

The Sin of Partiality

by Bayless Conley

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Are you ready? We are going to get into the Word. We're on a series right now in the book of James. I'm going to be doing James 2:1–13. However, we are not going to get all the way through verse 13. We are going to get through to probably verse 9. So, I want to encourage you on your own; once we get done, read verses 10 through 13 and apply them contextually to what the previous verses have to say. Once we get through talking about the previous verses, and you look at verses 10 through 13, it will mean a lot more to you. I believe, by the grace of God, you will be able to dig some things out of those verses that will be helpful to you. We're going to begin in James 2:1–4 NKJV. It says,

¹ My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. ² For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, ³ and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” ⁴ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

So, he says don't hold or practice the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ with partiality, favoritism, or respect of persons. It's interesting because he didn't just say that. He threw something else in there. “Don't hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.” Why does he suddenly stick in this title, “The Lord of glory,” in a sentence like that? I think it's a reminder that the Lord created it all. He owns it all. He's above it all. And yet, He regarded you, and He regarded me. He lifted us. He blessed us.

He didn't overlook us. He didn't despise us. He paid attention to us. In the same way, we should act that way toward other people rather than showing partiality the same way that this glorious Lord has dealt with us. He gives one example here. It is an economic situation between rich and poor determined by the way a person dresses. Some people come to church to close their eyes, and others come to eye the clothes.

James uses this illustration of a guy who comes in with gold rings on every finger. Everything about him says that he's doing well and that he's prosperous. Someone else comes in, and everything about him says that he's not doing so well. He says you should not give preferential treatment to the one who you perceive as being rich. But it could be applied to any other thing like gender, male or female, or to something as crazy as the way somebody wears their hair.

When I was 17 years old, I had some pretty serious problems with substance abuse at the time, along with other things going on in my life. You probably could have figured out some of that by looking at me. I think God was even dealing with my heart then. I decided on Christmas Eve I was going to go to church. So, by myself, I went to church on Christmas Eve. I picked a church, went, and outside of the door; just as I was about ready to go in, the priest met me. He took one look at my long hair and just my general look. He pointed at me and said, “Your kind is not welcome here. You get off the property now!” So, I obliged him. I left and never went back.

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He could have given the illustration, rather than rich and poor, race, age, physical looks, somebody who's attractive, being treated differently than somebody who's not as attractive. It could be physical ability, someone who plays a sport well, or sings well, or popularity, being well known, so we're going to treat you with more dignity than the person who's unknown. It could be cultural differences, on and on and on. Why is it so wrong? Why is partiality so damaging? Well, think of it. First of all, he said, "Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." You can't hold them both at the same time. You wouldn't hold your infant child and hold a rattlesnake at the same time. Why? Well, one is pure, and the other is poison. It's not much different when it comes to our faith in Jesus Christ and partiality. It is a damaging thing. So, number one, it's wrong just because it's in direct disobedience to God's commands. He said in verse one of chapter two, "Do not do it." In James 2:9 NKJV he said,

⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

It is sin. You become a transgressor of God's law and we know that sin poisons our own soul. The scriptures say that it works like leaven. It'll affect other people in the believing community, and it certainly is an open door to the devil. In 1 Timothy 5:21, the previous verses talk about different age groups of people, male, female, young, old, people in different positions, and it talks about how to treat each different group. Then it says this in 1 Timothy 5:21 NKJV,

²¹ I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.

In Leviticus 19:15 NKJV the Lord says this,

¹⁵ "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor."

Now, some people may not show partiality to the rich, but they show partiality to the poor, and that's just as wrong. There are people in positions of authority in our own society, particularly in our country, who don't think certain laws should apply to the poor. They can steal or commit a violent crime, and they say, "Well, we shouldn't apply the law to them because they're poor." No, the Scripture says that the law should be applied to all equally. Some people don't like that, but that is what God says is just. Now, the sin of partiality is not only damaging to those whom it is committed against, but it's also very damaging to the one who commits it as well. Number one, because sin obviously separates us from God. This particular sin is very progressive in nature. It works like a malignant cancer that eats away at a person's conscience until very shortly, there's hardly anything left. Proverbs 28:21 NKJV says,

²¹ To show partiality is not good, because for a piece of bread a man will transgress.

