

The Rev. Billy Cerveney:

Pray with me. Father, thank you for the gift of your word.

Thank you that we get to read it

and that we get to reflect upon it, Lord, and that you use it to penetrate our hearts.

I pray now, Father, that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear, that we would know what it means to love you and to be loved by you and to love like you and to move out into the world

as people who want to impact it in your name. I thank you, Jesus. We pray this in your name, amen.

So we're doing a little blessing of the backpacks or blessing of the students later. We're gonna do a little combo because not every kid brought their backpack. But I love it this time of year when everybody brings their backpacks. You remember that when you were young? It was like the biggest event, like which backpack are you gonna pick or which lunchbox, was it \$6 million, man, or whatever? Am I dating myself? But that means that summer is coming to a close, sadly. Has everyone done all their last minute trips?

I just got back, my wife and I were up in Charleston, and it was our 20 year anniversary, right? It's pretty good, huh? I was very excited. So we did 20 years, we met 20 years ago,

well, 20, longer than that, 21 years ago, 28 years and a half maybe. And we met out in Colorado.

And we were at a young life camp, and we met her, and we started kind of staying in touch with each other. When I was driving back to Nashville, she was in Texas, was where she's from, in Dallas. And I drove through Dallas because it was nowhere on the way home to take her out on a date. And it was awesome. And I got there, and she tells me that she has tickets to go to the Texas State Fair. Now, if you've ever been to the Texas State Fair, you know anything about it. It is unlike any other state fair. I've got a giant big Tex at the front with this big dude with a cowboy hat. It's a giant kind of billboard statue of a guy. But when we got there, my wife she's very cool. And I remember when we first were talking about it, she tells me, she says, "I'm so excited. "We are gonna go ride the roller coasters "at the Texas State Fair."

And I'm so full of bravado in this moment, and I'm so blinded by her. I just said, "Oh, I love roller coasters.

"I can't wait to go do this with you."

The sad thing about it is to be completely honest, in that moment, I was so consumed with my need to impress her, or I was just blinded by it, I forgot one essential fact. I don't like roller coasters at all. Actually, in fact, I hate roller coasters.

Throw up machines, as I call them. I have grown to like them now, but at that point in my life, I was not a big fan.

But I remember when we get there and she takes me to one of these rides and I get in there, I don't remember what it was called, the spleen crusher or whatever it was and we sit on it and I remember getting a bar across my lap and I remember click, click, click, click, going up and all of a sudden when you get to the top and you see that first drop that's coming your way, it's a sobering moment, is it? It's like someone turns the lens and I become, my loves and affections come into full view, and I remember thinking to myself, I don't love this.

I don't love roller coasters. In fact, I love dying, not more. I want off this ride. I want to feel like I'm in control.

I tell you that story, it's kind of funny,

but I tell you because it's this perfect picture of my Christian journey, and I bet some of y'all can relate to this.

Because here's the deal, I'm a Christian and I love Jesus.

Jesus is my savior.

I love him, and I walk with him daily, and I put my trust in him. I store my treasures in heaven, and I love him more than I love the things of this world.

And I love him, and what I do every day of my life is I try to walk deeper into that journey.

But what I don't see in the same way that I didn't see in those moments, blinded by my wife's beauty and not seeing that I don't like roller coasters, what I don't see in these moments

is how full of it I am.

Sure, I love Jesus, but there are other things at times that I love more.

Now, one of the things that God loves to do is that he loves to show me how full of it I am at times.

And then I'll get up in my day, and I'm just going through my normal day, singing his praises.

But everything starts feeling different and things start heating up and all of a sudden I feel like I'm on this steep incline and I'm hearing the click of the tracks and I get to the top and I look over what seems like a free fall and I look down and something that I love or I value or I cling to seems like I'm gonna lose it.

Or it's in danger.

Something that if I lost, my life would not be worth living.

Or that it would make my life very difficult. I look down over that other side, and I see my bank account, oh my gosh.

My ability to provide for my family, is it gonna be okay?

Or maybe you look over and you see that free fall and it's your career and you think to yourself, man, I am not where I ever thought I'd be at this stage in my life.

I had very different visions for what it would be. Maybe it's your marriage or your health, or your family.

You know, the irony of those things is they seem like good things

and when we lean into them, and I think to myself, if I were to lose those things, I don't have them,

life's not worth living at times.

