

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Skeleton

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 2024

I don't know how true it is, but someone said to me this week, "People think of you as a preaching machine, and may not really know what's in your heart, because you're very seldom disconnected from a text." And I said, "Well, this Sunday will help then, because I am just going to share my heart." We, in our series in Matthew, would normally be beginning chapter 21, which begins the last week of our Lord's life. But before we get into that great, glorious climax of the book of Matthew, for which we all have waited about five years, including myself, I just have some things in my heart to share with you.

When I go away and minister in other places, preach in other places, talk to other folks, spend time in prayer in the Word and reading some books and things, I usually am able to back away from the pressure and think clearly. When I'm here, it's difficult to have the time to do that; and as a result of that, the Lord seems to impress upon my heart certain things that are needful for me to understand, for me to emphasize in my own heart and life, and, and for me to share with you; and I, I'm concerned about our church. I, I want you to know that this church is my life. It is the very heart and soul of my life. I don't feel the ministry has plateaued here. I don't feel that we've done it, now we're just going to try to hang onto it. I feel we've only just begun and that whatever energy I gave in the last 15 years is only preliminary to the energy that I want to give in the next—should the Lord tarry—15 years or whatever. I believe that the future is yet before us. It is exciting, filled with joy and anticipation, and, and tremendous potential of possibility. But I also think we are at a point in our church life where we're at a very, very crisis interval; and there can be a great future for us or there cannot, depending on what we do with the moment of opportunity which we have in our hands right now.

I was playing golf for the first time in my summer the other day, and I had waited a long time to get the time to do that, even while I'm vacationing. I usually find some places to preach while I'm on vacation, so it takes some of the time. But I, I was playing golf with a pastor, and he wanted to know about building a church and had it in his heart to build a church and really was hungry to build a church. Been to our Shepherds' Conference, and in fact been here twice, and I had preached in his church back East. And, and he said, "Boy, I just, I want to see God do that. I want to see a church built," and so forth. And so he was asking me about the ministry and then he said, "You know, a church like yours, how is it, how is it a church that's as large as yours and with so many things happening, so many ministries, and so forth. Is it difficult? Or is it a, is it." The implication of his questioning was, "Now that it's there, do you sort of rest?" And I said, "Let me tell you something." I said, "Being a part of the building of a church is easy. I mean that's like being in a sailboat. Somebody

else is blowing it along. You're just sitting in it. And I, I can honestly tell you that the, the growth of Grace Church, the great years of, of tremendous growth when we started out with four or five hundred people and just took off and grew and grew and grew; and all these wonderful things were happening; that was easy."

I mean, I didn't know what was going on, to be honest with you. I came here every Sunday just to see what was happening. In fact, it was so much God's doing. It was so thrilling and so exciting. Sure, there were principles which we applied out of the Word of God, and there were emphases, and there was a drive for excellence and so forth, but, but those were euphoria times. I mean those were just ecstatic times. I, I like to call those the years of discovery. I came here. I didn't know much of anything, and so every week I'd study, and we'd learn together, and then I'd tell them what the Bible said. And everybody'd say, "Wow, so that's what the Bible means there. So that's what it's saying to us." And we'd get excited about that, and we'd take another big step in terms of our spiritual growth and understanding, and the Lord would add to the church, and it just kept going like that. And, really, it was like some kind of a, of a prolonged honeymoon. There was energy everywhere. There was excitement and enthusiasm, and, and everybody was thrilled, and we weren't even doing in those years the things we're doing now, but, but no one ever expected anything. And so everything that came was just marvelous.

My goal, honestly, when I came here, was to keep the people that were already here from leaving. That was my basic goal. If I can just go there, and they won't leave, that'll be a moral victory. I never envisioned this. That's why I've said that the verse in the Bible that has come most true and most to my understanding in the years of ministry here is Ephesians 3:20, "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all you could ask or think." I've seen God do that.

But in those early years, we were all excited. There was a tremendous ecstasy. There was a tremendous sacrifice. Everybody was a part of the building and the growing together. One of the staff fellows said to me a couple weeks ago, he said, "If you look at history in, in just about every area of church life and the life of God's people, it's kind of followed a very interesting pattern. The first generation fights to discover and establish the truth," and that's what we did. I mean that first flow of years was discovery and laying down the truth and tremendous excitement. And then he said, "The second generation fights to maintain the truth and proclaim the truth." And we've seen that: where we put it down in books and on tapes; and we've, we've started sending out men to preach it somewhere else; and drawing people here and teaching them, sending them, and, and working with pastors; and we've started to want to maintain the truth and, and proclaim the truth. And then he said, "The third generation could care less. Since they weren't a part of the fight on either front, they really don't have anything at stake. They tend to take it for granted." Boy, that scares me. That really scares me. "The toughest thing," I said to this pastor, "the toughest thing to deal with in the ministry is indifference or apathy, complacency." You can't deal with it. There's no way to deal with it, except to just go at it as best you can in preaching and, and so forth. That is difficult.

Somebody comes to me and, you know, we have problems just like any church would have. In fact, we have more of them, of course, because we have more folks. Didn't have any people, wouldn't have any problems, you understand. But when somebody comes to me and says, "Oh, John, we've got a real problem. We have got a real problem." Now, I've come back. I've been gone and come back several times this summer. Every time I come back, somebody says to me, "We got a problem. We got a real problem. Do you know what happened? So and so and so and so having so." And my response to that is, "Terrific! Boy, that is exciting! We've got a problem, and we know what it is, and we can solve it with the truth of the Word of God. Terrific!" I mean, that's the fun of the ministry. Who would, who could stand a church with no problems? I mean, if you find a church— I'll tell young pastors all the time—if you find a church with no problems, don't go there. You'll wreck it. I mean, what a great thing to have problems, because problems can be solved with the application of divine truth. So I get excited about that.

