



SECRET CHURCH

THE GOSPEL, POSSESSIONS, AND PROSPERITY

The goal tonight is not to go off on preachers who are advocating a so-called prosperity gospel around the world, or to degrade professing Christians who are buying into a so-called prosperity gospel around the world. The goal tonight is to confront the idolatry of possessions and the pursuit of prosperity that is deep within every single one of our hearts. We could talk all night about this prosperity theology as if it was outside of us, but it is not. It is inside of us. It is inside of me.

We all have blind spots, points in our life where our vision is obscured. We can't see them. We rely on others to point them out, but even when people point them out, we still don't want to see them. I think about blind spots in American Christian history, like slavery. What a glaring blind spot. How could professing Christians preaching the Bible and worshipping week in and week out have men and women outside their homes like they were property to be used? It's just frightening when you think about it. Study the Bible, regular worship, church attendance; these things do not prevent blindness in us. There is something in us that chooses to ignore certain things.

The World Around Us ...

So, before we dive in tonight...it's in your notes...I want to share with you very honestly about a blind spot in my life that God has been revealing over the last year or two. It all started with uncovering the facts about the world around us. The reality of lostness: 6.8 billion people in the world. So, there are over 6.8 billion people in the world, and the most liberal estimate puts the world at about one-third Christian. That's people, who in many contexts, claim to be Christian with more of a social or political identification as Christians.

So, even if we assumed all of those people were actually followers of Christ, that still leaves over 4.5 billion people in the world today, at this moment, on a road that leads to eternal hell. Over 4.5 billion people. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says, if nothing changes, that 4.5 billion people, *"Will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."* They will be, Revelation 20:15, *"thrown into the lake of fire."* 4.5 billion people.

There are people groups in the world totaling 16,351. 16,351 represent that 6.8 billion people. People groups in the world that still haven't even heard the gospel that saves them from that hell; 6,645 people groups; ethnolinguistic groups that still haven't heard. They're unreached with the gospel, and Jesus said, "Make disciples among all the people groups." Every people group is going to be represented around the throne, Revelation 7. So, that's the reality of lostness.

The reality of poverty. Today, over one billion people live and die in desperate poverty and live on less than a dollar a day. Just to give you a little glimpse: that's 700 million in slums, 500 million on the verge of starvation, 93 million beggars, 200 million children exploited for labor.

We say poverty, desperate poverty, but what is poverty? What does that represent? Lack of food and water. Over a billion people on the planet today who do not have access to safe drinking water. Illiteracy: huge illiteracy rates in places like India and Africa. Inadequate medical care, disease. You've got a disease like AIDS, and there are 6,000 people who die every day in Africa of AIDS alone. Then, you've got easily curable disease and sickness. There are millions of people this year who will die of diarrhea. They will die from it. Brain damage. It's one of the most devastating pictures of poverty in the world, permanent brain damage. Most of your brain development, 80 percent of it happens in the first two years of your life, and if that is not provided for with enough protein and nutrients, then your brain is deformed for the rest of your life.

Over a billion people in desperate poverty. Close to two billion others living on less than \$2 a day. That's close to half the world living on what you and I would pay for french fries for lunch. It gets worse. According to UNICEF, 26,000 children will die today due to either starvation or preventable disease, a disease like diarrhea or pneumonia or malaria, 26,000. I mean, think about that. 26,000 Joshua's and Caleb's, our two sons. If this were true in our community, then every child 18 years or younger in our county would be dead within a few days.

Here is the blind spot that God is uncovering in my life. I...we are not inconvenienced by this extreme poverty because those stricken by it are not only poor, they are powerless; literally, millions of them dying quietly in relative obscurity. Here is the danger: we can comfortably ignore them in our affluence and pretend like they don't even exist. This was the scary thing for me. I can lead in a church and my life, my family, and I can be successful in the church, in our church culture, and all the while, turn a deaf ear to the unreached and starving. I can lead in a church and be successful in a church, but here was the question: Can I believe the gospel and turn a deaf ear to those who are unreached and starving? The answer to that question is absolutely not. It is impossible to truly believe in the gospel of Christ and turn a deaf ear to those who've never heard of Him or those who are starving outside our doorstep.

It's what James 2 is all about. Gospel, faith, works. Particularly, when you consider the reality of wealth, according to the World Bank - follow this - incoming: low income people in the world, percentage of people in the world that make \$825 or less a year, 37 percent. \$825 a year or less, 37 percent. Next, lower middle income, up to \$3,000 plus, 38 percent. So, that's about 5 billion people right there living on less than \$3,000 a year. Now, you're in the upper middle class of the world, up to about \$10,000, and that's 9 percent. Then, the highest incomes in the world, \$10,000 or more, 16 percent.