I thought Jesus was supposed to take care of this. Why does it feel like a free fall?

See what happens in those moments of existential horror,

rather than those just being terrified, what God does is much like when I was on that roller coaster; he turns the lens and allows me to see myself a lot more clearly.

And the Holy Spirit moves, and he begins to show me what? What's he showing me? He's showing me that there are things in my life that I love more than Jesus.

There are things in my life that I don't trust that Jesus will take care of, and that he's gonna somehow shepherd me through to see those things taken care of.

And I might love the Lord, but I love them just as long as I get these things the way I want them.

And what the Holy Spirit shows me, that's the sin of my heart.

I got a kind of an issue with that, a little bit of attention with that, and here's what I mean.

When I think about the sin of my heart, it's usually about bad things, but a lot of those things that I just named, those things that I love, those are kind of good things, right?

Like my family or being able to provide for my family, that's a good thing.

Or maybe a marriage, that's a good thing.

I wanna love that stuff and all those sort of things. It's confusing, so what does it mean? I can't love those things?

That's sinful? No, that's not what it's saying.

I love the way that Augustine talks about sin.

What he says is that sin is not so much a behavioral disorder as it is a love disorder.

And what he means by that is that the true evil genius of sin is that it misdirects the love of my heart.

Because it knows that if it can get me to love the wrong thing, that's just one step away from getting me to do the wrong thing. And it works in two ways. The first and most obvious way is this. It can cause me to love the wrong things. And what I mean by that is this. The obvious things, violence, rock and roll, all the things that come with it. You know what I'm saying? The obvious destructive things.

But the second way that sin works in my life, and this is a lot more common, and it's also a lot sneakier, and it's something we can all relate to, is that when sin causes us to love the right things, but in the wrong order.

When it takes something that's good, it takes a good thing, it makes me love it more than God.

But Tim Keller, one of my favorite writers, you'll hear me quote him all the time, one of the things that he says he says it's when we take a good thing and we make it an ultimate thing, when I seat it on the throne.

He's saying this is the place where God says no.

You cannot put these things in front of me.

Why is God saying no, don't put these things in front of me? Is God like some toxic boyfriend or toxic girlfriend that says no, I need all your affection. You can't split your loves with me.

No.

He's not saying that because it hurts his feelings, as though it does make him sad. God is saying that don't do that because it twists our hearts.

It twists our hearts.

Doesn't matter what good thing you're talking about. I don't care if it's kids.

I don't care if it's your ministry. I don't care if it's marriage, whatever it is.

If I put that love above God, what I'm doing functionally in that place is I'm saying to that thing, I want you to do something for me that you were never designed to do. And I didn't want you to bear the weight of my heart. I want you to bear the weight of my spiritual needs. I want you to bear the weight of this sense of incompleteness in me. And it's up to you, this thing or this person or this relationship or this job or whatever it is, this ministry, it's up to you to bring closure to me.

Not only can that thing never deliver that thing,
not only can that thing never deliver on that promise,

what happens is I become obsessed with that thing, and it consumes me. It consumes my thoughts and my actions, and my sense of purpose, and I end up not satisfied

and it hollows me out from the inside.

What scripture calls that is it says that's when we make something an idol.

And when we make something an idol like that, what we're doing is we're lifting it above God, and what John Calvin says, my heart, it's an idol factory. I could turn anything into an idol, anything.

This is where the God steps in. This is where the gospel preaches in and what preaches a freedom for us in Luke 12.

And what the gospel says is that Jesus will reorder our loves

and the second things he'll do it will renew our sense of purpose.

So what does that mean? How does it reorder our loves?

So in our passage here, Jesus he's on this journey, he's going back to Jerusalem

and he's walking with his disciples in chapter 12, that says many thousands are around him. So he's got a big draw right now. And for whatever reason, he's talking to them in echoes of the Sermon on the Mount, and what Jesus is saying is he's talking to them about their anxiety.

You'll find in chapter 12 a lot of familiar things, where it says don't be anxious about anything. Consider the lilies of the field. What the Father has, he'll give to you. He sees you. Seek first the kingdom of God.

So what Jesus is trying to do is he's trying to get them to bring them to a place of peace. So he starts in verse 32. Fear not, little flock.