But complacency, indifference, or apathy, that's heartbreaking. And to think that we could produce a generation of people who weren't ever a part of the struggle, and who just take it all for granted, just walk in and pile up and, and sort of sit on the outside perimeter and say, "Well, it's all here, folks, we just take it for granted. It'll always be here." And since they didn't know what the price was, they can't even taste the sweet taste of victory. They don't even know what it is to have gone through the whole battle. I mean you only have one shot at life, and I look at it as if God has given me the greatest, most wonderful, thrilling, possible use of the one shot I've got. He's put me right here, and I don't think it's over yet. But the thing that I fear is that folks who weren't a part of the process of building and the process of fighting and discovering and laying it all down and getting it all moving are going to come here and not be able to appreciate what it is that God has done.

And I'm reminded of a passage, and I'd like you to open your Bible to Deuteronomy, chapter 6, and I think there is a good illustration, a passage written for our example, of this same kind of thing. God, of course, in His wonderful grace, chose His people Israel; mercifully brought them out of bondage; put them in the Promised Land; literally inundated them with profuse divine grace and blessing. And He says in verse 3 of Deuteronomy 6, "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the Lord God of thy fathers has promised thee, in the land that flows with milk and honey."

He says you better keep the commandments, you better be true to the faith. "Hear, O Israel [verse 4]: the Lord our God is one Lord and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might." First thing He says is, "Look, if you're going to hold true to the faith, you got to love God with all your heart, soul, all your might." Love God. Love God. Love God more than you love the world. Love God more than you love your new car, your house, your job, your money, your wardrobe, anybody, anything, anyplace.

I've been reading this last week a classic on loving God by Bernard of Clairvaux. Very convicting. Very convicting. He says, "I have three great desires in my soul: to remember God, to contemplate God, to love God." It's a far cry from some of us. If we were asked to list the three great desires of our soul, I wonder if that's what they'd be: to remember God in all things, to contemplate God at all times, to love God. And so he says it starts on the inside. "I put you in a land with milk and honey. I put you in the best place of blessing, and you're going to have to get it in the inside, a commitment to love God."

And then it moves to the outside in verse 6. "These words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children." Not only in your heart, but on your lips; teach to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, when you rise up. What's your conversation like? Do you talk about godliness? Do you talk about God? Do you talk about Christ? Talk about the Holy Spirit? Talk about the Bible? Talk about virtue? Talk about things that are good and honest and pure and lovely? I mean do you go on a trip with somebody for the weekend and never talk about God, never talk about spiritual things, never talk about things for which you should be accountable in terms of obedience? I mean where is your conversation?

See, if we're going to hold onto these things, we have to love God with all our heart. We also have to talk about it all the time so that it stimulates our minds; and we need to be exposed to that. I believe one reason God has raised up Christian radio today and tape ministries is because it's the only way that I know of to, to sort of withstand the onslaught of godlessness that comes to people through radio and television. I mean, there was a day when you weren't bombarded in society by all that garbage. You just went home and talked to the folk, folks that lived there. Now you got the whole world talking at you and selling you godless philosophy from every possible angle. And you can hardly make it from Sunday to Sunday without falling out in terms of your own spiritual commitment; and so the Lord's raised up resources. We ought to be buried in those kind of things until we cultivate a pure mind. We need to talk about it all the time. Is that what you talk about? Is that your conversation? I mean, it's fine to talk about the Dodgers once in a while, but it's not the real issue, and all the other stuff that doesn't matter.

And then in verse 8, He says do something else. Put reminders up. "Bind them for a sign on your hand, and frontlets between your eyes, and write them on the posts of your house and on your gates." In other words, He says, "Jog your memory with some symbols." I mean, I believe that Christian homes and, and offices and whatever, wherever we are, we need to have reminders to jolt our memories into the things that we ought to be thinking about. That's all those things were, were just ways to jog their mind and remember, cause them to remember the things they were supposed to be committed to. We need to have those things around, too, to remind us what we forget. So it starts in the heart, and it comes out on the lips, and it ought to be jogged in our minds by signs and

symbols. You say, "Why all of this?" I'll tell you why. Because: "It'll be, when the Lord thy God has brought thee into the land which He swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildest not, and houses full of all good things which thou filledst not, and wells digged which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware lest thou forget the Lord, who brought thee."

I mean, the tendency is when you haven't been a part of the process you take for granted the results. And I guess I fear that some of us even who are a part of the process may forget that process, may forget the hand of God, the way we saw God move. And many new folks just come in; you don't even know the price that was paid. You don't even understand the sacrifice of time and talent and effort and money the people made. I remember a young couple who forfeited their honeymoon because they wanted to give. I mean that's just one of thousands upon thousands of illustrations; but some people just walk in and it's all there. It's all done well. It's all done right.