What does that mean? It means in the beginning, it may have taken a large bribe or a big gift or the promise of some future favor to cause a person to be biased or to be partial, but once they do it, before long, they'll be partial for a piece of bread. Their conscience is so diminished in that area, now, it hardly takes anything, whereas before, it took a big bribe or something very large. The downward spiral goes very, very quickly once a person begins to practice this sin. This sin of partiality, when it is found among believers, secondly, gives the world a distorted view of God.

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The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 3 that we are living epistles read and known of all men. You're the only Bible some people will ever read. Do you have family members you want to be saved? Well, they're reading the Bible all the time. It's you. You have co-workers you want to come to Christ; you want them to be impacted, right? They are reading the Bible. You're it. We're living epistles read and known of all men. We're God's offspring. We're God's children. We're God's ambassadors. The Bible says in Ephesians 5 that we're to imitate God as dear children. With that in mind, listen to what the Scriptures say about our Heavenly Father. Job 34:19 NKJV,

¹⁹ Yet He is not partial to princes, nor does He regard the rich more than the poor; for they are all the work of His hands.

Acts 10:34–35 NKJV says,

³⁴ Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. ³⁵ But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

The great Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, was very intrigued by Christianity, the claims of Christ, and the teaching of Christ. He was looking for God. He was hungry spiritually. He decided to look into this whole thing about Christianity and salvation. He went to a church, but he was blocked at the door by an usher. They said, "Look, you can stand in the back, but you cannot have a chair. That's for Europeans only." Gandhi said, "This is no different than the partiality shown in the Indian caste system," which he hated. He left and never went back. Now, of course, he became one of the world's great moral leaders. To this day, more than 1 billion people on the planet revere Gandhi. He spent the majority of his life spreading Hinduism throughout India.

How might history have been different if, when he came among the people of God, he had found a warm welcome as opposed to the stench of partiality? You see, as with Gandhi, and this brings us to the next point: the practice of partiality and favoritism can keep men and women from coming to Christ. From the church's side, if we're looking at someone's clothes and the kind of car they drive, we're not really considering their souls and the fact that both old and young, rich and poor, need to be saved.

There will be plenty of upstanding church members who will split hell wide open. They gave their money, but they never gave their hearts to Christ. They may have a seat on the deacon board or some committee in the church because of their large donations, but they will have no seat at the marriage supper of the Lamb because they were never born again. God have mercy on the shepherds who pastor these people's pocketbooks and not their souls. Friend, that is worth thinking about.

Now, from the viewpoint of the person who's hungering and seeking after God, if they come into the church, and I suspect there's people here today in this auditorium and outside. It's not a coincidence you're here. You wouldn't be here if there wasn't a hunger in your heart for God. But sometimes, it's hard to look past some of the Christians that you know and really consider Christianity. A person comes into church, and they find jockeying for position, favoritism, and partiality, just like they do in the world; that is a huge turn-off.

I was coming to church, and this is probably 1984 maybe. We had services in the morning. I'm driving. I'm going early, and I drive by this alley. I see a homeless guy in the alley who is digging through somebody's trash. So, I stopped, got out of my van, and walked down the alley. I said,

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“Hey,” and the guy said, “What, what, what?” He was really alarmed. I said, “Hey, don't worry, man.” I said, “I just want to know if you want to go to church with me.” He goes, “What?” I said, “I'm on my way to church. Do you want to come? I'll give you a ride. You can come with me.” He goes, “Okay, I don't have anything else to do.” So, this guy gets in my car, and he was pretty ripe. He had an odor. So, I drive him. We park. I walk in, and he follows me. The little greeter at the door, her name was Mary Tobias, grabbed him and hugged him like he was her long-lost brother. It freaked him out. He didn't see it coming.

I think about another guy. He came to church with his girlfriend. His girlfriend's parents attended Cottonwood Church. She was backslidden. She'd been raised knowing the Lord but had walked away from God. She's living with an outlaw biker. She told me this story later. This is the night before their first time in church. There's a party going on in their house, and things really got out of hand. People were shooting off guns in the house. A couple of guys stuck a pistol in her mouth.