It's interesting, if you just kind of get in your mind maybe your salary. If you keep taking the salary higher, you make \$25,000 a year, you're in the top ten percent of the world's wealthiest people. You make \$50,000 a year, you're in the top 1 percent of the world's wealthiest people. \$50,000 a year. The average annual American Christian household income, \$42,409. \$42,409. That is in the top two and a half percent of the richest people in the world.

Now, I know that there are a lot of college students who come to Secret Church, and you don't, like, feel rich. Ramen noodles don't give you that particular feeling, and I feel your pain. I know that we are in difficult economic times and there are people in this room who probably have lost jobs and have been through difficult times economically, and you don't feel rich, but the reality is if you have clean water and food and shelter and adequate medical care and a means of transportation, even if it's public, then you are incredibly wealthy.

This is important, because tonight when we see the Scripture talking about the rich, one of the greatest temptations will be, in our minds, a trigger to go off, and we'll think of them as the rich. We'll think of that guy who lives in a bigger house than we do, has all the stuff, and what I want us to see from the very beginning is that we are them. All of us. We are them. We, in our culture, are a rich aristocracy surrounded by billions of poor neighbors. That's the reality of the world.

So, that's incoming. Look at outgoing. North American Christians give an average of 2.5 percent of their income to the church. I think that's probably generous, but that's the stat. There's a place at the end where I show where all these stats come from, but even if that's true - follow with me - North American churches give an average of 2 percent of those funds to missions overseas. 2.5 percent of the income to the church, 2 percent of those funds to missions overseas, and when you do the math, and I checked this about ten times because I wanted to make sure. I couldn't believe that this was what this meant. For every \$100 a North American Christian makes, we give five cents to missions overseas. Five cents out of \$100.

What are we spending our money on? "Today Christians spend more money on dog food than missions," Leonard Ravenhill said. My goal is not to spend \$40 billion every year on pets and \$60 billion every year on weight loss programs and \$10 billion every year on church buildings. This quote here from Blomberg is a little outdated because it's from the early 90's, but I couldn't find one like it. It's so poignant. You know that this is only worse now.

In the early 1990s, Americans spent annually twice as much on cut flowers as on overseas Protestant ministries, twice as much on women's sheer hosiery, one and a half times as much on video games, one and a half times as much on pinball machines, slightly more on the lawn industry, about five times as much on pets, one and a half times as much on skin care, almost one and a half times as much on chewing gum, almost three times as much on swimming pools and accessories, approximately seven times as much on sweets, seventeen times as much on diets and diet-related products, twenty times as much on sports activities, approximately 26 times as much on soft drinks, and a staggering 140 times as much on legalized gambling activities.

Is this not astounding? What are we doing? This is not a problem with American church and American Christians. This is a problem with our hearts. I wonder if 100 years from now - if something doesn't change - I wonder if 100 years from now Christians will look back on you and I and our culture and ask the question, "How could they live in such affluence while so many had no food or water. How could they go after bigger houses and nicer cars when their brothers and sisters were starving?"

The Bible is not silent on this, and that's where I want to point us tonight. You see where the statistics are from, but I want to leave statistics behind. I wanted to set the stage for the realities in the world. Some people say that you shouldn't use statistics because they make people feel guilty. Well, what if we're guilty? So, if you have been offended, I hope so, but statistics don't change us. Scripture changes us. So, I want us to see the reality of the world and see Scripture in light of the reality of the world, but it's Scripture that's going to change us.

The Word Before Us ...

So, the Word before us. What we're going to do is dive into just about every passage there is in the Bible. So, we're going to fly through every one, as best as I can - every passage

that addresses possessions in Scripture - and we're going to see those. I want to be clear from the very beginning; I'm a pastor, not an economist. I'm not here to offer financial counsel for you when it comes to whole or term life insurance, or what to do about this or that area.

Our culture, even our Christian culture today, is filled with all kinds of books on financial stuff. It's everywhere. It's not that those books are bad, but here's the deal. If we're not careful, we'll go running to those books for answers, and we'll go running right past this book. Now, this book won't talk about whole or term life insurance or what kind of investment portfolio you should have, it won't talk about those things, because this book will talk about things far deeper than that, that affect those things. I wonder if, in our culture, we're running to those other books because we want to avoid the realities that are expressed in this book.

So, I want us to dive into this book and see. I want to stay as close as I can to this book. Tozer said, "Listen to no man who has not listened to God." My prayer is that tonight the Holy Spirit would communicate through this Word. I'm in no way claiming that everything I say is from God. That is divine inspiration. That's one of the things we'll see, and some prosperity preachers just claim this special inspiration for interpretation of Scripture. It's totally bogus. Guess I showed my cards on that one, but my challenge for you is to take everything that I talk about, any conclusions that I come to and match them up against the Word of God, and if they match up with the Word of God, then that is authoritative for your life. If they do not, then throw it out.