For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

And then he continues, and he starts saying, sell your possessions.

Give to the needy. Store your treasures in heaven. Stay dressed and ready. And Jesus talking about the second coming, he says be like men ready waiting for their master return because the master is coming like a thief.

Blessed are those he finds awake.

Really?

Like this is the passage that Jesus is trying to make us feel less anxious with. Because this is, when I read stuff like this, this is like the New Testament version of the Santa Claus is coming to town song. Like you better watch out.

You know, you better not pout. He's watching you, he can see you, and he's coming. Like, don't mess it up. Jesus is coming back.

It doesn't reorder my loves when I read that. It actually reorders my blood pressure, and I get more nervous about it.

Now, when I read passages like that in scripture, and there are a lot of them, after we have these initial reactions, I just wanna encourage you. We need to slow our roll a little bit. Because sometimes these passages might not be saying what you think they're saying. And I wanna point to a little pattern in scripture, which we see here, and you see it throughout the New Testament. And you really see it in the writings of Paul. But it's something that's called this pattern between the indicative and the imperative.

The indicative and the imperative. And what that means is, another way of saying that is in scripture, God always will declare who you are in Christ. What you are in Christ. The indicative. Before he will tell you what to do. The imperative. He will always tell you the blessings that have been lavished upon you. Your identity in grace. What God has done for you. What he is doing. What he will do. Before he calls you into this command to go therefore and do X, Y, or Z. Right? And the reason he does that is that as Christians,

the framework here is this. Our identity, who I am in Jesus,

always precedes what I do in Jesus.

That way we can maintain, we don't obey to earn our identity in Christ. We are given an identity by grace, and then we live out of that place.

We have a grace-based faith.

So in our passage today, we see this. It says, before we are told to keep watch.

Before Jesus gets into that stuff, it kinda feels like he's wagging his finger. And it says not to fall asleep. What does Jesus say?

He says, fear not, little flock.

For it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

The indicative.

God is your father.

Now that's a phrase. If you were part of our Bible study we did for the river service on Tuesday nights in the month of July, we talked about this a lot. Especially when we talked about the Lord's Prayer.

But this phrase right here, where he says, God is your father. If you were as a 21st century non-Jewish person, we just kinda read over that. Cause we're so used to saying it. Our father who art

in heaven. We just say God's father, we pray to him. Right, like that. But if you were a first century Jewish person, that is a scandalous phrase.

Because God, Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one true God of Israel, who lived in this holy of holies, in this glory cloud above the Ark of the Covenant, was untouchable.

You couldn't approach him. His name was Yahweh. He was so holy, you were not allowed to say his name. You could not say the name Yahweh. So much so, when you read the Old Testament and you flip through, you know when you read the passage and it says, blah, da, da, da, and you get to the word and it says Lord and it's all in all caps. You know when it says Lord? That's not the word, Lord. That's the name Yahweh. But it's too holy of a name to print, so they write it as what they call a circumlocution. They put a substitute in there. And the point is this is that for Jesus to call him Father is insane.

It's a paradigm shift. And what more, he's pulling back the curtains a little more, and he's letting them see the contours of the Father's heart when he calls them little flock, little lambs.

Any of you guys have kids? You have pet names for your kids? You have a nickname for your kids that only you can call them, but no one else outside the family would call them that would be kind of weird. It's kind of like what's happening here.

It's this tender and unique place that Jesus keeps going.

And what does he say? He says it's the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

And what he's saying in that moment is there's nothing the Father has that not only will he not give to you, but it is his pleasure. It is his ultimate pleasure to give you these things. He wants this for you. He wants extravagant gifts for you. Really?

Because I know some of you, in fact, I can know for a fact, all of us have those moments where we feel like we're strapped into that roller coaster and we're looking over the free fall and we look at these things we might lose or look at these things that might disappear. I'm saying to him, I say, really, you're gonna give me the kingdom?

I don't feel that. Prove it.

No, he did.

And he has.

You see, as Christians, we live in a very different part of the story than the people that were listening to this. Right? And as Christians, we know that the only way for us to have a stake in the kingdom and God's kingdom is how?

Through the cross of Christ.

It was only by Jesus choosing to climb on that cross

that I can receive any gifts of the kingdom. I don't want you to miss this, because that is our proof.