She said, “Pastor, I was so terrified. I went into the kitchen. I opened the little cabinet doors under the sink, and I crawled under the sink with the pipes. I closed the doors and I stayed in there, hunched up like a ball for half the night until I could tell that the house was empty.” She said, “I was terrified for my life.” She said, “When I came out, I told my boyfriend.” She said, “I'm done with this. I need God. I'm going to my mom and dad's church tomorrow morning.” He said, “I'll go with you.”

So, they show up. He has his leathers on, his motorcycle jacket with the insignias, and patches, and an attitude that says, “If you look me in the eye, I'm going to punch you in the face.” He comes walking in. Mary is the greeter, and she grabs him around the neck, and she won't let go. Then she grabs his shoulders, looks him in the eye, and says, “We are so glad you are here today.” Totally threw him off his game. He comes in and starts crying during the worship service. He cried through the whole worship service. He cried through all the preaching, and he got saved. He became a pastor.

Later on, he told me, “Pastor Bayless, the first day that I came I dressed specifically to provoke people. They treated me like I had a suit on.” He said, “I walked in with a chip on my shoulder as big as a redwood tree. Dang, if that lady at the front door didn't totally disarm me when she grabbed me and welcomed me. Everybody was that way.” It changed his life. It changed his girlfriend's life. In fact, just to tell you the story about him. We didn't tell him what to do, but a couple weeks later, I came into the office during the day. He's sitting in the office, and he's crying like a baby.

Now, this guy was previously the armed guard for mafia drug deals. If they were going to fight some rival, he would go up to the biggest guy he could find and punch him in the face without warning. That is the kind of guy he was. He's sitting in my office crying his eyes out. I go, “What's going on?” He says, “Man, I've been reading the Bible. Me and my girlfriend are living together, and I know that's not right. I know that's not God's way. What do I do? We can't afford two places.” I said, “Well, God will take care of you. He'll supply if you'll do the right thing.” He says, “Okay.”

He moved into a friend's garage and lived there for six months in his friend's garage. Then, I performed a wedding for them. He lived celibate. He and his girlfriend lived pure for those six months. He was all in. He was in for real. God's Word became the final authority in all matters of conscience and living for him. But it all started because when he walked into the doors of the church, he was treated just like everybody else. Which brings us to the fourth thing. The sin of

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partiality can open the door to envy and strife in God's family. We skip ahead a little bit. James 3:16 NKJV. It says,

¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

Verse 17, great contrast.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.

When partiality is taken out of the mix, it makes room for gentleness, peace, mercy, and good fruits. But friend, when you have partiality, he brings all of his first cousins along with him. When there is partiality, you're going to have evil, confusion, self-seeking and envy. They all come along with Mr. Partiality. We all are familiar with the story in Genesis 37. I read to you verses 3–4 NKJV,

³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

It tore the family apart. Things happened that never should have happened because of the favoritism shown by Daddy. I was talking to a friend this last week. He had been the HR director in a fairly large company. Now, it wasn't a Christian company, but the owners were believers. They had brought on board a family member who didn't have a very good work ethic at all, but he got paid big dollars. He only came to work when he wanted to. If he didn't feel like it, then he wouldn't come in. And when he came in, he worked on his own stuff, his own projects. He didn't even work on stuff for the company. All the rest of the team, everybody knew it. While talking to my friend, who was the HR director, he said that it literally poisoned the atmosphere. He said it created this undercurrent of resentment and bitterness among everyone. It destroyed the morale to where people didn't even want to come to work because of the favoritism that was shown. Friend, that's what happens so many times when you find partiality being shown. It just guts everyone else, the ones who are coming in on time and doing their share of the work. When somebody's being treated differently, it's a hard environment.

I move a lot in church circles, both here domestically and in different places around the world, and I've seen this happen so many times. You'll have a great church, the pastor is growing and doing things, and then they'll install their son as the leader of the church, which is not a bad thing because God uses families. You see that principle throughout Scripture. But it's one thing when the boy's got the goods, and it's something entirely different when he doesn't have the goods. Everybody knows it if the kid doesn't have the goods.