Just know that God's Word on money is true. It's true; it's all breathed out by God. It's true. That's why one of the reasons we're not going to focus on all those other periphery questions is because the reality is most Christians in history and most Christians in the world today aren't worried about investment portfolios or a lot of the questions we have when it comes to finances. They live in cultures where that's not quite the same reality that it is here.

This Word, though, speaks across cultures and gives truth upon which to make those kinds of decisions across cultures. It's true; God's Word on money is thorough. Over 2,300 verses. That might surprise us. Sometimes I think we think that the Bible is a book about spiritual things, and Fortune Magazine is a book about financial things, and so I'm going to go to Fortune Magazine or the like for financial advice, and I'll go to the Bible for spiritual advice. The reality is the Bible talks more on money than on faith and prayer, more than on heaven and hell combined. Why did God choose to say more about how we're to view money and possessions than heaven and hell? What does God know about money and possessions that we don't?

It's true, it's thorough, and God's Word on money is clear. Randy Alcorn says,

My interactions with people as a pastor, teacher, counselor, and researcher - as well as my observation of my own tendencies - have convinced me that in the Christian community today there is more blindness, rationalization, unclear thinking about money than anything else.

It's not because the Bible's not clear. Yes, it's sometimes difficult to wade through and apply, but it's clear. It's all over, 2,300 verses. There's not one of us in this room who's going to be able to stand before God one day and Him ask us to give an account for the way we spend our money and resources without saying to Him, "Well, I wish you'd given me

more information on that." He has spoken. Maybe the problem is not the Bible is unclear on money. Maybe the problem is that the Bible is too clear on money. It's clear.

At the same time, it's complex. Clear doesn't necessarily mean easy, and we're going to work through different things that we've got to hold in tension, that the Bible is not contradicting itself on, but we've got to see them both side by side.

I put an example here. In Luke 12:33, Jesus said, "*Sell your possessions, and give to the needy.*" Hebrews 13:2, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,*" which is basically invite strangers into your home. Well, if you sold your home, you've got no home to invite them to stay in, so do we have a home or not? That's a valid question. So, it's complex. It's not that those are contradicting; we've just got to put all these things next to each other and then see what is Scripture saying.

God's Word on money is redundant at times. We're going to see some truths repeated over and over and over again, and I thought about just kind of skipping over those ones that we've already seen as we're walking through Scripture, but if they're repeated in Scripture, they're probably repeated for a reason. So, we're going to see those repeated. Redundant at times, shocking at other times, and there are some things included in this book that would cause financial planners, even wonderful Christian financial planners to say, "I'm not sure about that." I mean, Jesus commends a widow who gives everything she has, her last penny, and He says, "That is wise." Then, He talks about a rich man who's storing up savings, and He says, "That is very unwise." This is challenging.

God's Word is going to confront us. The reality is if the Bible were written today and included what it says about money and possessions, there's no way you could get this thing published. This book would be a hard sell. Nobody would buy it. It confronts. It pierces. It commits the unpardonable sin in our day. It makes us feel guilty. What if we don't need to be comforted in our sin? What if we need to be confronted in it?

God's Word will confront us, and it will, at the same time, comfort us. Psalm 19 says, "*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. It makes wise the simple. It rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes. It endures forever.*" It's good. There's great reward in the Word of God. So, it will comfort us.

God's Word will comfort us, God's Word will free us. Sometimes we think - when it comes to money - we think, "I would just rather not deal with these issues in my life." The reality is, if that were so, you should not have come to Secret Church, because we're going to deal with these things, and we think, "I'm just content with the way I'm living now. I don't want to make radical changes." I would ask you, are you really content? Is it really possible for a follower of Christ to be content without hearing the Word of the Father to you and responding to it in obedience? I would say we won't be content until we see what the Word says and live it out. This Word will free us, like Psalm 119 talks about.

God's Word will guide us. This journey will not necessarily be easy. I like what Philip Yancey said. He said,

I feel pulled in opposite directions over the money issue. Sometimes I want to sell all that I own, join a Christian commune and live out my days in intentional poverty. At other times, I want to rid myself of guilt and enjoy the fruits of our nations' prosperity. Mostly, I wish I did not have to think about money at all. But I must somehow come to terms with the Bible's very strong statements about money.

The journey will not be easy, but it will most definitely be worth it.

The Question ...

