

Faith, Forgiveness, Faithfulness, and Fun

by Bayless Conley

I'm going to share just for a few minutes with you four things. The Earth has gone around the Sun 70 times since I was born. I have learned a few things through my mistakes. I've learned a few things from getting it right. I've learned a few things from watching others make mistakes, and from watching them get it right. Just for the next few minutes, four things I want to talk to you about—Faith, Forgiveness, Faithfulness, and Fun.

If, as a father, as a grandfather, there were just a few things that I would want to transmit, communicate to my sons, to my daughters, and my grandkids, these would be them. So I just want to speak to you as a father today, things that I think are important just after having been around the block a few times. The first one is faith. Jesus cursed the fig tree, and within 24 hours it withered away. When they passed by the next time, Peter exclaimed, “Master, the fig tree You cursed has withered away.” This was Jesus' response. He said this in Mark 11:22 NKJV,

²² So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God.”

It's my first point. It's the first thing that I would want people to understand—children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren—is to have faith in God. The Bible says this in Hebrews 11:5–6 NKJV,

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, “and was not found, because God had taken him”; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. ⁶ But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

There's not much in the Bible said about Enoch besides this. You can read his story in Genesis 5:24 NKJV, and it basically says this.

²⁴ And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

We're also told that he walked with God for 300 years. Now when we think about that in connection with this, he did it by faith. Enoch walked with God by faith. If we backed up just a few verses there in Hebrews 11:1 NKJV, it tells us what faith is, the definition of faith biblically.

¹¹ Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Meaning Enoch walked with God for 300 years, and he didn't see God any more than you see God. He didn't feel God any more than you feel God, or any more than I feel God. But he talked to Him, he prayed to Him, and he worshiped Him. He lived as though God's eyes were upon Him.

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The truth is, God sees our actions. He hears our words, and He also sees the very intent of our hearts. Now, others may know our public persona, but God knows who we are in private. We should strive that there be no difference between who we are publicly, and who we are privately. Now, for us, having faith in God is tied to His Book, the Bible. Romans 10:17 NKJV says,

¹⁷ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Hearing God's promises creates faith in the human heart, and it is sustained in the same way in the human heart through the promises of God. As a father, I just want to encourage you, have a love affair with God's Book. Don't ever try to have faith. Just fill your heart with the Word, and faith will come unconsciously. Never try to believe God, that's ridiculous. If you just fill your heart with His Word, faith will come unconsciously to you.

Faith is the byproduct of the indwelling Word. Faith comes with a word like wet that comes with water. You don't go into the restaurant and say, "I'd like a water, please. Oh, and bring the wet with it." No, the wet comes with the water. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word. It is sustained through the Word of God as well. The Apostle Paul put it well in Acts 20:32 NKJV. He says this,

³² "So now, brethren, I commend (or I entrust) you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

"I'm literally entrusting you to God and to His Word, which is able to build you up, and it will bring you into your full inheritance in Christ." Everything that Jesus died to provide will come to you through the Word of God. When Jesus made that statement to Peter and the disciples in reference to the fig tree He had cursed, He said, "Have faith in God." Then He told Peter a couple of different ways that faith works.

But we need to remember, faith is not just about operating a principle. It's not faith in a principle; it's faith in a person. He said, "Have faith in God, and then if you'll do what God said to do in His Word, God will do what you cannot do." God will come on the scene and do what you cannot do through your human ability. So here Jesus says, "Have faith in God." in verse 22. Mark 11:23–24 NKJV,

²³ "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."

These are two ways that Jesus said we express our faith in God. I remember so distinctly, I was a new convert. I had been reading and reflecting on these verses—these words of Jesus in Mark 11, "Have faith in God." I understood that the mountain represented an obstacle that you couldn't move on your own. Something that's just too big, too massive, and too difficult for you to deal with.