It creates resentment, and it creates an undercurrent. It creates strife that can be palpable. I've seen so many of those churches that've shown favoritism to a boy just so they could set him up for the future and set him up financially, even though he didn't have the calling. He didn't have the goods. I've watched those churches that were going forward for the cause of Christ diminish, lose their momentum, and lose their impact. To this day, some of them have never recovered because of this thing we're talking about. It can open the door to envy and strife among God's people. Number five: It will keep us from having God's perspective. The Bible says, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." I think if we'll

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pray, God can show us some things that are not readily observable by first impression or by the things we tend to be biased about. First Corinthians 1:26–29 NKJV,

²⁶ For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. ²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence.

You don't always know what you have on your hands if you're making all of your judgments based on your prejudices and your partialities. I've shared this story in one form or another many times. I got saved in a street mission. I was really messed up in a lot of ways, and Jesus took hold of me, and He changed me. I started going to a little Pentecostal church, and most of the people in the church avoided me completely. I understood why even then. It's because they were afraid of me. I didn't look like them. I obviously came from a whole different world than they'd come from. Most of them were older than me, and they were afraid of me. I got that, but there were a few people in there that were actually kind to me.

There was one person in particular who gave me some books and helped answer some of my questions. They went out of their way to help me. A guy in the church was actually the principal of the Christian school. It was not just the only Christian school in that town. It was the only Christian school in a large area of towns. He was a well-known Christian and very respected. He pulled the person who was helping me aside and said, "Listen, just a bit of advice. This Bayless guy, don't waste your time on him. He's a lost cause. He's never going to amount to anything. I'm just telling you, he's not going to make it. You're spinning your wheels. If you want to help somebody, find somebody else to help. It's a total waste of time with this guy. Don't even bother." I'm glad God saw something different in my heart than what he saw.

I have a friend who pastored a great church. Today, he's sort of a traveling teacher. But years ago, he had a great church, and he had an evangelist there whom I also happened to know. He's not on this earth anymore, but the evangelist was doing amazing crusades across the African continent from Cape Town to Cairo. A small meeting might have 150,000 people in it. A large crusade sometimes had close to 700,000–800,000 people in one meeting. They would count people by the acre. So, he's preaching away in the church and finishes ministering to people, then is escorted out or goes off.

The pastor, my friend, is getting ready to leave, and this guy comes up. My friend said, "I thought he was going to ask me for bus fare because he looked like he didn't even have enough money for bus fare. I looked at the way he's dressed." The guy came and said, "Hey! Excuse me, pastor, when the evangelist was preaching, he talked about his upcoming crusades and said he needed two and a half million dollars for them." He says, "Did anybody respond to that request yet?" Pastor says, "No." He says, "Well, I'd like to talk to him. Can you arrange that?" Pastor said, "No." He said, "He's gone, and frankly, I'm hungry. I'm leaving, too." The guy said, "Well, I'd really like to get in touch with him." The pastor said, "Look, I got to go, but he's staying at such and such hotel. Good luck!" He was just really rude to the guy and left.

Anyway, the guy called the hotel, and they patched the call through to the evangelist's room. He says, "Hey, I'm so and so, and I was in the meeting." The evangelist recognized the man's name. He was the fifth richest man in Great Britain. He said, "I'd like to meet with you." So, they had a coffee together. The guy wrote him a check for two and a half million dollars. The first of

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many checks that he wrote him. Anyway, my friend hears about it and says, "You have to be kidding me." He talked to the evangelist after the fact, and he was just shocked.

Well, anyway, sometime later, that same guy is back in the church, and now the pastor makes a beeline for him. My friend says, "Hey, good to have you here. Do you mind me asking you something? The last time you came to church, you were really dressed down. Why did you dress like that when you came?" He said, "Always when I go someplace for the first time, I dress like that so I can find out what's in people's hearts." When we practice partiality, instead of having God's perspective, we become what James 2:4 says, "Judges with evil thoughts." We begin looking at people as merchandise as opposed to someone created in the image of God who is worthy of our time, our input, and of being loved.