So, here's the question for us. Are we willing to hear the Word even if it convicts us? Are we willing to hear it? Part of the point tonight is that we want to acquire biblical information. We want to hear what God has to say, but that's not the only point. The second question: are we willing to obey the Word even if it costs us? Are we willing to obey the Word even if it costs us? Are we willing to obey the Word even if it goes against everything our culture says? Are we willing to obey the Word even if it goes against everything our affluent religious neighbors say?

This is an important question. The goal tonight is not to look at the Word and then decide whether or not we want to obey it. Not an option for a follower of Christ. A follower of Christ goes into tonight and says, "I want to hear what the Word of God says, and I will obey it. By His grace and the power that He provides, I will obey it." We're willing to obey it even if it costs us. We want to experience spiritual transformation.

I want to give the reminder that I give every Secret Church. This is not just about a Bible study. It's about you and I receiving God's Word, but we're being transformed by God's Word and walking out of this place, in a few hours, understanding what God's Word says about money and possessions, processing that, and being transformed by it, with a commitment to obey it and to go into the nations with the good news of a God who is far superior to all the stuff this world has to offer. Lives that will show that and lips that will proclaim that.

I picked this topic because it's huge. It's huge for us in a world of prosperity surrounded by a world of poverty. We need to see these things. I've picked this topic because this prosperity theology is a theology that is being exported for American Christians and American churches all over the world and is deceiving people all over the world and damaging the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth, because in the end, it is no gospel at all. Taking the pure gospel and replacing it with an idolatry of possessions and pursuit of worldly prosperity. That is damning souls here in materialistic America, and it's exported to damn souls in other places.

The Plan ...

So, we need to address this. We're going to look at the gospel, because we've got to see everything in light of the gospel. Then, we're going to look at the gospel and possessions. We're going to walk through the Old Testament, Jesus, New Testament people of God, and then after we go through all these passages, we're going to come to the conclusions. 18 different conclusions that we're going to get to. I hope at least, in some way, to sum up what the Bible teaches about the gospel and possessions. Then, applications. These ten different applications that we're going to talk about, and then we will close with the gospel and prosperity.

The Gospel

OK. I hope you have your Bible with you. We're not going to turn to all these passages, but there will be a few that we do turn to. The gospel. We're starting here because the gospel transforms everything. There are some things along the way that we're going to talk about that, if we're not clear on the gospel, will get really, really confused. So, I want to make sure we're on the same page.

Romans 3:21-26. Memorize that paragraph in Scripture. One of the most beautiful, one of the most important, profound paragraphs in Scripture. I put under that a definition that, if you were to ask me to summarize the gospel, this is what I'd say. The gospel is the good news, the just and gracious God of the universe has looked upon hopelessly sinful people and sent His Son, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, to bear His wrath against sin on the cross and then show His power over sin in the resurrection so that all who have faith in Him will be reconciled to God forever.

Five Threads of the Gospel

Now, what I want us to think about are five different threads of the gospel. You've got them listed there, and we're going to unpack each one of these. We're going to fly through this because I want us to get to the possessions, but we've got to see this first.

The Character of God

First, the character of God. The gospel starts with the glory of God. Second, the sinfulness of man. Sufficiency of Christ, third. God, man, Christ, then, the necessity of faith. That's how we respond to the gospel, and then the urgency of eternity. The character of God, sinfulness of man, sufficiency of Christ, necessity of faith, and urgency of eternity. So, I want us to think about all five of those threads, and this is important, because when we get to those conclusions, those 18 conclusions about money and possessions, we're going to look at them through the lens of these five threads of the gospel.

The character of God. A few things about God, amidst all of His attributes, that are foundational for understanding the gospel. He is our Creator. Genesis 1:1, Isaiah 40. He is "*the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.*" The fact that He's our creator means that we belong to Him. He owns us. That's huge. We are not our own. We belong to another. The one who created us has authority over us. We are not masters of our own fate or captains of our own soul. We belong to another. He's our creator.

Second, He's our Judge. Psalm 7, Isaiah 5. This means that we are accountable to Him. This is a stark reality of the gospel. Every single person here will one day stand before God to be judged, and He will be just. He will render to each person, Romans 2:6, according to His works. Now, we're going to talk about what that means, but this is an important reality.

He is our Judge, our Creator and our Savior. Praise God, He is not a judge who is indifferent to our needs. He loves us. We belong to Him, we're accountable to Him and we need Him. We need Him in every second. We need our God for every breath we breathe. He is loving toward us. We are not a self-sustaining people. We are a God-sustained people. Just Creator and loving Creator, the character of God.