What happens is, is little things go wrong, and they get real picky. And they don't understand where the real warfare is, and they don't understand the real fight and the big issues, so they quibble about the rest of the stuff. It's like one guy said one time, "They're rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic." And sometimes people tell me things, little picky things, and my response inside, I don't always say it, sometimes I do, is "Who cares? I don't care about that. What I do care about is this." And they say, "Oh, oh." Let's get on to the real stuff. Why do people want to fiddle around with the nonessentials? Get on with the kingdom. Some people spend their whole life fooling around with trivia, picky little things. They don't understand, and I, I think that the child of apathy is criticism. And it's so easy, you know I, to get into the place where you take everything for granted, and you become kind of indifferent to it all, and then you start to criticize it, and all of the imperfections you can see. You know, like Thomas Hardy. He said he could, he had a friend who could go into any beautiful meadow and immediately find the manure pile. Well, that's a perspective. That's a perspective that you don't want to have.

I know that God's given us wonderful people, and we, we are the richest church in, in the world in terms of the wondrous people God's given us. We bless His name for that. But I also know that there are many people who come only when it's convenient. I know you, some of you, come only when it's convenient. It was convenient today, so you came. If it wasn't convenient, you wouldn't come. And you look at the church like you look at everything else in life; and if it serves a need for you, then you go. If you can find something else that serves your need better, you go there. I mean, if you think it's better for you to take off, you take off. If it's okay to go to church, you go to church. For some people, it's sort of the, the lesser of alternatives, when the budget's low on the weekend. For other people, they come whenever they want. They don't see, they don't see any real need for commitment; and Sunday night, to them, is just something they never get involved in. They think one sermon a week is enough. If you think that's true, you need 200 sermons at least this week, maybe. Sort of blast you out of your complacency. As somebody said, I think it was Kierkegaard said, "People think that the

preacher is an actor, and they're supposed to come and be his critics." What they don't know, is they're the actors, and he's the prompter offstage reminding them of their lost lines.

So it's easy for us to get to the point where, you know, we, we live in a world where everything's for you. I mean do your thing. Get it your way. All coming to you, everything coming to you; and even our so-called Christian world spawns that same kind of feeling. And so you look at the church; and if it's got something to offer, you show up. You don't understand the loyalty of supporting the pastor when he's up there or the man of God who's speaking. And I worry about that sometimes when others are speaking besides myself, and, and people say, "Well, it's only so and so speaking. We'll go away. We won't go." And you realize, of course, what that says to that person. They're not blind. They're not stupid. They understand what that says; that that says to them, "It's only you, isn't it?" And that's the kind of attitude that breeds complacency in a church, and that's the kind of thing that can kill a great ministry.

You see, that's right where Ephesus was. They left their first love, and they needed to be jolted to remember what it used to be like. Have you forgotten how it was? So I said to this pastor, "Building a church is easy. It's trying to deal with the big one that's tough. It's trying to get your arms around a thing, keep people from getting complacent, indifferent, taking everything for granted, and not understanding what they have. I mean, the teaching here is so good, and the music here is so great, so glorious. We just take it for granted. And people work so hard to take care of our kids and teach our little ones and so all the things they do, and it's so easy for us to just take it for granted, and we don't even pray like we should.

I mean, do you pray for me, regularly? Ah, some people say to me, very often, people that I love will say to me, "I, I pray for you all the time." I hang on that. I hold onto that, because you don't understand. This is a warfare. I know. I'm a preaching machine. I get up here and *bllllllrrrrr*, out it comes. And you, you grade it on a one to ten, maybe. And once in a while one's good enough to keep you coming for another, looking for another good one; and that's all right. I understand that. But do you pray? And what about the others? Do you pray for them, too, the others who teach and preach here? The others who lead and serve? I mean some folks are quick to criticize and not so quick to pray. And what about those of you in leadership? Are you praying for the people you lead? Or do we think it's all being done so well, we don't need God anymore? See, you don't understand the battle. You don't understand the warfare. You just see the result. It all looks so easy. You don't understand the tears and the toil. You don't understand how we who are in leadership in the church have to come alongside each other sometimes just to hold each other up, because it gets very painful, very difficult. And I just want you to remember that we need you to be a part. We need you to be totally committed. We need you to pray. We need to use your gifts, serve.

I had this brought home to my heart, I think rather strongly, by a letter I received from a young pastor, and I want to share it with you. It's really what kind of triggered my just talking to you from my heart

this week and probably next week, too. But my great joy in the ministry is to see young men go into the ministry. I got a letter from one who's thinking about getting out, and that really kind of broke my heart. This is what he said:

"This letter comes to your attention for several reasons; and though we have not met personally, I have read some of your books and heard you on the radio several times. Let me explain my great concern, one which I have not been able to correct and one that is causing me to consider leaving the ministry. Perhaps your [your] insights, the Lord will use to give me some light.

"First of all, my position: I firmly believe that the leadership of the church should be the very best, not only in their personal spiritual lives, but also in setting the pace for people they lead. Now, I hasten to add that I am not talking about perfection or any type of super humanness, just a living, growing personal relationship with our Lord. I firmly believe that, if the leaders of the church do not present a lifestyle of commitment and dedication to their Lord and to the local body that those following won't either.

"The problem: Pastor MacArthur, two-thirds of our elected officers attend only one service per week. Again, I'm not talking about being or having to be present every time the doors are opened. But I do believe that, other than unforeseen situations, illnesses, and vacations, that the leadership of the church should make a double effort to be present at the services, if for no other reason than for the encouragement of the saints and the pastor. I find it extremely difficult to believe that proper leadership is or can be provided when the leaders do not spend enough time with their people to even know where their hurts and fears are. I go to board meetings and find that, by far, the majority of the time is spent on items that have no direct relationship to the needs and hurts of people. I believe that, because of this, our church has come to a stalemate, which is equal to going backwards instead of moving ahead.

