I do not know where I would be.
- They have been Jesus in the flesh to me.
- They are Wisdom dancing with Knowledge.
- They are Understanding kissing Discernment.
- Thank you Lord for the blessing of Spiritual Mothers.

3. Use what you have to serve where you can. In other words, fulfill your job description. If you're a mother, use your position to make an impact on the next generation. If you're not a mother, give what you've been given in service to the Savior. In her book, "Women of a Generous Spirit," Lois Mowday Rabey says there are seven unique gifts that a woman can give: Grace, Hope, Presence, Extravagance, Loving Truthfulness, Provision, and Legacy.

Lu Dunbar, Maxine Williams' mother, wrote a wonderful story about Emily Tubman (www.royaltreasure.org/html/fall_031.html). Eighteen years before Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of 1862, as a result of reading Galatians 3:28: "...there is neither slave nor free..." she freed all of her slaves, giving them the opportunity to live free in the country of Liberia. Only half agreed to go, and for those who elected to stay in this country, Emily provided land, clothing and provisions so they could support themselves. In regard to her wealth, she often said this: "I am a steward of the Lord, and only hold this money in trust, and my supreme joy is to dispense it to advance His Kingdom or to relieve human suffering."

She fulfilled her job description, as did Mary the Mother and Mary the Provider. Will you do the same?

As we close this morning, I'm going to ask the men to stand and applaud the worshipping women of this church. [Applaud]. Women, didn't that feel good? Now imagine the applause of heaven, when God will say to you, "Well done, my good and faithful woman!"

John 20:1-8

The Empty Tomb: A Place Of Faith

Brian Bill on Jul 9, 2004

I grew up in a family with four sisters and no brothers. There were a lot of downsides to this...which I won't go into now. One upside, and maybe the only one, is that I had to have my own bedroom in the basement, along with my own bathroom. I loved to just go in my room and shut myself out from all the screaming...which I usually caused!

I can remember one time when I woke up in the middle of the night and it was completely dark in my room. I must have gotten out of the wrong side of the bed because I couldn't find my door anywhere. I felt along the paneling and the door had disappeared! And then I realized it must have been a plot of my sisters...they had somehow sealed me in my room when I was sleeping! As my heart began to race and panic set in, I started screaming for my parents.

After what seemed like an hour, my dad came downstairs and opened the door and turned the light on. I remember feeling both relief and surprise because the door was not where I thought it was!

The disciples were disillusioned and disoriented after the crucifixion. They were filled with fear and thought it was all over. Jesus was dead and had been placed in a tomb built out of rock...

1. It was blocked by a big boulder
2. Protected by a Roman seal
3. Guarded by a contingent of soldiers

When Jesus was entombed on Friday, they felt like their faith was buried along with Him. They were in the dark and knew no way out.

That all changed on Sunday morning. John 20:1-2: "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!'"

Mary Magdalene discovered that three amazing events had taken place.

1. Seal broken
2. Stone removed – “away from the entrance” Note: The stone was moved so people could see in, not to let Jesus out!
3. Soldiers went AWOL

John 20:3-7: “So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.”

Peter and John ran to the tomb and saw...

Strips of linen (illus: Passion movie)

Verse 8: “Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.”

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead can change your life today. If Jesus came back to life, there is nothing too difficult for Him to do for you.

Perhaps you’re still in process and you need more proof – I encourage you to join us for the next series called, “Beyond the Tomb” as we look at the appearances of Jesus during a 40-day period of time before His ascension into heaven.

Is the light coming on for you? Are your eyes opening? If so, it’s time to trust in what is true and commit yourself to Christ! You must respond by receiving. It’s not enough to just say that you have faith.

1 Kings 18:21 – “If the Lord is God, follow Him.”

Joshua 24:15 – “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...”

John 1:12 – “But as many as received Him, He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”

Friend, you don’t have to live in the dark anymore. If you have eyes of faith, the light of the world will flood you with forgiveness, He will give you a fresh start, and He is offering you a new beginning.

1. Admit you are a sinner.
2. Acknowledge you need a substitute.
3. Accept Jesus as your Savior. Not enough to just say you have “faith.” Biblical faith always involves the mind, the emotions, and the will. To “believe” means to “receive.”

If you have Easter Eyes, and you’d like to receive salvation right now, please pray this prayer with me.

“Lord Jesus, thank you for what you suffered on my behalf. I know you did it for me. I confess that I am a sinner and I repent of the way I’ve been living. I no longer want to live in the dark. By faith I believe that you died as my substitute and I receive you into my life. Please forgive me for my sins and give me eternal life. And give me eyes of faith that I might see you and serve you for the rest of my life. In your name I pray, amen.”

Closing Benediction/Response:

Leader: He is Risen!

Congregation: He is Risen Indeed

John 20:21, Luke 5:29: Owning the Mission

Brian Bill 1/28/01

Jim had a passion for God, a love for people, and a burden to communicate the gospel. But he wrestled with the question of how to

bring the message of Christ into a setting that seemed so far from him. How could he help people see and embrace the truth when they had so little biblical understanding? The barriers seemed insurmountable. The task appeared virtually impossible.

Even with all of the obstacles in front of him, Jim knew he had to try. God had given him a vision to make a difference in the lives of these men and women.

For starters, he shaved his head right down to the skin, except for one patch of hair that he let grow long. Not only that, he began wearing it in a pigtail and then dyed it a different color so that he could fit in with those he was trying to reach. He also gave up his suit and tie and began to dress like the people he was trying to reach. He changed his eating patterns. He worked hard to learn new vocabulary and expressions, in the hopes that he would be able to effectively convey biblical truth in their everyday street language.

Jim didn't do all this from a distance. He actually moved into the neighborhood with these people. He tried to become their friend. This wasn't easy because of their non-Christian lifestyles and their outright rejection of his message.

Jim paid the price of loneliness, weariness, and discouragement, along with criticism from many Christians. He also lived with the daily rejection of most of those he wanted to reach. And he did this year after year. Jim owned the mission. His life is a powerful illustration of evangelism against the odds. And today, generations later, countless people from the neighborhoods he worked so hard to reach have come to saving faith.

Is it worth taking risks to reach lost people with the love of Jesus? Is it right to proclaim the gospel in ways that break a few paradigms, push back a few boundaries, and ruffle a few feathers? If you're not sure, you might want to ask the hundreds of thousands of Chinese Christians who have been touched, directly or indirectly, by Jim – or, as he's more widely known, James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission over a century ago (this story adapted from *Building a Contagious Church* by Mark Mittelberg, Zondervan: 2000, pages 32-33).