The Sinfulness of Man

Second thread, the sinfulness of man. We've got who God is, now who we are. We are morally evil. Now, that doesn't sit well with us initially. You say, "Well, you have sinned before, or you've done some wrong things. OK, yeah. You're evil? That seems to take it a little too far," but that's how far the Bible takes it. Genesis 8:21, "*The intention of a man's heart is evil from his youth.*" Luke 11, Jesus practically assumes that we know we're evil. We're born with an evil, God-hating heart. People say, "Well, I've always loved God." No, you haven't. You may have loved a god you created in your own mind, but the one true God you have hated.

The Bible says we are morally evil, and we are spiritually sick. "We need a doctor," Jesus said. At the core of our being, we have a malignant spiritual disease that far outweighs any cancer or physical sickness that we will ever experience. Morally evil, spiritually sick. We are

slaves to sin, slaves to sin. We are not free to live however we want to. We're slaves to ourselves and slaves to sin. John 8, Romans 6. We're in "*the snare of the devil*," 2 Timothy 2 says. Morally evil, spiritually sick, slaves to sin and blinded to truth. Our eyes are blinded, 2 Corinthians 4:4 says. We don't accept the things of God. We're darkened in our own understanding, blinded to truth. We are children of wrath. How is this for the power of positive thinking? "*Children of wrath*," Ephesians 2:3 says. Enemies of God, James 4, Romans 5. Ultimately, we are spiritually dead. Dead in trespasses and sins. Dead through sin, Romans 5. "Dead," Ephesians 5 says. "*The wages of sin is death*." (Romans 6:23)

Now, let those soak in. Like, look at those. Morally evil, spiritually sick, slaves of sin, blinded of truth, children of wrath, spiritually dead. That is hopeless. Can those whose every inclination is evil choose good? If you are sick, can you make yourself well? If you're a slave, can you set yourself free? If you are blind, can you give yourself sight? If you're an object of wrath, can you appease that wrath? If you are dead, how many of us decided, "OK, I'm ready to come to life?"

The glaring reality of the gospel is that apart from divine intervention, apart from the work of the Spirit of God, we are helpless and hopeless to do anything about our spiritual condition on our own. That's huge. It's huge because we dumb this down at every turn with the gospel in our culture. We live in a land of self-improvement, and we say, "Well, the problem is you've done some wrong things in your life, but the beauty is God has a plan for your life. So, a few easy steps...pray this prayer, say these words...and you're in." It makes sense. We live in a land of self-improvement, where a dose of church attendance followed by a prayer, a pretty good moral, decent life, seems to overcome our sinfulness. The reality is we cannot manufacture salvation, and we cannot program it. We cannot even initiate it. We need God to do this in us.

The Sufficiency of Christ

Now, we're getting to the beauty of the gospel, the sufficiency of Christ, because He has done it. In Christ, His life displayed the righteousness of God. We were slaves to sin, so we needed someone who was not a slave to sin, who conquered sin with their life. That's what 1 Peter 2, Hebrews 4, and John 8 all say. Fully man, fully God. He obeys the law perfectly. No deceit. John 8, He says, "*Convict me. Show me where I have sinned*." His life displayed the righteousness of God.

His death satisfied the wrath of God. Romans 3:25, "*God put him forward as a propitiation by his blood*." That's a great word. Isn't that a great word? It means one who would turn aside wrath. The wrath due your sin and my sin from a holy God. His holy and good wrath, and His wrath is good. We don't think of wrath as good, but it is a really good thing that God hates that which destroys us. He poured out all of His holy wrath, due your sin and my sin, upon His Son, and His Son turned aside His wrath from us. In my place, condemned He stood, and God "*made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God*." (2 Corinthians 5:21) That's propitiation. That's really good.

His death satisfied the wrath of God, and His resurrection demonstrated the power of God. God vindicated the work of Christ and the cross for our sins by raising Him from the grave. I love the end of Colossians 2:9-15: "*He set it aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him*." The character of God. Holy, just, Creator and Savior. Sinfulness of man, dead objects of wrath, morally evil, sick. Christ comes. His life displays His righteousness, His death satisfies God's wrath, and His resurrection demonstrates God's power.

The Necessity of Faith

So, how does this become a reality in our lives? The necessity of faith. Now, follow with me here. What we've just talked about, Christ is the basis of our salvation. Ladies and gentlemen, Jesus has done the work. Jesus has conquered sin. He has purchased righteousness for you and me, and what that means is there is no work for you to do. None. Jesus has done it all. His work is the basis of our salvation. That's what Ephesians 2:4-7 is all about.

If I were to ask you tonight, "How do you know that you are righteous before God," what would your response be? If we were one-on-one, "How do you know that you are righteous before God?" If the first words that come out of your mouth are, "Because I," then I want to encourage you to be cautious, because the only way to be made righteous before God is because Christ did what He did. It's only in looking to what He did. He is the only basis. It's not what I did, this or that. Christ is the basis of our justification before God.