"I have brought this to the attention of our board on several occasions—and to be honest, not even all of them are faithful in their attendance—and expressed my concern, with absolutely no results.

"Again, I'm not talking about men and women who just cannot make it, but about those who could but will not. I receive the normal replies, "My schedule's awfully busy. I'm, I'm just too tired at the end of the day." Or they don't even offer an excuse. But these very same people are not afraid to remind me often that they are the power of the church. It often happens.

"Pastor, I've come to the place where I am, if this is carried on into next year, ready to resign the pastorate. How is it possible for a pastor to direct his flock, establish the needed programs, develop spiritual leadership, if he can't even get the backing to get started? I'm open to your advice. I believe our church has great possibilities, but as long as we're lukewarm, the Lord will not bless us or use us."

That letter could've been written by thousands of different pastors, because that's so common—to take for granted the good things God's given us. I don't want you to do that. I don't want you to take it for granted. I don't want you to forget the Lord. I want you to go on fearing His name.

Look with me for a moment at Second Peter, chapter 1, and I'll tell you just where I am in the words of Peter, verse 12. Second Peter 1:12: "Wherefore [Peter says, writing to his congregation, in a sense] I will not be negligent." I can understand that. You're given an opportunity by God; you don't want to blow it. It's a holy calling, a high calling, a great privilege for which you are accountable, responsible. But he says, "I don't want to be negligent in my calling, so I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance." And I stand here to do the same today. I'm not going to say anything new. I'm going to say some things that are old that you need to remember. He says, "I want to put you in remembrance of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. I know you know them. You just need to be reminded. You just need something to jolt your memory. And I'm going to keep doing this as long as I am in this body, so that when I leave this body, this earthly tabernacle," verse 14 and verse 15 says, "you'll remember even then after I'm dead." There's a certain virtue in harping on the same basic things that cannot be forgotten; and that's what I'd like to do, just share my heart along the line of those things.

Many pastors come here to find out why our church grows and what we're doing; and they usually come wanting to pick up some programs that they can take back and apply in their own church. They come to our Shepherd's Conference. We'll be having one in October. I hope you'll be a part of that. We'll have 250 new pastors here, and they are desirous of knowing what God is doing. And they usually come thinking they can pick up methods, tools, programs, ideas, and take them back and stick them in their church, which would be like coming to get a body, and just dragging the skin home. I mean, they're looking for how we flesh out our ministry. What they don't understand is all the stuff that's inside. And so when they come for the Shepherd's Conference, we try to teach them that—that there's an awful lot under the surface that you don't see that is foundational to make everything else make sense. You see a ministry functioning, but what you have to understand is what's behind the scene that you can't see. And so I'd like to borrow an analogy, if I can, from the apostle Paul, the analogy of a body. And I believe we can call this "The Anatomy of a Church." But I believe that the body can be seen in four features. This is not clinical. This is just for the sake of our analogy. Bones or skeleton, internal systems, muscles, and flesh, and a church has to, has to understand itself in that way. There has to be framework, skeleton. There has to be internal systems, which I call the flowing through of certain attitudes. And then there has to be muscle, which is the kinds of function that we do, and then it fleshes out in the form of our ministry.

But the form is not enough. You can't just reproduce the form without the rest. It won't live. It won't stand up. It won't work. So I want to take us back, if I can and, and start where we are at the beginning; and this is what I believe Christ wants our church to be. This is where we're committed,

and we've been committed to this from the very beginning, and we're still committed to it, and the future is greater than the present by far if we really get our act together. I mean, we look around and say, "Hey, look at how crowded it is." Listen, we got a balcony we're waiting to put in this place. We're ready to put it in as soon as we sense there's a need for it, and there ought to be a need for it. We have a million people right in this little valley here, and on any given Sunday, at the very most twenty thousand of them are in a church where they're going to hear the truth. And that leaves us a whole lot left, huh? Maybe 980 thousand? We can get some kind of skewed perspective when we think it's all been done already. We got people right around the block here who've never been in the door of this place. We want to do what we need to do in the future, because God's given us the foundation. We don't want to say, "Hey, we built the foundation. Isn't this a lovely foundation?" We want to go on and finish the house.

So moving to that familiar Pauline metaphor and borrowing it if I can out of its biblical pattern, I want to talk first of all about the skeleton; and I think that's all I'll talk about this morning, just that, the skeleton. For the body to function and the body to work, it has to have skeleton. It has to have structure, has to have form. It's the skeleton that gives the basic structure, form to the body. Now, I believe that there are certain skeletal truths that we have to be committed to. These are nonnegotiable. These are unalterable. These are invariable. These are things that we will not compromise in any way, shape, or form; and these are the skeleton things; and I believe that the church has to be committed to these things. And when I say that, beloved, I mean you. You; the church is you. I'm not talking about some nebulous thing. I'm talking about you. That's, I'm talking about me, too.

Let me give you what I think to be the skeletal, nonnegotiable issues first: a high view of God, a high view of God. Now, I could reach back through all the years and bring up all kinds of things that we've tried to teach on this, but I'm going to trust your memory for some of these things and just say some general things. It is absolutely essential that the church perceive itself as an institution for the glory of God. You understand that? Now, that's so basic that it just—it seems like you wouldn't even need to say it. But I believe the church, in general, in our country, has descended from that level to become a church for the help of men. And the church thinks its goal is to help people feel better about themselves, to play psychological games with them, to patch up their marriages, to give them placebos, you know, like patching up a marriage; like Marabel Morgan said, by putting on a black negligee, a rose in your teeth, and getting under the dining room table and winking at your husband, that kind of stuff. I mean, if you've got a rotten marriage, you can do that and still have a rotten marriage, because there's some Biblical foundations, and there are relationships to God that are required between people if they're going to have right relationships with each other. And those kinds of placebos really aren't the answer; but we have reduced the church from an, from a body or an organism which has, as its goal, to know and glorify God to, to an organization which has its objective to make people feel better about themselves. And that's not the point.