I remember one time Janet and I went into a mall. We were attending some meetings in another state, and I needed a suit. I think I had a pair of shorts on, some flip-flops, and a T-shirt. We went into a men's store. I couldn't get a single guy to wait on me. I found a nice suit I wanted to buy. The guys there would see me and look the other way. There are three or four salespeople. They're not doing anything. They won't give me the time of day. I realize they're working on commission, but I can't even get anybody to talk to me.

Finally, we got to go because we have to make this meeting. We get back to the hotel, and I change into a suit. We go to the meeting and went to a meeting the next day. We got done, and I said, "Babe, let's go back to that men's store. I'm going to buy that suit. She said, "Okay." This time, I walk into the men's store, and I've got a suit on. Before I got three feet in the door, I had three sales guys fighting over who was going to wait on me. The same guys who wouldn't even look my way the day before because now they saw dollar signs. They just saw my suit. God have mercy on us when we start looking at people as our next customers. We're in a bad place spiritually when we begin to look upon people that way. We come to James 2:5 NKJV.

⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

Now, I don't know if it was on the screen. I didn't look, but in your Bible, if you'll notice, the words "to be" are italicized. Anytime you find words in the Scripture that are italicized, they're italicized for a meaning. It literally means that the translators want you to know that they added those words. They're not in the original manuscripts, but they added them for what they felt was going to bring clarity. Let's just look at the verse without the addition of the translators. It says, "Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world rich in faith?"

He didn't choose them because they were poor. We've already read God doesn't show favoritism to the poor or to the rich. He chose them because they were rich in faith. He chose them because of their willingness to obey. Jesus says, "If you love Me, obey My commandments." He's given His kingdom to those who love Him. He's chosen the poor because they're rich in faith. And frankly, the gospel has so much to offer to the poor. It puts value on those whom the world sees as valueless. It welcomes those whom the world rejects.

At the same time, the gospel puts great demands on all believers, which the rich might consider more than the poor. Because when Jesus becomes the Lord of your life, He's also to become the Lord of your money. Did you assume this position of, "Okay, Lord, You gave everything to me. I'm just a steward. These are Your resources, and You have access to them at any time." Now, the rich are going to consider that perhaps more than the poor. If you don't think so, read the story of the rich young ruler. He wanted Jesus to be the Lord of his life but not the Lord of

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his money. He walked away sorrowful because he had great riches. Flip that around. He walked away sorrowful because great riches had him.

God is not showing favoritism to the poor. He chose them because they were rich in faith. They responded in faith to the message, while others rejected it. But he's illustrating the fact that the important things from heaven's perspective are not what weighs heavily on earth's scales. And in like manner, that which the world most highly esteems is counted worthless by heavenly standards. He goes on in James 2:6–7 NKJV,

⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?

That's an overall observation he's making. These churches, apparently, had been showing partiality and favoritism to those who, at large, had harassed them the most and given them the most grief. It's sort of like the pastor who spends 90% of his time trying to pacify the terminally disgruntled members of the church while almost ignoring the faithful sons and daughters whom God is using to build the house. That is not a wise use of a shepherd's time. So, what's the answer to all of this? Verse 8,

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well.

We don't want to be judged on the basis of our present economic status. We don't want to be judged on our outward appearance. We want to be judged based on our character, our work ethic, and on the intent of our heart. If you will treat other people that way, you'll do well. It'll come back to you, is what James is saying. There was a huge controversy in New York some years back. I remember reading the headlines. The headlines said, "Rich door, poor door." They were building these high-rise luxury condominiums that would sell for millions of dollars a piece, but because of the city's inclusionary housing guidelines, in the same structure, they also had to build low-income units. So, they did it, but the rich folks entered by the front door, and the lower-income people had to enter by the back door. Hence, "Rich door, poor door." They never mixed. They were completely segregated in every way. It was a huge controversy.