So, Christ is the basis. Now, how does that become a reality for us? Faith is the means of our salvation. Faith is the anti-work. We are justified, Galatians 2:15-16 says, "*not by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.*" Faith, trust, surrender, realization. There's nothing you can do but trust in what has been done for you.

Now, I want us to unpack this a bit, because this is where it's going to get a little bit complex when we see different things in Scripture. By initial faith in Christ, we are made right before God the Father. Romans 5:1, "*We have been justified by faith.*" We were enemies of God, and we were reconciled to God by faith, Romans 5 says. So, that's what happens. Justification, made right before God the Father by faith in Christ. We experienced a new birth. You remember Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3? Jesus says to him, "*Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" You must be born again.

So, what happens when we're born again? Well, first, God opens our eyes. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. You remember the whole context behind this facet? Nicodemus is a good man. He's a religious leader. He is radically devoted to the Word. He has taught others the Word, but his realization needs to come that he is dead and he needs life, and he's never been born spiritually with all that he's done. God help us to see this. No matter what we have done, we are still dead. You can't make yourself be born.

God has to open your eyes to this, and then God has to change our heart. He said, "You must be born of water and of spirit." You need a radical change that happens inside of you. Salvation - don't miss this - does not happen from the outside in. Salvation happens from the inside out. God changes our heart. It's what Titus 3 talks about. It talks about washing our hearts. 1 Peter 1:23, "*You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.*" God's Word does this. The whole background behind John 3 is Ezekiel 36, where the Bible, God talks to the prophet Ezekiel about water and spirit. I want to remind you what the reference is there.

What happens when God changes our heart? First, He cleanses us. Ezekiel 36, the background here in the Old Testament, "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*" That's what happens when we're born again. God changes our heart. He cleanses us of our sin, washes us by the power of His Word, but that's not all. Water and what? Spirit. Born of water and spirit. He cleanses us, and second, He indwells us, indwells us. "*I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you...remove your heart of stone...give you a heart of flesh...put my Spirit within you...cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey*"

my rules." So, God puts His Spirit inside of us, and that's what we need. We don't just need cleansing. This is what we oftentimes think of when we think of the gospel and salvation. We think, "Well, I've been cleansed from my sin. Now, I'm going to go live however I want to." It's not the gospel. You can't be cleansed from your sin, and then just go live however you want to. You're cleansed from your sin, and you're indwelt by the Spirit of God, and that means you live how He wants you to now.

Everything in your life is different. This is huge. You see all these Barna studies about what born again Christians do. In order to be classified as a born again Christian in those studies, all you have to do is say that you've made a significant faith commitment to Jesus Christ. You've got to say that. Most every drunk person I've ever met on the street says that. Oh, and the second thing is you've got to believe that you're going to heaven. So, they go on and they talk about how born again Christians live just like the world, born again Christians do this just like the world and do this just like the world, and they've got the stats to show it, but the reality is, their stats may be right, but their conclusions are totally wrong. If people are living just like the world, then that's not showing us that born again Christians look just like the world. It's showing us that there are some people who think they're born again that are totally not. They might have done this or that, but they've not been cleansed and changed from the inside out.

That's a hugely important question for every single one of us in this room. Has God changed your heart? An eternally important question: has God changed your heart? Not did you walk the aisle or did you do the deal? Has your heart been cleansed and indwelt by the Spirit of God? He opens our eyes to our need for Him. He changes our hearts. He enables our belief. Second half of that story in John 3:11-21, belief is mentioned over and over again, seven different times. God enables our belief, and this is key, a phrase that's intentional here. God enables our belief.

Now, this is something, obviously, we do. We believe. Nobody else can do this for us. We're responsible to God for this. Our eternal destiny hinges on belief, but I want us to see that belief is still something that happens by the grace of God. Look at what Scripture says. John 6, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Acts 11, you see people coming to Christ. "When they heard these things, they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance.'" "When they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." (Acts 14:27) Who opened the door of faith? God did. Acts 15, "He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith." Acts 16, "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia...a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." Lydia is selling purple goods. The Lord opened her heart.

Now, this can be confusing. We say, "Well, what do I do? What does God do in salvation?" Here's the reality. Faith is our act. We believe, but faith is only possible because of God's act. You say, "Well, how does that happen?" Well, we've talked about that before, and the answer is it's a mystery, but it's beautiful. Our salvation is not dependent on our works. It's totally dependent on His grace. That's the whole point.

Look at the New Testament. You'll see what belief involves. What is belief? By His grace, we turn from our sin and ourselves. We repent. That's the first Christian invitation. Next chapter, next three, we repent. We turn from sin and self, and by His grace, we trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. He saved us from our sins, and He reigns as Lord over our lives. "Lord" is the dominant term we see used with Jesus in Acts and in Romans. Interestingly,

we don't see in Scripture anyone talking about accepting Jesus as our personal Savior. Instead, we see people confessing Jesus as Lord and King, who reigns over us.