If you know God right, ultimately you'll get to you, and you'll be a whole lot better off. The answer to everything in your life is to know God, true? Sure, the Lord's the beginning of all wisdom. And when you have a right relationship with God, and you take God seriously, and you get rightly connected with God, then all other things fall out in their proper place. That is not to say we're unconcerned about people's needs. We are concerned, as God is, as Christ is. But it is to say that there is a balance, and everything begins with a high view of God. We must take God seriously. As I've said before, I, I sometimes wish that God would strike some people dead during the offering. I mean I don't wish that real strongly, but I, because I might be the guy. But I mean, some dramatic way to illustrate that God must be taken seriously. We say, oh, you know, somebody dies or something happened, "How could God let that happen?" Listen, friend, that isn't even the question. The question is what are you and I doing alive? A holy God should've blasted us out of existence long ago. That's the issue. And because God is gracious is no reason for you and I to be complacent and indifferent. We got to take God seriously.

I, I get righteously indignant at these preachers and so forth who drag God off His throne and turn Him into some kind of a servant for men, who has to do all the things they demand. This is an irreverent age. It's irreverent. It does not know how to worship. Even what it calls worship, basically, in many cases, is simply inducing a warm feeling, and they think that's worship. It knows little about God, and as I said in the series on worship, we are too many Marthas and not enough Marys. We're busy serving all the time, and we don't know what it is to bow down and wash Jesus' feet. We don't know what it is to tremble at God's Word. We don't know what it is to have an awesome confrontation with an infinitely holy God that leaves us broken over our own sinfulness and, therefore, usable to Him for His glory. We want to feel good about ourselves. We want ourselves to feel good. We want to get all that we need, have all our problems solved, and we're being sold a, a sack of religious psychology that is called the church.

Listen, I really, I'll go a step further and say you could take 90 percent of all the books that are being written today and bury them in the sea, and we wouldn't be gone, we wouldn't lose anything. Because they're just a bunch of placebos, superficially attacking them, attacking problems that they can't solve. I go back in history to eras when the church was holy, and they had very few things to read, but the things they did read told them how to connect up with God. We've got zillions of things and doesn't seem to solve the problem. I was amazed recently. They told me at Moody that at the last pastors' conference they surveyed the pastors and said, "What do you need help on most of all?" And the answer was "the family." And I said, "Wait a minute. You can't mean it. You mean to tell me that, with all the stuff that's out there, you still got to have more stuff about how to help families?" It isn't that. It isn't that you need more material. It's that, with all that's been said, people don't take God seriously, so they don't walk according to His laws, so they get themselves in the mess they're in.

So we continue to lift up God. That's why we went through the series on worship, and the book is out, and I hope you'll read the book. I really do. I hope you'll read it. I know you, some of you say, "I bought it. I bought it." I know. I hope you'll read it. You know, James says it, says, "Draw near to God [in James 4:8] and He'll [What?] draw near to you." Now what could be better than that? How would you like to live life with God near you? Wouldn't you like that? Well, sure. You draw near to God; He'll draw near to you. You say, "Yeah, but when you get near God, oh, boy, it gets nervous." Sure, that's why he says in the next phrase, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners." Closer you get to God, the more you see your sin, right? Humble yourself. Mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to sorrow, and so forth. And then when you're all in a crumble there, it says, "The Lord'll lift you up." But we will take God seriously, and we believe that God must be exalted and lifted up, and we're not going to have a man-centered church. We want to reach out to everyone in the love of Christ, in the love of God. But God will be the focus of our worship, our life. And we don't look at the Bible, therefore, as a place where you find little formulas to solve all your problems. We look at it as a book that reveals God. It reveals God.

There's a second nonnegotiable, and it flows right out of the first, and that is the absolute authority of Scripture. The absolute authority of Scripture; we, we will not compromise on this. The Bible is constantly being attacked. I read the other day a review of a new book by Lewis Smedes at Fuller Seminary in which he says that it's perfectly all right for two homosexual men to have a relationship, that's within the tolerance of God. And if you want to hold that view, all you have to do is just eliminate the Bible; very, very convenient. And if you're a professor in seminary, it seems to me to be somewhat inconsistent to be training young men to minister the Word of God while you deny it. But that's where we are. Now, that's a head-on attack.

I believe that there's, there are charismatics who are attacking the Bible by adding all their visions and all their revelations and all their other things as we've shared with you in the past. And, and they, Jesus is telling them this; and Jesus is telling them that; and God's speaking to them over here and over there; and they got all this material being piled up; and they've sudden, they've subtly undermined the Bible, because it's no longer the single authority. I may have told you, but one man said that Jesus comes in the bathroom and puts His arm around him—and my re—he says, "While I'm shaving." My response to that was, in my mind, "Do you keep shaving? Do you keep shaving?" Because if you keep shaving, it isn't Jesus, because if holy God came in the bathroom while you were shaving, you'd kill yourself because you'd hit the floor so hard. It's an awesome thing to confront an infinitely holy God. Then that kind of silliness; and then get these little special messages from God.