Now Jesus didn't say, "Complain to God about how big your mountain is." He didn't say, "Talk to God about how big the mountain is." He said, "Talk to the mountain about how big your God is." But very few people talk to the mountain. Everyone else wants to talk about the mountain. Jesus said, "You speak to the mountain. You speak to the problem." God will do what you cannot do. He'll remove it.

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Now, I'm a brand-new convert. Again, I still remember what I was doing and where I was. I'd been reflecting on this late one night. I'm by myself, driving my 1972 Ford Courier pickup truck. I can tell you the intersection I was driving through. At about 11 o'clock at night, I had a monster migraine headache. It was massive. I thought about these verses, and I felt like the Lord was saying, "Have faith in God. Just do what I said." So, I did it by myself in the car, out loud. I was kind of mad at the headache. I spoke to it to leave in the name of Jesus. I kind of shouted it. It didn't just begin to diminish. It just went, "Boop." It was gone. It was gone.

I still remember driving by myself. My jaw is hanging open. I'm thinking, "This stuff works." Have faith in God. Act upon His Word. The second thing I would share as a father is, forgiveness. Learn to forgive quickly. The very next thing Jesus said, "Speak to the mountain. When you pray, believe you will receive it." The very next verse in Mark 11, Jesus said this, verses 25–26 NKJV

²⁵ "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

Unforgiveness will keep our faith from working. It's like being in a dead zone with your cell phone. You can dial all you want, but you're not going to connect. When you are harboring unforgiveness and animosity, you're in a dead zone when it comes to your faith. It will stop your faith from working. You will not connect with your carrier, who happens to be God, who carries your burdens for you.

As long as we're in unforgiveness, we're in that dead zone. Friend, life is difficult enough without carrying the crushing burdens of unforgiveness, resentment, and bitterness. The truth is, the longer you carry bitterness, the longer you carry resentment or unforgiveness, the heavier that burden becomes.

I still remember, we were in our 20s, I was with two of my buddies, we were backpacking in the western Sierras, my friend Monty and my friend Don. We were a couple of days in, and we'd made a camp. We've got like another four days, maybe another five days. We were going to be in the backcountry. Monty picks up this rock, and he puts it in his pack.

I go, "What are you doing?" He says, "Oh, Christy would like this." Christy was his girlfriend, now his wife of 45 years. But he said, "Christy would like this." I said, "You are going carry that rock around in your pack for the next four days?" He says, "Yeah, she'd like this." I remember Don and I, we just rolled our eyes at each other, said, "Okay, this guy's done." His life of being single, it's over. He's head over heels for this girl.

Well, being the good friend that I am, I got Don to distract Monty over by the fire, and I got a rock about this big. I went over to Monty's pack, took his stuff out, and I put it down on the bottom of his pack. If you don't have friends like that, you need to get better friends. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. That's what your good friends do to you.

So, the next three days, Monty's going, "This pack is heavy!" I'm going, "Yeah, mine feels heavy too." Don and I are cracking up. A few days later, he discovered the rock at the bottom of his pack. Unforgiveness is that way. The longer you carry it, the heavier it becomes. In fact, if you carry a grudge; the truth is, eventually it'll carry you, and it will take you to places that you do not want to go.

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Learn to forgive quickly, because offenses are going to come. It's inevitable. Jesus had 12 apostles. One of them doubted Him, one of them denied Him, and one of them betrayed Him. Statistically, you're probably not going to get off any better. It's going to happen. Betrayals are going to come. Broken heartedness is going to come, and you need to learn to be a forgiver.

In Luke 17, Jesus, talking to the disciples, said, "If your brother sins against you seven times in a day, and he comes back seven times and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." Do you know what the disciples' response to that was? They said, "Lord, increase our faith." Sometimes you have to forgive by faith.

I had a friend once who betrayed me in a way that I just didn't see coming. If you would have asked me, "How much would you bet that this person would ever do this?" I would have bet everything I owned. I said, "There's no way. It's not possible. They won't do it." So, it really shattered me when it happened, and he ended up telling some lies that affected other relationships I had.