Our drama this morning portrayed where most of us are at when it comes to evangelism. While we know it's important, we often get sidetracked just like Courtney did. Instead of making an impact, most of us feel inept. I want to suggest that our first step is to "own the mission." If we don't we won't see much evangelistic fruit.

Valuing What God Values

During this series that we're kicking off today, I want us to take a look at what is supposed to be one of our top values: telling others about Jesus. Here at PBC we have identified 6 values that come right out of the second chapter of the Book of Acts. Let me list them for you by way of review:

- Instructing from God's Word.
- Mobilizing for ministry.
- Praying with faith.
- Adoring God in worship.
- Caring for each other.
- Telling others the Gospel.

These value statements help us see where we're headed as a church. They also serve as an evaluative tool to help us identify areas that we need to work on. I use these IMPACT phrases to discern what sermon series to put together so that we cover all six of these areas on a regular basis.

I used to think that we should give equal time and attention to each part of our vision statement but then I realized, through the help of another pastor, that the value of evangelism will always need more emphasis than the other ones because this is the hardest one to keep fresh and to live out authentically.

As believers, we want instruction, we want to be mobilized for ministry, we pray, we adore God, and we care for each other. Most of these have to do with our relationship with God or our relationships with other believers.

In his book *The Purpose-Driven Church*, Rick Warren reports on a survey that found 89% of church members believe the church's purpose is to "take care of my needs and those of my family." Only 11% said, "The purpose of the church is to win the world for Jesus Christ." (Page 82).

According to George Barna, in his book called, "Evangelism That Works," most churches have only a small group of people who have a passion for evangelism. Barna asks 3 probing questions to churches like ours:

1. "Do people "own" evangelism as the heartbeat of the ministry?"

2. "Is evangelism deemed the highest priority of the church?"

3. "Have the people caught a vision for reaching nonbelievers that gives the church definition, energy and direction?"

He concludes by saying, "If not, the organization is not truly a church but is simply a group of people intrigued by religion." (Page 129).

Brothers and sisters, let's admit something this morning. Evangelism is not easy. In fact, for many of us, it's downright scary. Evangelism is one of the highest values in the church – and one of the least practiced. Studies show that most believers don't have many – if any – friendships with non-Christians. We may talk a good game, but our actions speak louder than our words. Do we really care about lost people? Do we sincerely believe that knowing Christ is the best way to live and the only way to die?

Some of you know that I got the flu this past week. I tried to keep my germs away from others in the family. Beth wouldn't even let me kiss her! I don't blame her because I wouldn't want anyone to get what I had. By its very nature and purpose, the church ought to be a contagious place that is "infecting" more and more outsiders with the Christian faith. There ought to be an epidemic of people trusting in Christ. Why isn't that happening?

In his book called, "Building a Contagious Church," Mark Mittelberg points out that the evangelism value in every church tends to head south over time. He calls it the "second law of spiritual dynamics," in which Christians, if left to themselves, move toward self-centeredness. If we're serious about telling others the gospel, then we must fight this gravitational pull inward. In order to overcome evangelistic entropy we must be relentless in our pursuit of owning the mission we've been called to fulfill.

Let's revisit the mission we've been entrusted with. Please turn in your Bibles to John 20:19-23.

He Accepts Us

In our text we see the disciples huddled together in a room. It's Resurrection Sunday and it has been an eventful day for everyone involved. It's now evening and they're excited, yet afraid. The door was locked because rumor had it that the Jewish leaders wanted to arrest and dispose of anyone who had been associated with Jesus.

Suddenly, without warning, Jesus appears and says in verse 19, "Peace be with you." I don't imagine those were the words some of the disciples were expecting.

There is no rebuke, no "how could you?" Jesus doesn't scold or shame them. The first words out of his mouth show one thing: He accepts them. Can you imagine the relief and the joy that must have flooded their hearts? These first words of Jesus after His resurrection were almost identical to what He said shortly before He was arrested in John 16:33: "I told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

In some respects, it is almost as if the last few days hadn't happened. Certainly these disciples felt unworthy . . . but the Savior extends peace. Let that sink in. Understand how gracious an act this was.

The disciples were afraid. The word "fear" in verse 19 carries with it the idea of "flight." The disciples were so alarmed and frightened that they wanted to bolt. Now, contrast this with the word, "peace," which is defined as "putting together that which is broken." Jesus knows they are afraid so He says "Shalom" to them, which literally means, "All good to you."

Do you understand that Jesus wants to extend peace to you and I as well? He doesn't gloss over your past. He is well aware of the mistakes we have made. He knows how we've scorned Him, denied Him, and rejected Him when we should have been speaking up for Him. Yet He still extends peace. When He sees you He says, "Shalom."

This peace has at least 4 dimensions:

- Peace with God (Romans 5:1)
- Peace in difficult times (John 14:27; 16:33)
- Peace in our relationships (Ephesians 2:14-18)
- Peace with the past (Romans 8:1)

The Savior offers YOU peace today, even if you feel you don't deserve it. God's peace and forgiveness is extended to us by His grace. So here's the question: Why do we continue to cower in the corner when the Savior wants to embrace us? Why do we try to lock Him out of our lives?

By granting peace, Jesus shows how much He accepts us. In verse 20, He underscores how much he cares for His followers. He

knows that doubt can creep into all of our lives and so, “He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” Luke 24:37-43 tells us that Jesus went out of His way to show His followers who He really was when He asked them to touch Him and then He ate a piece of broiled fish to show that He really was alive.

As it relates to our mission, Jesus knows that fear keeps many of us from sharing the good news. That’s what Courtney felt in her high school. As His peace floods our lives, and His proofs ground our faith, He also opens locked doors so that we can go through them. He now has a job for us to do.

He Commissions Us

I’ll never forget when my dad tossed me the keys to his truck for the first time. I had just passed my driver’s test and it was his way of saying, “Son, I trust you. Take the truck and have some fun.” By the way, I had to give those same keys back about a year later when I lost my license because of a couple speeding tickets!

Jesus does something similar with His followers when He says in verse 21, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” If you will, Jesus tosses the disciples the keys. He not only accepts them but He entrusts them with the message of the gospel. He believes in them and so He commissions them.

The first use of the word “peace” in verse 19 was given in order to quiet their hearts. This second “peace” was given in order to prepare them for a fresh statement of their purpose as initially given in John 17:18: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”

Listen to how Paul states our mission in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20: “He has committed to us the message of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

Notice that Jesus sends us into the world in the same way the Father sent Him. This has several implications.

- We must take the initiative. As Jesus went into the world so we are to go to others. We are not to just sit back and wait for others to come to us.
- We must open our mouths. We are to speak the truth like He did. That’s why we’re going to go door-to-door this Saturday as we talk to people about the Jesus Video. That’s why we’re challenging each of us to talk to 10 people.
- We must declare AND demonstrate. As Jesus demonstrated the validity of His message by what He did, so must we.
- We must be prepared for opposition. It shouldn’t surprise us when others laugh at us and ridicule us because of our message or our approach to living.