Listen, we will hold God's Word up as the absolute authority. The Bible is always attacked. The worst attack of all is by the people who say they believe and don't know what it teaches, wouldn't you say? That's the worst of all. That's the most subtle there is. But there are people all across America who say, "I believe the Bible from cover to cover." They don't know it: period, paragraph. They just believe what they don't know, which is the height of something or other.

Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Listen, that's why I'm an expository preacher. If we're to, if we're fed by every word that comes out of the mouth of God, then we ought to study every word, and I—don't—I think preaching has lost that. And now preaching is all kinds of different things, not teaching the Word of God, and we've got to get back to that. And we're going to stay right where we are. We must teach. We must teach every word. Every word, and if you don't have an appetite for it, that isn't going to change the way we feel.

You say, "Well, I, you know, we don't need another sermon. We, we like to have fellowship." Well, that's fine. I hope you can find some fellowship. We're just going to keep giving you the Word, just keep feeding you the Word, because we know what makes you grow. Fellowship's important; all that's very important, but not as a replacement for the Word of God. In fact, if you want to know the truth, I find the sweetest, purest, best, and most rewarding fellowship is always around the Scripture, always around the Scripture. The absolute priority of the Word of God, that's where my heart is. I hope that's where yours is; and I'll tell you. You say, "Well, we already know so much. We've been taught for so long." Listen, that's the height of pride to say that. I mean the discovery process never stops. Never stops. For me it doesn't, and as I've said in the past, the great joy of, of my preaching ministry is not the preaching. The preaching is the work part. The joy is the discovery part. Getting in there, finding out things that I never saw before, never knew before, never fully understood; and that happens to me every week of my life. Now, that's an adventure that no one should miss.

I remember a pastor, he said to me when I was back in Michigan one time, he said, "Well," he said, "I only pastor two years in one place, then I leave." I said, "Really?" He said, I said, "Have you been doing it a long time?" "Yeah, I was two years here, two years here, two years here, two years here, two years here." I said, "Why?" He said, "I have 52 sermons. I preach them twice. I leave." That's a funny way. I said, "What about the whole counsel of God?" "I don't give it all. Just the part that I think's important." Oh, I think every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God is important. That's a nonnegotiable.

Third: and this again flows out of the second sound doctrine. You start with a high view of God, and if you make your commitment to God, then you're going to have to stick with His revelation, His Word. If you make a commitment to His Word, you're going to be stuck with what it teaches, and that's doctrine, sound doctrine. You know, beloved, there is such a doctrinal vagueness across Christianity. There's such a fuzziness; sermonettes for Christianettes; you know, nice, helpful little things. I don't know what ultimate purpose they fulfill. But they may; they're nice; and sometimes they're interesting; and sometimes they make you feel emotional and you get the warm and *fuzzies*; and, oh, you feel sad or whatever; or you get pumped up or whatever, and so forth. But, but there's no sound doctrine.

In other words, nobody screaming truth about God, truth about life, death, heaven, hell, truth about man, sin, Christ, angels, Holy Spirit, the position of the believer, the flesh, the world, or whatever. I

mean give me something I can get my hand on. Give me a truth. That's why we've always talked about *principlizing* the text. You take a text. You find out what it says, and then you see what it means. You draw out of it a divine truth, and you establish that truth in the minds of people by banging that truth in about ten ways. In case you don't know, that's what I do when I preach. Take you through the passage, pull out a divine truth, and hit you with it about ten ways. From this passage and that comparative passage, and this passage and the other passage, and so forth, until there's driven home in your mind a truth, a solid truth. I got that when I was young because my dad gave me a Bible when I got out of high school. And in the front of it, he encouraged me to read 1 and 2 Timothy; and I did. And I kept hearing Paul say to Timothy, "Teach sound doctrine. Teach sound doctrine. Teach sound doctrine. Nourish up on your own heart and communicating it to your people. Sound doctrine."

There was a day when pastors were theologians. Now, I don't know. I, when I think about the fact that Dick and I went back to the ICBI Congress in Chicago, I don't know. It was a year ago I guess now, Dick. And there were three pastors I think, out of a hundred scholars—well, four including you, four of us, and 96 guys out of colleges and seminaries. When they bring together people to discuss the Bible, they don't even think about pastors; and that's not necessarily a reflection that there aren't any. It's just that that's not where they're looking for people who can deal with Scripture. I, frankly, don't even know why we were there. But, but we've lost that, that doctrinal clarity and distinctiveness in preaching that really belongs in the pulpit. People need answers, solid answers out of the Word of God.

We, we just, for interest's sake, I wrote a letter a couple of weeks ago to all the various ministries that we knew about that are on the radio, and posed to them a question. We answer Bible questions all the time. We posed a question just to see how they all answered questions. One question was sent out, and everybody that answered gave us a different answer. So if you had sought counseling from all these ministries, every one of them would've given you a different answer. Now that's, that's really kind of sad in a way. There's so much confusion about things that ought to be, and are in fact, clear in the Word of God.