Well, my friend, in God's kingdom, listen to me. The rich and the poor, the scholar and the simpleton, the heiress and the harlot, the moral and the immoral, the philosopher and the peasant all have to come through the same door and travel the same road. It is by faith in Christ. I read a story recently. It was about a Swiss preacher. His name was Cesar Milan. He was in London and was invited to a prestigious, large house where they were going to have a big musical production. They had a number of people sing, play, and do different things.

This one woman who had been thrilling the audiences of London at the time played, sang, and got a standing ovation. People went wild and are congratulating her. This preacher, Cesar Milan, sort of winds his way through the crowd when it dies down a little bit and goes up to her. He gets her attention and says, "I couldn't help thinking while you were singing that if you would dedicate yourself and your talents to Christ, it would be a great benefit for the kingdom." He went on and said, "But right now, you're just a guilty sinner. The same as the worst drunkard out on the street or as the women who sell their bodies down in the red light district. But if you come to Christ just as you are, He'll cleanse you, and He'll change you." She was really offended. She said, "Sir, you are so offensive." He said, "I didn't mean offense, ma'am. I'm sorry, but I do pray that the Holy Spirit will convict you." That night, she couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned in her bed. Finally, Charlotte Elliott slipped out of her bed, got on her knees, and took Jesus as her

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Savior. Then that night, in 1835, she penned the words of one of the world's most loved songs, Just as I am.

Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidd'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come. Just as I am, and waiting not to rid my soul of one dark blot, to thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come. I come. Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come.

Friend, there is no other way. You come to Him by believing His promise. It's not your financial status. It's not your good works. It's not anything that you have done. You are so loved by God that He sent His Son to be a sacrifice for you. As Christ hung upon that cross and shed His precious blood, God laid upon Him the sin of the world. He took your sin and the punishment that was attached to it, and He put it on His own Son, the innocent Lamb of God who died, and through the shedding of His blood paid for our sins. After three days and three nights, once the claims of God's eternal justice were forever satisfied, Jesus was raised from the dead. The Scripture says this: if you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, and if you confess Him with your mouth as Lord, you will be saved.

Salvation, thank goodness, is not about religious ritual. It's not about mindless ceremony. It's not about some endless list of things you are no longer allowed to do. It's about walking and talking with your Creator. It's what you were made for. It's that crazy missing piece of the puzzle that you can't find anywhere else. It's that empty place in your heart that you cannot fill with sex. You cannot fill it with drugs. You cannot fill it with alcohol. You cannot fill it with good works. You cannot fill it with money and success. You cannot fill it with extreme sports. You cannot fill it with religious ritual. You cannot fill it with any other thing. It's a God-shaped hole.

Sin separated us from Him. Jesus died for that sin. And because of His sacrifice, we can come back into a relationship with God. I want to pray with you. Out on the plaza, in the auditorium, if you wouldn't mind, just right now, close your eyes and bow your heads if you would. I don't think it's a coincidence that we are together today. There is a God in Heaven who knows your name. Jesus said, "The one who comes to Me, I will not turn away." The Bible says, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Friend, this is about relationship.

I just want to ask, if you're here, and you have never made Jesus the Lord of your life, whether on the plaza, in this auditorium, and you say, "I want to be made right with God. I want a relationship with Him." You may not be interested in ritual and ceremony; neither is God. But you are interested in a relationship. I'm just going to count to three in a moment. When I do, if you want to pray with me and you want to say yes to Jesus, I'm just going to ask you to lift a hand when I get to three. I'll acknowledge hands, and then you can put them down. By that uplifted hand, you are just saying, I want in on this.

An act truly as simple as lifting your hand, I believe, can help your faith begin to move toward God. The Bible says, "Faith is expressed through action." Just consider it this way: your hand is being lifted toward God. It's an outward reflection of your heart. Your heart is reaching out toward God. If you are a backslider or a prodigal in here today, maybe you loved Jesus when you were a little kid. Maybe you went to some vacation Bible school, and you actually made a genuine commitment from your heart to Him. Or maybe you had an encounter with God at a youth camp. Or maybe as an adult, you were in trouble, and you said, "Oh God, help me." You might even have made some promises, and God helped you, but you haven't fulfilled your side of the deal yet.