His peace and His proofs show how much He accepts us. We’ve been accepted not so we can just bask in our relationship with Him, but so that we can live out our purpose – we’ve been commissioned to a task.

He Equips Us

Are you feeling a little overwhelmed? Me too. That’s why these next words in John 20:22 are so important, “And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’” Jesus not only entrusts us with the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel to others, He also equips us for the job!

At this moment of greatest need the Savior promises to place His Spirit in each of us individually. Listen to what the Bible says the Holy Spirit will do.

- He gives us the words to say (Luke 12:11,12)
- He convicts us, and our listeners of sin (John 16:8)
- He converts a hard heart (John 6:44)
- He sustains us in the difficult times (John 14:26,27)
- He gives focus and substance to our prayers (Romans 8:26)
- He gives us the abilities to do what He has called us to do (1 Corinthians 12:7)
- He gives us Christ-like qualities (Galatians 5:22-23)

When the Holy Spirit is given room to work He will surprise us again and again by what He can do. We are not left alone! He has

provided the help we need.

Wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano, a mother took her boy to a Paderewski concert. After they were seated, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her.

Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and went through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE." When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and discovered that her son was missing. Suddenly, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Then leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he added a running obbligato.

Together, the old master and the young novice transformed a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience. The audience was mesmerized.

That's the way it is with the Holy Spirit. What we can accomplish on our own is hardly noteworthy. We try our best, but the results aren't exactly graceful flowing music. But with the hand of the Master, our life's work truly can be beautiful. Friend, you've been accepted and commissioned and equipped to play the beautiful music of salvation for those who are lost in their sins. He's whispering to you today, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Feel His loving arms around you. Know that His strong hands are playing the concert of your life.

God doesn't call the equipped; He equips the called.

He Motivates Us

The last verse of our text adds one final thing. He motivates us. Look at verse 23, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." This text is difficult because we know that Mark 2:7 says, "no one can forgive sins but God alone."

The NIV Study Bible explains it this way, "God does not forgive people's sins because we do so, nor does he withhold forgiveness because we do. Rather, those who proclaim the gospel are in effect forgiving or not forgiving sins, depending on whether the hearers accept or reject Jesus Christ."

If you tell people about this forgiveness you are extending forgiveness to them. If they respond they are indeed forgiven. However, if you don't tell them, you are NOT extending forgiveness to them. Then their sins will not be forgiven.

Jesus accepts, He commissions, He equips, and He motivates us. The motivation is that the world is desperately in need of the message we have. If we do not go forward some will never hear that they can be set free. Some will never know the joy of salvation. Some will never know of the Spirit's strength in the difficult times. If we don't tell the people we come in contact with about the Gospel, then we're not living out our mission and calling.

Gabriel and Jesus

The story is told that on the day Jesus ascended to heaven, he happened to see Gabriel and they had a talk. Gabriel asked, "How did it go?" The Lord said, "Great, excellent."

"Did they make you king?" "No."

"Did they make you prince?" "No."

"Did they worship you?" "Most of them didn't."

"Well, what happened?" "They crucified me."

"Then they worshipped you, right?" "No."

"So, what happened?" "I left my people down there."

Gabriel then said, "Well, what if they fail, do you have another plan?" Jesus replied, "There is no other plan."

They didn't fail. We're here today because they didn't drop the ball 2000 years ago.

And what God provided for them, He has also provided for us. We have the same God, the same Bible, the same Holy Spirit, and the same gospel message.

Action Steps As we wrap up this morning, 4 Action Steps come to mind that will help us stay focused on the plan as we strive to own the mission we've been given.

1. Admit that your evangelistic values have slipped. This is the right place to start.
2. Stay spiritually authentic. Pray the "Prayer of Jabez" every day. Sometimes we don't even think to share Jesus with others because we're not walking with Him ourselves.
3. Pray for opportunities. Colossians 4:2-3: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ..."
4. Follow God's promptings. Colossians 4:5-6: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Ten Little Christians

We need to get back on task, don't we? We must own the mission we've been given.

- Ten little Christians, standing in a line, one disliked the preacher, then there were nine.
- Nine little Christians stayed up very late, one slept in on Sunday, then there were eight.
- Eight little Christians on their way to heaven, one took his own road, then there were seven.
- Seven little Christians chirping like some chicks, one disliked the song leader, then there were six.
- Six little Christians seemed very much alive, but one lost his interest then there were five.
- Five little Christians pulling for heaven's shore, but one stopped to rest, then there were four.
- Four little Christians, busy as a bee, one got her feelings hurt, then there were three.
- Three little Christians knew not what to do, one couldn't forgive another, then there were two.
- Two little Christians, our rhyme is nearly done, quarreled over petty stuff, then there was only one.
- One little Christian, can't do much 'tis true; brought his friend to Bible study – then there were two.
- Two earnest Christians, each won one more, that doubled the number, then there were four.
- Four sincere Christians worked early and worked late, each won another, then there were eight.
- Eight splendid Christians, if they doubled as before, in just a few short weeks, we'd have 1,024.

John 21:1-14

Dealing With Disappointment

Brian Bill Jul 9, 2004

Summary: Today I want to tell you about a fishing trip that took place after the Resurrection.

Hi, my name is Simon Peter. You've probably heard of some of my most embarrassing moments. It would take me all day to tell you about how my mouth has messed me up, and about how I let Jesus down, as well as the other disciples. Today I want to tell you about a fishing trip that took place after the Resurrection. My buddy John wrote about it in some detail – you can follow along if you'd like in John 21:1-14.

Jesus told us to go to Galilee, where He would meet with us (Matthew 26:32). It was amazing how Jesus would appear briefly and then go away. He first made Himself known to Mary Magdalene and the other women, but we didn't really believe their report. He then appeared to me and then revealed Himself to two disciples as they walked to Emmaus. I'll never forget that day; I only wish He would have stayed longer because I still felt so bad about my failure. On Easter Sunday night, Jesus came through locked doors and proclaimed peace to us. One week later, when Thomas was present, He visited with us again. But then Jesus was gone. As I think back, it was almost as if He was weaning us from His presence.

As we headed to Galilee, I was pretty down in the dumps. The other disciples couldn't believe how quiet I was. I was disappointed in myself and frankly felt like giving up. When I saw the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the

Sea of Galilee, my heart starting racing as I remembered how successful I had been as a professional fisherman. I even had hired men working for me. The smell of the water and the sound of the waves did something to me. Since I wasn't any good at this "disciple" thing, maybe I could go back and just catch fish again. I announced to the six others that I was going fishing. They could tell from my tone of voice and the words I used that I was ready to retire as a follower of Christ. Part of me just wanted to relax, but another part of me felt rebellious. I was surprised when they all said they would join me. I guess I still felt like they wouldn't want to be around me because of what I had done.