We're committed to drawing some biblical conclusions. I remember going through the book of Ephesians early in the ministry here and establishing the believer's position in Christ, which was foundational to this church. And the other day I was, I was with my high school football coach. I hadn't seen him a long time except one time when he came to the church, and he's gone on with the Lord, and he's, he's taught the Word of God. He's a wonderful guy, and we were reminiscing about some of the silly things that happened when we were playing ball in high school. And he said to me, "You know something, John?" He said, "You set in concrete in my life for as long as I live an understanding of the position of the believer, because I listened to Ephesians, chapter 1 tapes over and over and over and over and over, and then I taught it year after year after year after year to young people, and," he said, "the solid understanding of the doctrine of the position of the believer in Jesus Christ

has given foundation to my entire life." Well, you see, I'm not commending myself. That's the book of Ephesians. That's the Holy Spirit. But what I'm saying is that's the kind of thing that people can build a life on—sound, solid, sound doctrine. And I believe we must teach the Word of God and teach it with principles that are divine truths; that are foundational for life, very essential. So if you want to know about angels, we ought to have truth that's concrete and, and clear about angels. You want to know about demons then we ought to be able to establish what the Bible teaches about that, so we're always laying down solid content.

A fourth nonnegotiable, and you know these things, and I only want you to remember them. A fourth is personal holiness. Personal holiness. I fear that we're all victimized by an absolutely unholy society. I mean I just cringe in the midst of the society in which we live. The filth and trash and garbage that is pumped out unendingly, not only philosophically, that, that corrupts the mind away from God, but immoral stuff, just a sea of it like drippings of a broken sewer. It just, in fact the sewer isn't just broken, it's completely shattered, and it's flooding the place. I, I don't know if this is new or not, but I, I've always had a problem with contemporary music, because I think—not only do I hate the very, the style itself, but the, I have problems with that, but basically—that the sexual innuendos of the words are so vile and wretched. And I, you try sometimes to tell this to kids and, "Well, you don't understand. You're an old guy. What do you know, you know? And you don't understand where we're at; and I, I, the words are all right. I take them the way I want." And blah-blah.

Well, recently, I turned on one of these—the TV, and I—I saw one of these music video things. That settled it with me. When they put that kind of music to visuals, it's filth. It is. Its, in the first place its sexual overtones are just rampant. In the second place, it's totally disconnected from any form of reality, which is to divorce people from clear, sane, logical reasoning and an understanding of reality. It's like trying to induce a drug high; totally disconnected. I watched a whole bunch of totally disconnected, totally disjointed nonsense, no rhyme or reason, no logical connections between what was going on. In fact, it was all utterly bizarre. And I mean, I may be 43, but I'm not completely senile. And if you put that stuff to visuals and that's what you get, then that's trash. And then you, you get a whole generation of people, you know, inundated.

Listen, people, we got to start drawing some lines when it comes to personal holiness and being careful where we expose ourselves and our children and the people around us. You can't be parading in and out of the movie theater and watching anything you, your eyes can set on, and, and reading trash and garbage and exposing yourself to all that, and not pay a price. I, I just was struck by that, and I just, it, I said to myself, "Is that where we are in our society?" I don't, I don't go to movies, so I don't see that kind of stuff, so this was a jolt to me. Is that where our society is? Is that what thinking goes on in the confused, chaotic minds of kids who've blown their brains on that kind of stuff? I think it's, we're, we're called to a purity of life and I, we can't, we can't negotiate that. There are no compromises there. There's none. We don't compromise that, and we want to enforce that holiness purity, that, that holiness purity standard.

Second Corinthians 7 always comes to mind. Verse 1: "Having these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." We want to enforce that. That's why we do church discipline. That's why, if somebody sins, we have to go to them. You have to go to them. I have to go to them. We have to. We have to. I got a letter from some guy, and he was, he was, wrote me and said, "I want to tell you. One of the people on your church staff is so and so and so and so, and he did this, and he did that, and all the other." He was, he was running down a staff member to me. And I wrote him back and said, "Dear friend, If you have something against a brother, you go to that brother. You don't slander that brother in front of me. I do not accept what you just said. You go to him if you have a problem. You resolve that. And if it's resolved, I don't even need to know it. But don't you accuse a fellow servant of Jesus Christ to me that you haven't even gone to yourself." Well, he wrote me back a beautiful letter and confessed the sin that he had committed and asked that I would forgive him and said that he had learned a lesson for life. Well, that's right, and that he should resolve that with the brother that he feels is offended. I'm not even sure there was such an offense. But if you think that's being hardnosed, that's just being biblical. We just want the church to be pure, right? And so we want to deal with those kinds of things in love, of course, in love.

What, you take the area of personal holiness, and, and you can see how much we've lost in that area. I mean, what about our prayer life that cultivates that holiness? What's it like? What about the study of the Word of God? What about fasting? What about meditating? When do you sit and meditate on the Word of God? When do you do that? You say, "Well, I'm an elder. I'm a deacon. I, I, I prepare my Bible study." No, no, when do you sit and meditate on the Word of God? When do you meditate for a prolonged period of time drawing nigh unto God in a moment of prayer that extends beyond a moment? Where are we in terms of holiness? Where are we in terms of real communion with the living God? You see, it isn't just leaders. It is leaders. It's me and it's everybody else in the leadership, but it's also you folks. I mean we cannot just sit back and live half-committed Christian lives and expect God's work to be done God's way.

Well, there's just a final one, and I'll give you this one briefly. Spiritual authority. Spiritual authority. I believe with all my heart that a church must understand that there is authority over those people in that church and that authority is Christ, who is the head, who mediates His rule through godly elders. That's just what the Bible says. I mean I didn't invent that. Presbyterian church didn't invent that. That's what the Bible says; that elders have the rule over you in the Lord. It's just that simple. They have authority.