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Well, I have good news for you. God is not mad at you, but it's time for you to come home, prodigal son. It is time for you to come home, prodigal daughter. I want to encourage you to pray this prayer as well. One, this is your moment, friend. Two, are you ready? Do you want in on this prayer? Three, if that's you, just lift a hand. By your uplifted hand, I want to pray. Out in the auditorium, I mean in the plazas as well, just lift a hand. Just get it up. That's good! That's awesome! A lot of hands, go ahead and put them down. I want everybody to look up this way if you wouldn't mind.

In just a minute, not yet, but in just a minute, I'm going to ask you to do something. I'm going to ask that nobody leave until we're done. We have some sacred stuff going on right now. In just a minute, I'll have everyone stand up. When I do have everyone stand, I'm going to ask every person who lifted a hand who is in the auditorium here to come out from where you are seated or where you're standing and just come stand across the front with me here.

Out on the plaza, you can just stand to your feet when I have you do that. I ask you to do that for a of couple reasons. One, it would give me the privilege to look you in the eye and pray with you personally. But I want to make it clear. You do not have to come up here to the front for God to hear your prayer. There is nothing especially holy about the front of the church. If you sit right where you are right now and from a sincere heart, if you speak to God, He will hear you. Your geographical location and your physical posture really are unimportant. What is important is the posture of your heart.

Listen, you do not have to come up here to meet with God. You don't. Absolutely, you don't. You might say, "Alright, why would I come up at all?" For a couple of reasons, I think it helps you. One, it'd just give me the privilege to pray with you personally. The second reason is that the Bible talks about the fear of man. It says the fear of man brings a snare. In other words, it binds us. It restricts us. As long as I'm afraid of what you think of me, as long as I'm worried about how you are going to interpret what I do and what I say, it's going to restrict my life. The worst place to have your peace is in somebody else's head. If you are worried about what people think of you, if you are afraid of what people will say about you, I'll tell you right now, you will never be able to serve Jesus from your heart like you should. It can't be done.

I think that by coming forward is a way to break the chains of the fear of man. In a sense, you would be saying, "Look, if the whole world wants to look at me right now, let them look. I don't care. I care more about what God thinks than anyone else." I think it would honor God, and I really think it would help you to do it. Now, when I do have you stand, a couple of things. One, if you have a Bible or a purse or whatever with you, bring it forward just so you're not thinking about it back in your chair because we'll dismiss everybody with you still up here. Then, secondly, once we stand, you're going to find out that it might be a little difficult to get out of the aisle. Not a problem.

Listen, just tap somebody on the shoulder. The whole aisle will move out, so you can come up here. We would just love to see it happen. We don't mind doing it at all. We are going to wait till you come up, and then we're going to pray with you. Again, out on the plaza, you can just stand to your feet and pray with us. And with that, just stand to your feet, okay? If you're lifting a hand, make your way. Just come all the way up to this bottom step and stand up here if you would.

I am so glad you came forward. I know that there will be a few of you who are up here going like, "If I knew he was going to ask us to come forward, I never would have lifted my hand." But you did it. You have courage. We are swimming upstream in a downstream world. It does take

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courage to serve Jesus. If you have courage, you can. Every one of us has a story. God knows it, and He loves us. The best news I can give you is that this is about a relationship with Him. I gave my life to Him 47 years ago, and since that day, I have been telling everybody who will stand still long enough about Him because He is real. I'm going to lead you in a simple prayer in just a minute. Then, I want to share a couple of things with you. All I can do, though, is give you the words.

The words are important, but the important thing is that you tie a sincere heart around these words. That's what God looks for. He always looks at our hearts. It's an amazing thing. If you will tie your heart around the words and speak them to God, He will hear you, and He will meet you. Now, if it helps you to close your eyes when you pray, you can do it. Maybe put a hand on your heart. I'd like everybody to pray out loud with us right now. Just say,

Oh God, with all of my heart, I come to You now. I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe He died on the cross for me. I believe He was raised from the dead. Jesus, I invite You into my life. I give You everything. All I am and all I have, I put in Your hands, Jesus. From this moment forward, I will follow You, Lord, wherever You lead me. Amen.

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