At first I was pretty pumped up to fish but the feelings faded quickly. I had forgotten how hard it was to hurl the nets into the sea and then drag them back into the boat. It all seemed monotonous, especially since we got skunked. We had worked all night and didn't even catch a pan fish! This made me feel even more discouraged as the empty nets were a metaphor of my life at that moment.

As the sun was beginning to come up, we saw someone standing on the shore, but we had no idea who it was. He then called out to us, in a voice that sounded vaguely familiar, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" This was disarming for two reasons. First, fishermen never like to admit that they've not caught anything. Second, this man used a term that literally meant, "children." I had heard that before. When we told Him we had not caught a thing, he told us to throw our nets on the other side of the boat and we'd find some fish. We decided to listen to him, and when we did, we couldn't even pull in the nets because they were so full!

As we strained at the nets, my mind went back three years earlier to a very similar scene. I had déjà vu, all over again. After fishing all night and catching nothing, Jesus used my boat as a pulpit – it certainly wasn't good for much else. When he was done teaching, He told us to go back out in the boat and drop our nets in deeper water. What does a carpenter know about fishing? I lot more than me, actually. We caught so many fish that we had to ask for help because the nets began to break. When I realized what had happened I was so overwhelmed by my sinfulness in the presence of holiness that I asked Jesus to depart from me. Jesus told me not to be afraid and commissioned me to catch men. I pulled my boat up on shore, left everything and followed Him. And now I was back in that same boat...

John put into words what I was beginning to formulate in my mind: "It's the Lord!" That's all I needed to hear. I put my outer garment back on and jumped into the water, and started swimming to shore. Being in the water reminded me of the time Jesus allowed me to walk on the waves. This time I was making waves as I yelled and screamed and thrashed around. When my feet hit the shore, I raced over to Jesus and saw that He was cooking breakfast for us, over a charcoal fire. And then my mind filled with failure again as the fire reminded me of how I was warming myself right before I denied Jesus three times. Just then Jesus shouted out, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught!" I raced back to the water and helped drag the net ashore. It was full of fish, 153 in all (you know how fishermen like to count their catches).

Jesus then invited us to have breakfast but we were all so astonished that we didn't even ask if it was Him. We didn't have to because we knew it was the Lord. Jesus served us fish and bread, and in so doing invited us back into fellowship with Him, and setting the table for my personal restoration, which we'll look at in greater detail next Sunday. He was sautéing fish; but for me He was serving forgiveness.

Disappointments are His Appointments

God allows disappointments to come into our lives. In fact, we could say that disappointments are His appointments because He has some things He wants us to learn through the lean times. Before Jesus reveals Himself to the disciples, they are dogged by discouragement. Many of us feel that way this morning as recent events have rocked us. At least three elements make this a pervasive problem.

It's universal. All of us are predisposed to discouragement. Everyone you have ever known has been discouraged at one time or another. Billy Graham once said, "I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, 'O God, forgive me,' or 'Help me.'"

It's recurring. Being discouraged once does not give you immunity to the disease. It can happen over and over again. In fact, you can even be down by the fact that you are discouraged a lot.

It's highly contagious. Discouragement spreads by even casual contact. People can become disheartened because you are discouraged. You can be bummed out because other people are downcast.

I see seven ways to deal with disappointment from our text for today.

1. Don't bail when we're bummed out.

When Peter was feeling blue, he wanted to go back and do those things that he used to do. But when he did, he found that it didn't work. I wonder if some of you are tempted to do the same thing. Perhaps you're going through a hard time right now and you just want to chuck this whole Christianity thing. Maybe you feel like people have let you down so you just want to get away from everything. Peter discovered the hard way that we can't go back, but we can get through it. Several years later, he wrote in 1 Peter 5:10: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." As Rick Warren states, "You'll never know that God is all you need until God is all you've got."

In fact, if you're a Christian, God won't let you find satisfaction in those things you once did because He loves you too much to see you stray. God posed a question through the prophet Jeremiah to His people, when they were considering going back to the life they once had: "Why do you go about so much, changing your ways? You will be disappointed by Egypt as you were by Assyria. You will also leave that place with your hands on your head, for the LORD has rejected those you trust; you will not be helped by them" (Jeremiah 2:36-37).

Clyde Billingsley asks two probing questions: "How much discouragement can you take for God? What would it take for you to quit your service to the Lord?" Are you close to giving up? With all that God has done for you, don't bail on Him or His church. Keep serving Him faithfully no matter what happens.

2. We can do nothing apart from Christ.

It's fascinating to me that there were at least three professional fishermen in the boat that night. They knew how to fish but they didn't even catch one little perch. Verse 3 puts the emphasis on the word "that," so it would read: "But that night they caught nothing." To not catch anything was very unusual and no doubt led to a deeper level of disappointment and discouragement among the disciples. After all, they had decided to go fishing to get rid of the blahs. But Jesus was teaching them the truth of what He had said earlier in John 15:5: "...apart from me you can do nothing."

They couldn't rely on their experience or their expertise to accomplish anything. They, like us, needed to reaffirm the truth of Zechariah 4:6: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty." It's so easy to go through the motions, isn't it? I confess that I often lean on my own abilities instead of surrendering to God's Spirit. And for that, I ask your forgiveness. It's so easy for us to be fooled into thinking that we're accomplishing something for God, when in fact; our mediocrity must rise like a stench in God's nostrils.

This past Monday night I took our younger girls to see the circus. As we got out of the car, we immediately saw (and smelled) the elephants. As we hurried over to them, I couldn't believe my eyes. They had two elephants, and they looked like most sleepy and lethargic circus pachyderms. People were lined up to take rides and next to the 12,000 pound beasts was their trainer. He had a thin whip in his right hand, and in his left hand he was holding a cell phone up to his ear, and he was talking into it! He wasn't paying much attention to his task and his lackadaisical approach made me wonder how committed he was to his vocation. Incidentally, he was still talking on the phone when he brought the elephants into the ring about 45 minutes later!

Friends, we must stop meandering through the motions of religious routine. Let's allow times of disappointment to reveal how easy it is for us to get bored with our faith. Have we lost our passion for Christ? When Jesus addressed the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2, He commended them for their hard work and perseverance. They had certainly labored for the Lord, but Jesus then points out that something was significantly wrong in verses 4-5: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first." Brothers and sisters in Christ, have we as a church forsaken our first love? If so, let's repent and get back on track, refusing to settle for second best. Jesus does not tolerate anyone taking His rightful place in our individual lives, or in our church.