Now, that can be abused. There are men who get into that seat of authority, and they wield that authority as if it were authority given to them by the office or by their own personality. It isn't that. It's the authority of the Word of God in the hands of a godly man. In other words, I don't have any authority to say to you, "Listen, folks, build that building out there." Or, "Listen, folks, I want some

more vacation or raise my salary or I demand that these walls be painted green, because I'm in authority." I don't have any authority over the paint. I don't have any authority over that stuff. The only authority I have is to speak and apply the Word of God, right? And when you, when a man gets outside of that, he violates it; but when it comes to the Word of God, there is authority there. There is authority.

Boy, some people are so paranoid of this. When I was in New York this summer, a guy gave me a twenty-five-page paper. He said, "I think you'll be interested in this." He gave me this big, thick Xerox paper, twenty-five pages, and the title of it was "The Heresy of *MacArthurism*," and it wasn't talking about the general, either; "The Heresy of *MacArthurism*." And so I was eager to find out what I was her—in what way I was a heretic; and so I, I started out. "First of all, watch out for John MacArthur, because on the surface he appears to be a good man; but here are the facts. One, he is anti-evangelism. Two, he is anti-missions," and then it went on for about ten things; and the last one was, "He believes in elders, and that's the most deadly of all." See? As if I invented elders as some heretic? The truth of the matter is that some people just don't want to be under spiritual authority; and maybe in their favor we might say that they were sort of jaded in their understanding of that, because some have abused authority. But the church must understand, beloved, that God has given to the church godly men who have the authority to represent Jesus Christ by example and precept in that church; and the church must lovingly come under their leadership; and it will not be flawless; and it will not be perfect.

Listen, we pray constantly that it may be as close as it can be; but we know there'll be failure. Somebody said, "The only difference with Christians in their army is they shoot their wounded," meaning to say that when somebody does something wrong in the Christian body, sometimes they get attacked rather mercilessly. It isn't wrong to do wrong. That is, it's wrong to do wrong, but it isn't ultimately a disaster to do wrong if you confess it and move on, only if you continue it. And so when something is done that isn't all that it should be, we'll be the first to want to know that and move on, glory the Lord. But we have to understand that there has been given in the church those who are to be our leaders; and in 1 Thessalonians 5, it says to honor those people, to esteem them highly in love's sake for their work. And in Hebrews 13, it says submit to them, for they watch for your souls. Follow their example. And we have a plurality of leaders here. I'm, I'm just one of them.

You say, "Well, how come you're the guy that always preaches?" Well, that's just the way gifts work out. I mean you had, you had twelve apostles, right? But every time there's a list of them—and there's four lists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts—in every list, Peter's always named first; and he was always the spokesman. That's just the way it is. Doesn't mean that they were—he's better than anybody else. In fact, if the truth were known, he's probably worse than most of them; but he had the gifts in that regard; and there's a variation of gifts. Peter and John traveled together. You think John didn't have a thing to say? Guess again. He wrote Revelation, 1, 2, 3 John, the gospel of John, and, no doubt with his intimacy to Jesus Christ, could've given great things. But every time he's with Peter,

for 12 chapters, he never opens his mouth. Why? Because Peter had the, the greater gift in terms of speaking, or the more unique gift in terms of speaking. When you come to Paul and Barnabas, we know Barnabas was a great teacher and a great speaker and probably the leading one in the church till Paul came; but he and Paul travel together; and even the pagans said Paul was the chief speaker. So there are variations in gifts. But in the totality, there is an equality of spiritual authority and leadership given to those that the Bible calls elders or pastors, overseers. We have to understand that, and this church will always come under the care of those people, always.

So what have we said? If the church is going to be the body of Christ, it has to have the right framework. It has to have a high view of God, and that has to be its pursuit: to know Him, to know Him, to know Him. And in seeking to know Him, it has to have a high view of Scripture, for that is the place where alone He may be known. And so we will have that high view of Scripture; and we will be committed to doctrinal clarity, sound doctrine, personal holiness; and we will submit our souls to the care of those who are over us in the Lord in spiritual authority. I tell these pastors this all the time. If you don't have these five things working for you in your church, all the rest of the stuff you're going to do is short-range, shallow, because these are the things. And I tell them this, too. You see, men, you can't pull this off in 18 months. The average stay of a pastor now in a church is 2.6, two years, six months. You can't do it. It takes years to lay this kind of foundation, and that's just the skeleton. We haven't even talked about the internal systems and the, and the muscles and then the, the flesh.

I want you to know that I only have one life to live, and I sense the Spirit of God saying that I'm to live it and give it right here, and I couldn't be more happy. For me, the adventure is just beginning, and I'm not saying, "Hey, we did this big deal, and now let's all spread out and go over here and go over there and do all." No, sir, this is the passion of my heart, this church; and I believe God's got a great future for us if we can see where the real war lies, be committed to the real foundational things, and that means you. You, as an individual, you're our hope. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we have really touched on some very important things to You. May not always be so important to us, but they should be, because they're the most important things to You, because You are important to You. You're God; and Your Word is important; and what it teaches is important; and holiness is important, because that is what You desire; and spiritual authority is important, because You desire to rule in Your own church, in Your own kingdom, for You're the King. Help us to consider important what You consider important and not spend all our time fooling around with trivia that doesn't matter. Or worse, become apathetic and indifferent because we've been weaned away by the world or because we've taken for granted the things You've done, because we weren't a part of the battle. Or maybe, Lord, we were a part of the battle, but we just sort of retired. Get us back in there, Father. Do a work in my heart and every heart that will be to Your glory.

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