I forgave, but it was a total faith venture, because I didn't feel like it. I didn't feel like forgiving, but I did it. I would be sitting there and out of nowhere these feelings of animosity and resentment would just sweep over me. Every time that happened, I would say, "No, I've forgiven him. Father, this is in Your hands. Resentment has no hold on me. I've given him to You."

I would pray until those feelings would dissipate. But then a little while later, they'd come back, and it would just sweep over me, resentment and unbelief for what had happened. The unfairness of it, and how it still had traction and was going on and affecting my life. So, I'd go again, "No, I have forgiven him. I've got no resentment in my heart. Father, I've put him in Your hands. I've given it to You. I refuse to give in to resentment." I would just worship God for a while. Then it would get quiet. That went on for months, and months, and months, and months.

Then one day, I got a call from one of his siblings. He said, "Pastor Bayless, this is so-and-so." I said, "Yeah." He said, "We have met." I said, "Yeah, I remember we met one time." He said, "I just want you to know the family knows what my brother did to you." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, and he is doing it to us now. It has to do with the family inheritance. We were talking, and I'm just calling you because we don't know how to deal with it. We didn't see it coming. How have you responded? How in the heck did you get through this?"

I just shared with him. I said, "It was a venture of faith for me." I told him what I had done, and he thanked me. It's interesting, when I hung up, you'd think that hearing something like that would just fortify the rightness of you being angry. It's like, "Okay, I am justified in being resentful. This guy's doing it to his own family." But there was none of that.

I hung up the phone, and I realized all of the feelings of resentment and animosity were gone. Not a single negative feeling was there. And that was years, and years, and years ago. They have never visited me again. Not a single time. I have been completely free. Faith had turned to reality. Now, would I trust that person? Absolutely not. Trust has to be earned. Forgiveness is a gift that you give freely. No, I wouldn't trust him, that would be foolish.

Now, the best way that I could illustrate this—many of you've seen the old churches where they have the tower and the bells up in the tower? You have the rope coming down, and you've got to pull hard on it several times. You pull, and you pull. You get the momentum of that bell going, then the tongue begins to hit the sides of the bell, and it begins to ring. Once the momentum of

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the bell is going, just every once in a while, just a slight tug on the rope. It's not hard at all. Just a little bit, just like that. Every once in a while. It'll ring, ring, and ring.

Forgiveness is when you let go of the rope. When you let go of the rope, those negative emotions are still going to clang in your soul for a while. There's still going to be that noise, and those feelings are still going to sweep over you. But if you don't grab the rope again, friend, it'll start to get quiet in your soul. My soul has been quiet for many, many, many years regarding that. But if you grab the rope again and keep that momentum going, it doesn't take a lot.

Here's what grabbing the rope again is: you start sharing that private information with somebody who's not part of the solution or part of the problem. You rehearse to somebody how you were hurt. You were hurt; you tell somebody else what was done to you. You tell somebody else about what you think about that person. Every time you do that, you're giving that thing a tug.

Some people keep the momentum of that bell going for months and months. Some people keep it going for years. Some people keep it going for a lifetime. It affects their health. It puts them in an early grave. It affects their relationship with God. It affects their relationship with others, and it affects their relationship with their own soul. My friend, when you forgive, you set a prisoner free, only to discover that you were the prisoner. Be quick to forgive. The third thing that I would tell you is be faithful. Proverbs 28:20 NKJV says,

²⁰ A faithful man will abound with blessings.

Be steady. Be dependable. Be faithful to your spouse. Be faithful to your friends. Be faithful to your church. Be faithful to your place of employment. Show up on time. Put in a full day's work and be faithful to your word. If you give your word, keep it, or die trying to keep it. Your word is sacred. You should never be quick to give your word and make a promise. But if you gave your word, you keep it regardless of the cost. You be a person of your word. If your word is no good, you're no good. Your word is your bond. Psalm 15:1 NKJV asks the question,

¹ Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle?