In Luke 22:31, Jesus tells Peter that he is about to be spiritually sifted: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat." I wonder if this is a season of spiritual sifting for us. As we walk through trials and difficulties, God strips away the junk so that we will see that we can do nothing apart from Christ. And, when we realize that our "nets" are empty, we see the need for God to fill us. Beth Moore says that we will then either bend our knees to Him, or we will be broken. I sense that some bending and breaking is taking place within our church right now, and that's not a bad thing. We can also take comfort from the next verse as Jesus tells Peter that he will get through the trying times because the Lord Himself is praying for him: "But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

3. Obedience is always the right thing to do.

In John 21:5, we see Jesus gently calling out to his disciples, greeting them as "friends," or literally, "dear children" as He asks them how the fishing is going. He wants them to admit the obvious fact that they've caught nothing. John uses this exact phrase in 1 John 2:13: "I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father." This term of endearment reveals that Jesus loves us even

when we're going astray. He watches us rely on our own expertise and His eyes fill with tears. He sees our empty nets and longs to load them up. As I've stated before, borrowing from Max Lucado: "He loves you just the way you are, but He loves you too much to let you stay that way."

And the way He changes us is through obedience. When we decide to obey Him, no matter how we're feeling, no matter how empty we are, and no matter whether it makes sense or not, He is honored. In Jeremiah 42:5, God's people make a commitment to obey: "Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the LORD our God..." That's what He wants from us. And that's exactly what the disciples did when Jesus told them to throw the net on the right side of the boat. That didn't make much sense because they had been trying all night to find some fish. But they chose to obey.

In his book called, "The Screwtape Letters," C.S. Lewis imagines a dialog between the devil and his young apprentice:

"It is during the tough periods, much more than during the peak periods...hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those that please Him [God] best...He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys" (Page 25).

Henri Nouwen refers to those times when God feels distant as the "ministry of absence." It's then that we must honor and obey Him, for it's out of obedience that God will reveal Himself to us.

In Zechariah 6:5, God promises His people that they will have enough workers to complete the Temple, providing that they obey Him: "This will happen if you diligently obey the LORD your God." I wonder how many blessings we've blown it simply because we haven't always obeyed Him.

4. Blessings are closer than we think.

The difference between an empty net and an engorged one was the width of the boat! Jesus kept the fish from swimming into the nets during the night and now He sends the school of fish right where He wants them. Psalm 30:5: "Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." We can't fish the blessings out of life but we can catch what God sends our way. The disciples, in their own strength came up empty. But when they obeyed, God sent His blessings. And when God blesses, He does so abundantly as Ezekiel 34:26 states: "I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing."

5. Do whatever it takes to get close to Jesus.

I love how John was the first to recognize Jesus. Maybe that's because of all the disciples; it was John who hung in there while Jesus hung on the cross. His love for His Master was never questioned and Jesus had a special place in His heart for him as well. As they're wrestling with the wet nets, John turns to Peter and says, "It is the Lord!" Verse 7 says that as soon as Peter heard this, he grabbed his outer garment and jumped in the water. While John is contemplative; Peter is courageous. When Jesus performed the first fish miracle in Luke 5, Peter wanted Jesus to depart from him; now He jumps into the lake in order to get to Jesus. Earlier when Peter walked on the water, He asked Jesus if it was really Him (Matthew 14:28); now, He doesn't need any confirmation because He knows. And once again, He can't stay in the boat. He has to get to where Jesus is.

I love this about Peter. He won't let anything stop Him from seeing the Savior. While He certainly still had some guilt and shame, He knew that Jesus would fully forgive Him. Friend, will you do whatever it takes to get as close to Jesus as you can? We can't be passive about this. Spiritual growth only happens when we become disciplined to read our Bibles, to pray fervently, to worship with other believers, to serve others, and to fish for the souls of people. We must take action. Proverbs 18:10 tells us that the Lord will protect those who run to Him for shelter: "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." Will you run to the Redeemer every day?

I don't know how disappointed or disillusioned you are today but I do know that you are as close to Jesus as you want to be. Rick Warren mentions that at least eight times in the New Testament we are told to "make every effort" in our spiritual growth. We can't sit around and just wait for growth to happen. We must want to grow, decide to grow, make an effort to grow, and persist in growing. It always begins with a decision ("Purpose Driven Life," page 175, 179). It's time to get out of the boat and seek Him passionately like Peter did.

6. Everything we accomplish is by His grace.

My favorite verse in this passage is John 21:10 when Jesus says, "Bring some of the fish you have caught." Jesus already has some fish frying and some bread baking but He invites them to share what they have. What is very interesting here is that Jesus asks them to bring the fish they have caught. The disciples knew that they didn't do anything to catch the fish. It was Jesus who lured the

little (actually big) fishies into the net. All they did was put the net in the water and bring it back up. The Greek prefix “mega” is used to describe the size of these fish. These fish were definitely “keepers” and shows the magnitude of the miracle, as the empty nets are now filled with mega muskies! Their paucity has been replaced with Gods’ bountiful provision.

This is a great lesson for us to remember. While we may do something for the Lord, it’s all by His grace. We really can do nothing, and yet we often take credit for those things that go well in our lives, and in our church. And yet, Jesus allows us to participate in the blessings, and partner with Him in His work in the world. That’s amazing to me.

Friends, we need to make sure we are free from pride because it has some ugly consequences as Proverbs 11:2 states: “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” The disciples couldn’t high-five each other, and celebrate their fishing prowess because Jesus was the one who filled their nets. Daniel 4:37: “And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” Hosea 13:6 reminds us how easy it is for us to take credit and become spiritually lethargic and proud of our own accomplishments: “When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me.” And James 4:6 puts it strongly and succinctly: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” It’s all about God and yet I often think it’s about me. Do you do the same? I wonder if we’ve been too proud as a church, taking credit for what God alone has done.

7. Jesus longs to rebuild what is broken.

The emphasis in this passage is not really on the fish; it’s on the fishermen. They needed to be restored and the only way that was going to happen was through spending time with Jesus. Look at John 21:12-13: “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ None of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.” This invitation is similar to the one Jesus gave in John 7:37: “Come to me and drink.” Here Jesus recognizes that they’ve labored all night and are cold and hungry and so he invites them to breakfast. Jesus knew that they needed to have their physical needs met before He could minister to their deeper needs.