Put all that together. Christ is the basis of our salvation. Faith is the means of our salvation. That gives us radical confidence. Our salvation is certain. Isn't that good news? It's not based on how well we do tomorrow or the next week or the next year. It's based on His grace, what has been done for us. He has forgiven us; put His Spirit inside of us. Ephesians 1 and 1 John 5 say we have confidence before God.

So, by initial faith in Christ, we're made right before the Father. We're born again. Then, obviously, that's not where this whole thing stops. Second, by continual faith in Christ, we now walk with God as our friend. We walk with God as our friend. People might claim to be right before God the Father, but if they're not walking with God as a friend, then there's a question about whether or not they're right before God the Father.

Follow with me here. This is where it can get really confusing. We experience a new birth in salvation. We also experience a new life. Galatians 2, "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by,*" what? "*Faith.*" So, we're saved by faith, and then we live out our salvation by what? Faith. Our whole life is by faith.

We walk, we live by faith, and what that results in is radical obedience, radical obedience. Here's the deal. When you're right before God the Father, and you're walking with God as a friend, then you never have to fear His commands. When you're right before God the Father, and you know and walk with God as a friend, then you never have to be afraid of His commands. You're free to do whatever He says, because you know He's good. He's good enough to save you and provide for you as Father and friend.

So, the basis for our salvation: Christ. Means of our salvation: faith. Works are the evidence of our salvation. Works are the evidence of our salvation. Now, we need to run, run, run from a works righteousness that thinks our works make us right before God, but that does not mean that works are totally disconnected in the holistic picture of salvation. This is where I want you to follow with me here. They are not the basis of our salvation, and they are not the means, but they are the evidence. Listen to James 2, "*Faith, if it does not have works, is dead,*" he says in the middle there, around verse 16. "*But someone will say, 'You have faith, I have works. Show me your faith apart from works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'*" Faith has works.

What's James saying here? Two things. Number one: he's saying that faith creates works. Faith creates works. He uses Abraham as an example here. Think about Abraham. In Genesis 15, God promised Abraham that he was going to have a son. He was going to have descendants, and Genesis 15 says, "*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*" That really even goes back to Genesis 12, when he believed God and he began to follow God where He was leading him, but it says in Genesis 15, "*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*"

Now, you get to Genesis 22 and Abraham, in obedience to God, takes his son up on a mountain and is about to sacrifice his one and only son. When did Abraham have faith? When did he receive faith, put his faith in God? Genesis 12, Genesis 15, and the effect of faith was radical obedience – works. Faith creates works. That's where we see it. Even in Philippians 2, Paul, who's always going off on works, says we need to work out our own salvation.

So, how are we supposed to think about works? Well, faith creates works, but not works fueled by the flesh. That's often how Paul talks about works. Works that we do in order to earn our way to God. That's what he's talking about all throughout the book of Galatians. Over and over again, Paul is saying, "No, no, no, no. That leads to a life of legalism," thinking that our works earn us favor before God. We've got to be on danger, cautioning against that at every turn. That brings no glory to God. Exalts man, and what we can supposedly do get to God.

So, when we say faith creates works, we're not talking about works that are fueled by the flesh, a life of legalism that exalts man instead of God. Instead, we're talking about works that are the fruit of faith. Works that are grounded in the result of faith in God. That's how James talks about works and how Paul talks about some, but he talks about a life of love. Even Paul says what matters is "*faith working through love*," Galatians 5:6. This is the beauty of works that are created by faith.

Follow this. As we trust God wholeheartedly, we abide in Him, John 15. As we trust Him, we obey Him, and the fruit of trust in God is obedience to God. Did you see that? The fruit of trust in God is obedience to God, and as a result, this brings great glory to God. So, in this way, works are really, really, really good. Works, not fueled by the flesh in order to earn favor before God, but works that are the fruit of faith, fruit of trusting in God.

Works create faith, and then works complete faith. James says at the end in James 2:26, "*Abraham's faith was made complete by what he did*." So, our faith is completed in our works. It comes to its full fruition in our works, and when that happens, God glorifies Himself in salvation that is free. It's all based on Him. I love John 3. Whatever he does, "*whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God*."

God glorifies Himself in salvation that is free, and God glorifies Himself in lives that are full. Salvation that's free; lives that are full. We've got to fight this idea that you can be saved or born again and your life look exactly the same. That's not the point. It blasphemes God. He radically changes our lives, and faith in Him produces fruit in our lives. That's why Jesus says, "You will see deeds in my people, and their deeds will glorify my Father in heaven."