Part of the answer is in verse 4, "The one who keeps his promises even when it hurts." The Message Bible says, "Keep your word even when it costs you." Many years ago, I was invited by a friend, Dave's been in heaven for a few years now, to go hunting with him and his dad. His dad was a friend of mine as well—back in what's called the Bob Marshall wilderness in Montana. It's the largest wilderness area in the United States—1.5 million acres of the wildest country in our nation.

I'm going to fly from LA into Glacier National Airport. I'm supposed to find this little hangar, and a guy's going to fly me back into the middle of the Bob Marshall wilderness and drop me off in a meadow where Dave—now he and his father had taken horses in a couple of days before and made a camp. He's going to be waiting for me there with the horses, then we're going to go another 20 miles in to where camp's going to be.

I get to LA, I'm excited, and LA is socked in with fog. So, my flight's delayed by three hours. Finally, they let us take off. I get to Glacier International Airport three hours late. I find the hangar, and the guy says, "You're late." I said, "Well, I couldn't help it. The plane was late. Are we going to go?" He says, "I guess so."

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He takes me back into the middle of one and a half million acres of wilderness. We land in this meadow. We get out. Dave's not there. We look around. We wait a while. The guy gets a gun and fires three shots off in the air. No response. He says, "Get in." I said, "What do you mean, get in?" He says, "We're going back." I said, "You're going back. I'm staying here." He said, "You can't stay here." I said, "I can, and I am." He said, "You can't stay here."

I said, "My friend told me he'd be here. I don't know where he is right now, but he'll be here. I knew. He's that kind of a guy. If he told me he'd be there, he'd be there." The guy looked at me and says, "You can't." I said, "I'm staying. Just go." He said, "Look, there's one grizzly bear for every square mile here. There's packs of hungry wolves all over here. You can't stay." I said, "I'm staying." He said, "Your friend's not here." I said, "He will be unless he got eaten by a grizzly bear or by a pack of hungry wolves."

I had an apple, a knife, and my sleeping bag. I said, "I'm golden. Just get out of here." The guy looks at me, and says, "You've made the biggest mistake of your life." I'll never forget it. He said, "When you see my plane dip over the horizon, you're going to have the worst sinking feeling in your stomach." I said, "Just go." He flies. I was so glad to see him leave. I goofed around for a few hours. It got dark, ate my apple, and climbed into my sleeping bag.

About 2 a.m., Dave shows up with the horses. He goes, "Bayless!" I said, "Hey, Dave, where have you been?" He says, "Well, I waited a couple hours, and you guys didn't show. So, I rode 20 miles out to a ranger station and made a call either on the radio or a sat phone, and I got the guy at the hangar. He says, 'I left that idiot up there.'"

But you ought to be that way with your word that if you've given it to someone, that's just it. There's no waffling. There's no second-guessing. They know the only reason you wouldn't keep your word is because you died trying to keep it. Our word is sacred. Be faithful. Faithful to your spouse, faithful to your friends, faithful to your church, faithful to your place of work, and faithful to your word. The final thing that I want to share with you as a father is have fun. First Timothy 6:17 NKJV says,

¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.

God gives us richly all things to enjoy. God's not against you having fun. There's some of you who may be here today, you have not given your life to Jesus because somebody sold you a lie, and you thought, "If I become a Christian, it means all of the fun is going to get sucked out of my life." No, friend, that is not true.

Listen, God created color, texture, and laughter. It is the greatest adventure you will ever be on in your entire life when you sell your life out and submit your life to Jesus Christ. God doesn't mind you having fun. He gives us richly all things to enjoy. You just need to find out what you enjoy, and then do it. If it's garage-sailing, do it. If it's gardening, do it. If it's hiking, biking, stamp collecting, music, golf, or if it's fishing, do it.