It’s as if He is giving them time just to sit and enjoy His presence. As they eat, their failures fade away as Jesus passes around His forgiveness. In this setting, the disciples didn’t have much to say because they were in awe. They had come to the shores of God’s amazing grace and were invited back into fellowship with Him and to restored community with one another. In short, Jesus wanted them to be at peace with Him, and with each other. Go back to verse 2 for a moment. As John tells the story, he lists Peter first and then right after his name, we read about Thomas. Thomas learned the hard way to not live in isolation. From here on, he lives in community with the other disciples.

While we certainly need to wait on the Lord, this passage reminds us that Jesus is waiting on us. He’s on the shore right now and He’s inviting us to sit down with Him and be restored. He wants to rebuild what is broken in our lives. The empty net reminds us that He’s not finished with us yet. Philippians 1:6: “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.”

Because so many of us live with some conflict in our lives, and at times find ourselves disconnected from God and from others, we are going to host a very practical Peacemaker Seminar June 11-12. I urge you to make every effort to attend. We’ll begin taking registrations next Sunday. The Peacemaker Seminar is designed to equip us to resolve conflict in a biblically faithful manner. The principles covered in this seminar have been used to resolve hundreds of actual disputes, ranging from simple personal offenses to family and marital conflicts, church divisions, and business and employment disputes. The training covers topics such as confession, confrontation, forgiveness, and restitution, and uses gripping examples and case stories drawn from everyday life.

The Sign of the Fish

Peter never forgot his fishing failure and the breakfast on the beach, and I hope we won’t either. Have you seen the symbol of a fish on cars? Maybe you even have one. This was actually a sign by which the early Christians identified themselves. The Greek word for fish is *ixthus*. The letters that spell fish are an acrostic that describes who Jesus is – Jesus, Christ, God, Son, and Savior. When meeting another Christ follower, one person would draw an arc in the sand, and a fellow believer would draw another arc to complete the symbol of the fish. Sometimes three fish were drawn together, signifying the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At a time during the Roman Empire when Christianity was illegal and Christians were put to death for practicing their faith, worship had to be held in secret places. A fish painted on the outside door of a house let Christians know that worship would be held inside.

1. Don’t bail when we’re bummed out.
2. We can do nothing apart from Christ.
3. Obedience is always the right thing to do.
4. Blessings are closer than we think.

5. Do whatever it takes to get close to Jesus.
6. Everything we accomplish is by His grace.
7. Jesus longs to rebuild what is broken.

He is Jesus Christ, God, Son and Savior, risen from the dead. And because He's alive today, He can deal with any disappointment you may have. He loves to make Himself known when you are most at a loss. Will you come to Him? Will you respond to His invitation?

I want to end this morning by having us listen to a song by Point of Grace called, "Jesus Will Still Be There." Think of the Savior standing on the shore...just waiting for you.

Things change, plans fail
You look for love on a grander scale
Storms rise, hopes fade
And you place your bets on another day
When the going gets tough
When the ride's too rough
When you're just not sure enough
Jesus will still be there
His love will never change
Sure as the steady rain
Jesus will still be there
When no one else is true
He'll still be loving you
When it looks like you've lost it all
And you haven't got a prayer
Jesus will still be there
Time flies, hearts turn
A little bit wiser from lessons learned
But sometimes, weakness wins
And you lose your foothold once again
When the going gets tough
When the ride's too rough
When you're just not sure enough
When it looks like you've lost it all
And you haven't got a prayer
Jesus will still be there

John 21:15-22

Forgiving The Fallen

Brian Bill on Jul 9, 2004

Shalom, it's Peter again. I talked with many of you last Sunday when I told you about an amazing fishing trip. I

had been doubly disappointed -- first in myself for failing Jesus, and second when we didn't catch any fish. But then Jesus appeared, and after having breakfast on the beach, he asked me three questions.

I was taken aback when Jesus referred to me as "Simon, son of John." While that was my name, I had really liked it when He referred to me as Peter, a piece of the rock. Well, I knew I was anything but a rock at that moment. My heart started racing because I didn't know what Jesus was going to say to me.

In His first question, He wanted to know if I loved Him supremely, above everything else. He even added a curious phrase, "more than these?" At first I thought He might have been referring to the fish on the fire. I certainly loved Him more than I loved food, or at least I thought I did. Then I looked up and saw the boat and my fishing supplies and wondered if He was asking if I loved things more than I loved Him. And then I knew what He was asking. I had made some pretty bold boasts:

I would lay down my life for Him (John 13:37)

Even if everyone else would fall away, I never would (Matthew 26:33)

Even if I had to die, I would never disown Him (Matthew 26:35)

And now, instead of bragging, I was broken. Jesus wanted to know if I loved Him unconditionally and without reservation. Did I still think I was more faithful than the other disciples? There was no way I could agree with that because I knew what was in my heart. I told Him that I was fond of Him. Interestingly, Jesus then told me to feed His little lambs.

I braced myself for the second question: "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me with an unconditional commitment kind of love?" Once again, I deflected the question by telling Jesus that I liked Him a lot. I cared for Him but I was hesitant to promise that I loved Him completely. Amazingly, Jesus still had a job for me to do when He told me to shepherd His sheep.

When Jesus asked the third question, my mind filled with my three-pronged failure. I had grossly overestimated my own abilities. But this time, Jesus used a different word for love. Instead of asking if I loved Him unconditionally, He asked if I had brotherly love for Him. This was unbelievable! He came down to my level, meeting me right where I was. He knew that I was in no position to pledge a love that would never fail. I was both humbled and hurt that He did this. Why couldn't I say I loved Him unconditionally? Because I wasn't sure I did. I'm so thankful that He knows everything about me and still chooses to love me. With His help, I know I can grow in my love for Him. Once again, he gave me a job to do. This time He told me to feed His sheep.

One pastor writes that there are a lot of things that Jesus could have said to Peter. He could have responded to him like we would have. He could have treated him with silence and given the cold shoulder. He could have expressed anger and let Peter suffer. He might have said, "You know, Peter, I normally would have asked you to do this but...I just don't trust you anymore." He could have brought up his failure in every conversation. He could have talked to the other disciples about it: "Remember that night when Peter denied me?" He could have excluded Peter. He could have found subtle and not-so-subtle ways to punish him. And if he ran out of ideas...He could have asked us! (Bruce Goettsche, www.sermoncentral.com). We're pretty tough on people who sin differently than we do, aren't we?

There's a lot we can learn about forgiveness by following the example Jesus set for us when He restored Peter. I see three calls from Christ in John 21:15-22.

1. Love Lavishly
2. Serve Selflessly
3. Follow Faithfully

1. Love Lavishly.

After breakfast is over, Jesus publicly forgives and reinstates Peter. This is for Peter's benefit and also provides some teaching for the other six disciples who are listening to the conversation. As Peter smells the charcoal fire and feels its heat, he is reminded of how he warmed himself next to a fire in a courtyard right before he denied Jesus three times.