So, two summary statements. I want to make sure we're on the same page. Number one: the basis, the means and the evidence of our salvation are only possible by the grace of God. It's all by grace. It's all by grace. Augustine said, "God gives what He demands." So, it's like with our sons, for my birthday, if I were to give my sons money to give me a present. Did they really give me a present? Yes, and not really. I probably could have found something better with my money, but the reality is what they gave was made possible only by what I gave to them. Now, this is not a perfect illustration, don't take it to its full end, but the reality is everything we give to God is that which we have received from God in the first place. It's all grace.

So, any works - that's why in 1 Corinthians 15, I love this - Paul says, "*I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*."

Here's what I picture. I picture Paul, he gets up in the morning, and he says, "I need grace today." So, all day long he works. He works hard, and he gets to the end of a day, and he says, "It was all grace, and by grace, I'll get up in the morning and do it again." It's all

grace and work. So, works are good here. We don't need to run away from works. Works are good when they're produced by faith.

I love this quote from Ian Thomas:

Beware lest even as a Christian, you fall into Satan's trap! You may have found and come to know God in the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving Him sincerely as your Redeemer, yet if you do not enter into the mystery of godliness and allow God to be in you the origin of His own image, you will seek...

Listen to this...

...to be godly by submitting yourself to external rules and regulations and by conforming to behavior patterns imposed upon you by the particular Christian society that you have chosen and in which you hope to be found 'acceptable.' You will in this way perpetuate the pagan habit of practicing religion in the energy of the flesh, and in the very pursuit of righteousness commit idolatry in honoring 'Christianity' more than Christ!

I wish I wrote that. That's really good. Do you see this? This is huge. Why is this so important? Because when we talk tonight about what we need to do with our possessions, we need to realize it's only by God's grace that we can do those things, and in doing these things, we're not earning favor before God. In doing these things, we are acting out trust and faith in God. It's all by grace.

Second summary statement. This one's big too. The basis, means and evidence of our salvation are all ultimately involved in judgment before God, in judgment before God. Now, stay with me here. You stand before God in heaven. To use that age old question, "Why should you be allowed into heaven?" Your answer is, "Because Christ has paid the price for my sins, turned aside the wrath due me and risen with power over sins. The only basis I have to come in is Him. I trust Him. I cling to nothing in my life. There's nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to the cross I cling." Basis means - and in the background is a life that absolutely confirms that was a reality. Now, this background is not the basis by which I'm let into heaven. Absolutely not. That's Christ. It's not why I did this and this and this and this. No, it's faith, and there's fruit of that faith, like James talks about and shows this was not some dead faith. This is real faith.

Now, these words that we see in Scripture, Matthew 24:13, "*One who endures to the end will be saved.*" Does that mean we have to work for our salvation? No. It means faith endures. Judgment, according to our works, Romans 2. 1 Timothy 4, "*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by doing so you will save yourself and your hearers.*" You will save yourself. What does that mean? Repentance produces deeds, Acts 26. This passage is appropriate for what we're talking about: Matthew 25, when Jesus says, "Because you did not feed the hungry and the sick, you will be thrown into eternal punishment." That's not saying because you did not do this and this and this and this. It's because you did not trust in Christ. This is key. The basis is Christ, faith is the means, works are the evidence.

The Urgency of Eternity

That leads us to our final thread of the gospel. That's huge, urgency of eternity, and this is simple. Heaven is a glorious reality for those who trust in Christ. "*Whoever believes in him will never perish, but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16) "*Our citizenship is in heaven.*" (Philippians 3:20-21) On the other hand, hell is a dreadful reality for those who die without

Christ, and it's at this point that I want to pause for just a second before we go any further. I want to ask you the question...I wish I could ask this one-on-one to every single person here...but just speaking to you, not the person beside you, in front of you, behind you, has God given you a new heart? Have you been born again? Have you looked to Christ and Christ alone as the basis of your salvation? Have you thrown aside all your religious attempts to earn favor before Him? Have you trusted in Him alone?

If you've not done that, then I want to urge you, Christ is good. He's paid the price for your sins, and you are free from your efforts to try to earn your way to the God of the universe. The God of the universe has made His way to you in Christ. Over the last few minutes, maybe He has opened your eyes, and maybe, at this moment, He is changing your heart. If that's the case, I want to urge you to turn from your sin and yourself and to trust in Christ and be born again, be brought to life.

The gospel demands a decision. It demands a decision in every single life here. Will you turn from Jesus, choose to live without Christ now and die without Christ forever, or will you turn to Jesus? Die to yourself with Christ now and live with Christ forever. That is the most important question.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt. Website: Radical.net