You were created to not work, work, work, work, work all the time. You need to do some things that fill your soul emotionally. My sweet little wife here plays pickleball twice a week with her girlfriends, and she loves it. She'll come back and gives me sort of a blow-by-blow of everything that happened in the games, how many games they won, and the different shots that were taken. She loves it. It fills her emotional tank.

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There are other things that I do. In fact, I've talked about this before, but many years ago, I became friends with a minister named Oral Roberts. We became very close friends. He and I used to golf a lot. He actually lived in the area here with his wife, Evelyn. We would share meals with him. He'd ring me up often and say, "Hey, Bayless, are you free? Let's go golf." So, just most of the time, it was me and him, or I'd call him up. On occasion, I took Harrison with us, but most of the time just Oral and me.

One of the days we are golfing, and he's been in ministry longer than I've been alive at that time, and I said, "Oral, what's the best advice you can give me as a young minister? What's the most important thing? Of all the things you could tell me, what's the most important advice you could give me as a young man in ministry having been through so much in your life?"

He said, "Bayless, you've got a pretty good golf swing. I would advise you to get some lessons, and whatever it costs you, you should join a country club." Then he said, "Golf is the only thing that's kept me alive." And that was it. I thought, "And?" But that was it. Honestly, I was really disappointed. I sort of tucked it away, but I thought, "Okay, not what I was expecting."

Two weeks later, I'm in Australia. I'm the keynote speaker for the Apostolics. It's a Pentecostal denomination in Australia. They found out I like to golf, and so they put me out with a guy named Leo Hart. Leo had been one of the pioneers in the early days of the movement, their premier evangelist. Leo and I were walking on hole 10 or 11. Leo starts talking about the denomination.

He says, "Bayless, in the early days we were quite legalistic." I said, "Really?" He says, "Oh yeah. No mixed bathing. Boys and girls couldn't go in the swimming pool at the same time. Boys were not allowed to wear shorts. We were forbidden to play any sports. We were told it was sinful. We could never watch a movie. The girls had to never cut their hair. They had to keep their hair long. I was the premier evangelist at the time, and I started having some serious health issues.

So, I went to the doctor. They did a battery of tests on me, and the doctor said, 'Leo, there's nothing wrong with you per se. You don't have a specific illness, but your body's breaking down, and it's just due to the stress of your ministry. So let me ask you a question. What's your hobby?'" Leo said, "I read the Bible." The doctor said, "That's good, Leo, that you read the Bible, but what's your hobby? What's your release valve? How do you let off steam?"

He says, "I read the Bible." He said, "Okay, keep reading the Bible, but I'm just telling you, if you don't get a hobby, you will die. You'll go to an early grave." So Leo—we're walking along, and he tells me, "Bayless, I took up golf. It was an absolute scandal. You wouldn't believe how much flak I received from the denomination. It was absolutely scandalous." Then he stopped in the fairway. He turned around, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Bayless, golf is the only thing that's kept me alive." I thought, "I heard the same thing recently."

Then I thought back to when I was in Bible school. They brought in a missionary from Borneo. This guy—utmost parts of the earth—20, 25 years in Borneo. So I got there early. I'm sitting in the front row. I'm leaning forward, "Come on. I want to hear it."

This is how he starts off. He says, "You won't make it as a missionary if you don't have a hobby. You won't make it in ministry if you don't have a hobby. My hobby is beachcombing. I collect shells. In fact, I found, in Borneo there are certain very valuable rare shells that people will pay a lot of money for. So I created a little micro industry for the natives who I work with there."

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I remember I'm sitting in the front row—I'm a young Bible school student, and I'm thinking, "Oh, please, can we get a real missionary in here? What the heck is this? How stupid. What a waste of time." But then what Oral had told me, what Leo had told me, and what I heard from the missionary—I began to connect the dots.

Listen, as a father, I just want to tell you, you need to do something that fills that emotional tank. You need to have fun. You are created for that. Now, let me just circle all the way back to the first one, faith. Have faith in God. If our greatest need had been more information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been more technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been more pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But He knew that our greatest need was to be saved and rescued from the consequences of our sin, so He sent a Savior. He sent His own Son. That's where your faith begins, is by embracing Jesus Christ. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him wouldn't perish, but would have eternal life."