It's curious that the questions asked by Jesus have to do with Peter's level of love: "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Simon son of John, do you truly love me? Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Jesus could have asked Peter anything, or did some teaching, or told a parable, but He chose to ascertain His follower's love level. That hearkens back to Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Jesus summarized the entire list of laws in the Old Testament by quoting this verse as the premier commandment (Matthew 22:37).

While this conversation was in Aramaic, John records the meaning of the dialog using the Greek language, which has three different words for love. One term refers to romantic love and is not used here at all, but the other two terms are used. Another word is *agapao*, which is an unconditional kind of love, and was used to describe wholehearted devotion. The NIV brings out this nuance by translating *agapao* as “truly love” in verses 15-16. This is the kind of love that is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 13:7-8: “It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

The other expression is *phileo*, which is the type of fondness that two friends have for each other. It’s often referred to as brotherly love. We might use this word when we say we “like” someone.

In the first and second questions, Jesus uses the word *agapao*: “Peter, is your love unending? Does it persevere? Is it selfless?” In his first enquiry, Jesus wants to know if Peter still believed that his devotion was deeper than the other disciples: “do you love me more than these?” Peter doesn’t even attempt an answer to this part of the question because he knows that he doesn’t even come close to unconditional love.

Peter is honest and uncharacteristically humble in his response when he says that he likes Jesus. He can’t bring himself to say that he truly loves the Lord because he knows that if he loved Him lavishly, he wouldn’t have denied Him. Through his failure, Peter begins to realize that he has a fickle heart. Through his embarrassment, he sees that he had exalted himself over the other disciples. It was his pride that ultimately led to his fall.

David never thought he would commit adultery and murder, Solomon didn’t think he would ever experiment with idolatry, Moses hadn’t planned on killing someone, Jonah didn’t think he’d ever run away, and Peter couldn’t imagine that he would deny his Lord. Friends, we must always be on guard and be vigilant as 1 Corinthians 10:12 reminds us: “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”

Peter has learned to be honest with Christ. While he had affection for Jesus, and he does refer to Him as “Lord” in all three of his responses, he could no longer promise uncompromising devotion. He was just being honest. He wished he could say that he loved Jesus, but he better just say that he liked His Lord. Likewise, we need to be honest in our relationship with Christ. When He asks the third question in verse 17, Jesus is basically saying, “Peter, do you have affection for me? Do you have *phileo* for me?”

This hurt Peter because he could tell Jesus was coming down to his level. This word literally means that he was “distressed.” I’m thinking that the tears that started after his denial, when we read in Matthew 26:75 that he “went outside and wept bitterly,” are now starting to fall down his face again. I’m reminded that repentance is painful and our sins do lead to sorrow as Hebrews 12:11 reminds us: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Even at this lower level of love Peter probably wondered if Jesus thought he even had this kind of affection. Oh, how he wished that he could be a rock once again, but he didn’t think that would ever happen. He does however, appeal to the fact that Jesus knows all things, and maybe He will find some level of devotion still within him.

An aged farmer and his wife were leaning against the edge of their pigpen when the woman wistfully recalled that next week would mark their golden wedding anniversary: “Let’s have a party, Homer and kill a pig.” The farmer scratched his grizzled head and replied: “Gee, Ethel, I don’t see why the pig should take the blame for something that happened fifty years ago.” Honesty about the health of our relationships is important, though I think they would be good candidates for the Peacemaker Seminar June 11-12!

Do you love God lavishly? Are you completely committed to Him? If not, admit it. Put into words where you are right now in your relationship with Christ. When you do, Jesus will meet you there and then bring you to where you need to be.

Erwin Lutzer tells the story about a woman and her husband who came to a pastor for some help in their marriage. The pastor started by addressing the husband, “The Bible says you’re to love your wife as Jesus Christ loves the church.” The man replies, “Oh, I can’t do that.” The pastor then tries a different tack, “If you can’t begin at that level, then begin on a lower level. You’re supposed to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Can you at least love her as you would love a neighbor?” The husband says, “No. That’s still too high a level.” The pastor rubs his chin, takes a deep breath and then says, “The Bible says, love your enemies. Why don’t you begin there?”

Begin where you are today. Jesus says to you and me: “Do you *agape* me?” If you don’t, just say something like, “No, I’m not there yet, but I want to be. I still succumb to sin and fail all the time. I need your help.” Notice that in all three responses, Peter affirms that Jesus “knows.” He knows the worst about us and still loves us! When we’re that honest, Jesus says, “Good, now I can work on restoring our relationship so you can become a devoted disciple. I need you to tell me your level of love for me, and when you do, your love for me will grow.”

Through the repetition of the same question, Jesus is bringing out the depth of Peter’s repentance. What about you? What do you

value most in life? Possessions? People? Your own pride? Is there anything or anyone you are loving more than you love the Lord?

2. Serve Selflessly.

With each of Peter's replies, Jesus gives him a task to do. The Lord is not looking at Peter's past; He is focused on what Peter can do in the future. If the ultimate commandment is to love God with everything we've got, then the second most important instruction is to love people. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 22:39: "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

One way Peter is to demonstrate his fondness for Christ is by loving and caring for people. The main point here is that our love for God will always show itself in love and care for God's people. If we say we love God lavishly, we better prove it by serving selflessly. 1 John 3:17-18: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Friends, simply put, if we do not love God's people, then we don't love God. 1 John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." We can't separate the two. We cannot claim to love the Lord lavishly and at the same time persist in bitterness or gossip. If we say we love God, then we can't continue to think that we're superior to others.

Let's look carefully at the task Peter is given:

"Feed my lambs" (1Jn 21:5). Little lambs need to be fed in order to grow. Peter is reminded that children matter to God. They need to be fed the Word of God as a regular part of their diet if they are to grow up in their salvation. In addition, spiritually speaking, new Christians are referred to as spiritual infants. In spite of Peter's failures, he is called back into service, starting with the young. We were reminded of the importance of ministry to children at the beginning of the service this morning.

"Take care of my sheep" (16). This is the word translated "shepherd" and implies much more than just feeding. A good shepherd makes sure all the needs of His sheep are taken care of and that they are protected.

"Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:17). The Greek word here literally means, "Dear sheep." Peter must not tire of serving those around Him because they matter to God.

These are "doing words," verbs that describe the function of all believers to feed the flock and shepherd the sheep. Unfortunately, we have turned the verbs into nouns as we often refer to the "ministers" or the "pastors" as the ones who are to do this. We're all called to care for one another. We know that Peter learned this lesson because he later wrote these words in 1 Peter 5:2: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care..." Let me make four observations.