Bow your heads and close your eyes with me for a moment, if you would. You may have been a recipient of a promise today, and the only reason you came is because your family promised to make you a good meal or take you out somewhere.

On Mother's Day, most of the moms and grandmas say, "I just want all of my kids and all of my grandkids to come to church for Mother's Day." But the guys say, "I just want to watch golf and eat barbecue." But you are here, out on the plaza, listening wherever you happen to be, around the world or in this auditorium. It's not a coincidence you're here, even if it took a family member to bribe you to get you here today.

God wants you to know that He loves you, and He wants you to have a relationship with Him. The only way that happens is to come to Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. When Christ hung upon Calvary's tree, I want you to just see Him there. He's been beaten and disfigured beyond recognition. He's on that cross, suspended between heaven and earth. The sky turns dark, and He suddenly cries out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

For at that moment, the Father laid the sin of the world on His own Son. All of the darkness and evil and the punishment for it fell upon Jesus Christ. The penalty for our sins came upon Him, and He willingly took it into Himself and died as our representative. After three days and three nights, the claims of God's eternal justice having been satisfied, by the power of the Holy Spirit, He raised Jesus from the dead.

Here's what the Bible declares that if you'll believe that, if you'll submit your life to Him and confess Him as Lord, God will bring you into a relationship that the Scriptures call salvation. It's not about rituals and ceremonies. It's not about adhering to some endless list of stuff you're no longer allowed to do. It's about walking and talking with God. It's about having that empty chasm in your heart filled up because you were meant to have a relationship with God, and no earthly thing will fill it.

A new girlfriend or new boyfriend won't fill it. A drug won't fill it. Extreme sports won't fill it. Money won't fill it. Religious ritual won't fill it. Good works won't fill it. It's a God-shaped vacuum. You were meant to have a relationship with God, and that only comes when you put your trust in His Son, Jesus. No one can do it for you.

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You may be here today, and your daddy was a pastor. Maybe your grandfather was a minister. Maybe you were raised in the church. That doesn't make you a Christian. You have to make a personal decision to embrace Jesus Christ. God won't force you to do it, but He does give you the opportunity. The risen Savior stands before you today, His arms open wide, wanting you to come.

Now, nobody's looking around right now, but me, and I'm just going to count to three. If you want to make that commitment and give your life to Jesus, or maybe you're a backslider who's come in today. You're a prodigal son or a prodigal daughter. You know the truth, but you're a long way from God right now. The good news is He is not mad. But the longer you stay out there on the perimeter, the harder your heart becomes. The more calloused it becomes, the easier it becomes to go down that wrong road, and the harder it becomes to return.

The Bible says, "Today, if you hear His voice, don't harden your heart, but respond." I'm just going to count to three. When I get to three, if you want to pray, I'm going to lead everyone in a simple prayer. If you want to pray with me, just lift a hand. I'll acknowledge the hands. You can put them down, and then we're going to pray.

One, it's your moment, friend. Two, are you ready this Father's Day to give it all to Jesus? Three, just put your hand up all across the auditorium, outside on the plaza as well. Keep them up for a minute, that's awesome. I see quite a few hands. So good. Go ahead and put your hands down. Let's pray. Maybe put a hand on your heart right now, wherever you happen to be. Let's just pray. Tie your heart around the words. That's the important thing. If you'll be sincere, God will hear you. Let's pray out loud. Say,

Oh God, I come to You right now with my whole heart. I believe that You love me so much that You sent Your Son to die for my sins. I believe that He was raised from the dead. Right now, I put my trust in Jesus Christ, not in my good works, not in my performance, but in Christ alone. Jesus, I embrace You as Lord and Savior. Wash me clean. Change my life. All I am and all I have, I put in Your hands, Lord. Amen.

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