These are His sheep and His lambs, not ours. Jesus refers to them as "my" lambs, "my" sheep, and "my" sheep. They belong to Him but He entrusts them to us. We must never forget that everyone has worth and dignity in His sight, from the preborn on up. John 10:27: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

Sheep and lambs are very different with different needs. We must therefore minister accordingly. We've each been given spiritual gifts and abilities that must be used to both protect and perfect the flock. 1 Peter 4:10: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

Our responsibility is to both feed and care. As a church we must make sure all ages have the opportunity to be fed spiritually, and that everyone is connected to a group that can provide caring. And when sheep wander, we must go after them.

Failure doesn't automatically disqualify someone from service. In fact, Jesus links our love for Him with our serving of others. Peter's relationship with Christ was healed and he was recommissioned to ministry. Jesus wanted Peter to know that He still had an assignment for him. He had more confidence in Peter than he had in himself. Peter was probably beating himself up for his failure; Jesus knew that one effective antidote for this self-imposed agony and pity party was for Peter to selflessly serve others. In spite of his failures, he could still be used!

Jesus is telling Peter that just as he was once a weak lamb and a wandering sheep, he is still very dear to Him. And, because he has experienced grace and forgiveness, he must go out and extend that to others.

Are you looking for ways to selflessly serve those around you? In his book, "Everybody's Normal Until You Get to Know Them," John Ortberg tells a story about a young man named John Gilbert. When he was five years old, he was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy, a genetic, progressive and cruel disease. He was told it would eventually destroy all of his muscles.

At one point he was made the representative for Muscular Dystrophy in the state of California. He was flown to Sacramento and honored by the governor. That night he went to a fund-raising auction. When the auction began, one item really caught John's attention: a basketball signed by the players of the Sacramento Kings. John got a little carried away, because when the ball was up for bids, John raised his hand, which his mother immediately pulled back down.

The bidding for the basketball rose to an astounding amount for an item that was not the most valuable on the docket. Eventually, one man named a figure that shocked the room and that no one else could match. The man went to the front and collected his prize. But instead of returning to his seat, he walked across the room and placed it in the thin, small hands of the boy who had admired it so intently. The man placed the ball in hands that would never dribble it down a court, never throw it to a teammate on a fast break, never fire it from three-point range. But those hands would cherish it.

Listen to what John wrote about this event: "It took me a moment to realize what he had done. I remember hearing gasps all over the room, then thunderous applause, and seeing weeping eyes. To this day I'm amazed...Have you ever been given a gift you could never have gotten for yourself? Has anyone ever sacrificed a huge amount for you without getting anything in return except...the joy of giving?"

Ortberg concludes: "It was as simple as this: Somebody noticed. Somebody cared. Somebody acted. Somebody gave" (Pages 197-199). Have you bought a basketball for anyone lately? Have you fed a little lamb? Have you shepherded someone through their sorrow? If you haven't, will you start serving selflessly?

3. Follow Faithfully.

Jn 21:18 is very interesting because it contains a prophecy about how Peter was going to die: "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." The phrase, "I tell you the truth" or "verily, verily" in the King James Version, introduces something very solemn and important. Evidently Peter is middle-aged because Jesus describes a time when he was younger. Peter had a lot of freedom back then but there would be a time in the future when he would be led to where he didn't want to go.

Most commentators believe that the phrase, "you will stretch out your hands" is a reference to crucifixion. Tradition tells us that Peter was in fact crucified, with his hands stretched out on a cross. Verse 19 tells us that in his death Peter would "glorify God." According to historians, Peter was crucified upside down at his own request because he didn't consider himself worthy to be killed in the same way Christ was. As someone has said, "If you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood."

We are to follow no matter what happens. The command, "follow me" in verse 19 is a present imperative, which means "keep on following me." Even knowing how he was going to die, Peter was to follow Christ faithfully. It's interesting that these are the same words Jesus used when calling Peter the first time in Matthew 4:19-20, just up the shore from where they are right now: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him." And now, He speaks these words of life to one who was caught up in his failure. What we can learn from this is that as we follow faithfully, our failures can be left behind. Matthew 16:24: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

- We must follow faithfully no matter whom else follows. We like to focus on what others are doing, don't we? After Jesus revealed some shepherding plans for him, Peter immediately wanted to know what Jesus was going to do about John. I love the answer Jesus gave in John 21:22: "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Our responsibility is to make sure the Lord is #1 in our lives and not to worry too much about other people. The real question has nothing to do with what others are doing. We like to compare, don't we? We see ourselves as a little bit ahead of others and if we sense someone is above us somehow, we like to cut them down to size. Our focus is all wrong. We shouldn't be comparing or contrasting ourselves with others. While we must provide care for people, God will ultimately take care of them. We don't have to play God; He does quite well on His own! Let's remember to not meddle in matters that don't concern us and live out Hebrews 12:2: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith..."

- We must follow what God has already revealed. Jesus had made clear what Peter was to do and yet he wanted more information. We do this as well, don't we? Instead of wanting additional revelation, we need to put in practice what we already know.

We're so much like Peter, aren't we? Here he's been restored and recommissioned, and now he turns around and asks a question about someone else. We're in constant need of forgiveness because we keep on failing as well. Just as Jesus redirected Peter, so he tells us, "What is that to you? You must follow me and keep on following me." Peter eventually got this because he later writes in 1 Peter 2:21: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

I'd like to suggest a few ways that we can put Peter's experience into practice.

1. Maybe you've never responded to Jesus' call to come and follow Him. If not, today's the day to do so as you reach out to Him for salvation. Friends, the church is to be a hospital for the hurting, not a palace for

perfect people.

2. Tell Jesus how much you love Him. Perhaps you're a follower and you've failed like Peter. It's time to talk to speak to the Savior. He wants to know how much you love Him...or how much you don't. Examine your heart and ask the question, "How much love do I have for the Lord?" He can take your old life and give you a new one. Just as He pursued Peter, so He is pursuing you. Come back to Christ right now.

3. Some of you are ready to recommit yourself to serve selflessly. Decide this week how you will put others first. Call someone. Give someone a ride. Come alongside a summer missionary. Jesus not only forgives, He also restores us to ministry.

4. Determine to follow Jesus faithfully. Will you do so right now, no matter what happens, no matter what others do, and without any more information?

I'm going to invite the band back up as we sing the song, "Lord I give you my Heart."

I invite you to respond however the Holy Spirit prompts you. Maybe you need to kneel. Maybe you need to stand. Perhaps you need to walk down front to indicate that you are ready to "walk in His steps."

Breakfast on the beach with Jesus was a turning point for Peter. Make today a turning point as you love lavishly, serve selflessly and follow faithfully.