You've heard me say this before. How do you tell what something is worth?

How can you tell what something is worth? It's not by the price tag that's on it.

It's by what someone is willing to pay for it.

What's the price that someone is willing to pay for an object or a thing or whatever it might be? And that's what the object is worth.

How much was the father willing to pay for you?

Everything.

Literally everything he had.

Everything he had. The father sent his son to suffer a punishment that he did not deserve. Why?

Two reasons. First, because he wanted to give you a reward that you did not deserve.

He wanted to give you forgiveness.

He wants to give you eternal life.

He wants to give you all the blessings of the kingdom.

And the second reason he did it, and it's so simple, and it's something we miss all the time. Why did he do that? Because he wants to be with you.

He just wants to be with you for the rest of eternity. You were the joy set before Christ so that he could have you and that they could spend all of eternity with you.

Can you see?

Can you see your value in Jesus?

Can you see your value to the father?

Listen, I love you guys. I love y'all. And if your life was on the line, I would do anything I can to save you. But if the only way for me to save you was that I would have to sacrifice my own son, guess what?

You got a problem.

You better run towards the light

because I'm not doing it. But thank God I am not the father, right? I'm not the father.

He's the one that lavishes. It is his good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

In order to give it to you, it costs him everything. So let me ask you this.

If he paid everything to get you,

what do you think he's gonna do now that he has you?

Is he gonna neglect you?

He's just gonna like kind of face palm you to the side like some collect thing you bought for a collection and put you on a shelf and let you collect dust and not nurture you? No.

That doesn't make sense.

What's he gonna do once he has you? Verse 37 in our passage.

"Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes.

Truly I say to you,

he will dress himself for service and have them recline at the table, and he will come and serve them."

Do you catch what's happening here?

What it's saying here is the master, who is Jesus, when he comes back, he's not trying to catch them to see if they're asleep. Oh, I busted you, you're not faithful enough. What it's saying is stay awake in anticipation of me because when I'm coming, I'm gonna dress myself as a servant and I'm gonna serve you. This is Jesus talking.

He's saying I'm gonna be, you're gonna recline at the table, and I am gonna serve you.

Do you see how Christianity is different than every other religion in the world?

Every other religion in the world you have some prophet that shows up as Buddha or Muhammad, and they give you these instructions and they list out all these things, and now they don't matter anymore. Really, what matters is their instructions, and it's this to do list of how you get from here to the holy throne room of God.

If you can do it, and you never can.

But the message of Christianity it tells the story of a God who traversed space and time.

It's a God who traversed pain and suffering. Why? So he could serve you.

So he could serve you, so you could recline, he could minister to you. Nurture your heart.

I assure you, your bank account cannot do this.

I assure you, your ministry cannot do this for you. I assure you, your marriage can't do this. Your children, your career, whatever it is, is your thing. It can't do this.

Only God, the Father, has the heart for us in that way.

Only God, the Father, is willing to do that.

When we begin to experience the love of God in this way, it reorders our love.

You will begin to store your treasures in heaven because you will realize that you are heaven's greatest treasure.

God says it all throughout scripture.

You are the pearl of great price. You know that parable?

The person's digging for the pearl?

It's not about us trying to find the good thing. It's about God finding us. We are the pearl of great price.

That is the message of the gospel. And we digest that, it reorders our loves, but it also renews our sense of purpose.

Verse 35, Jesus says, "Stay dressed for action "and keep your lamps burning.

"And be like the men who are waiting for their master "to come home from the wedding feast."

Now you read this this time after talking about everything we just talked about. It reads a little different, doesn't it?

It doesn't read like the indicative and changes the imperative. The gospel doesn't require obedience. It produces obedience.

Because when I read this, knowing what I know, I'm not waiting for the master because I don't want to fall asleep, because I'll get in trouble if he finds me asleep. I'm waiting because I can't wait for him to get here.

Because when I love something, it changes what I love.

When I love something, it changes what I do.

Let me tell you a story.

I grew up in Jacksonville, it's like many of you. And if there's one thing that shapes the culture of North Florida, it's what? It's football, isn't it? You can tell people whether you're a gator, or you're a seminal, or you're a bulldog. It's like telling someone your denomination, right?

It's really, it's a big deal. And in Jacksonville, you throw the jags in the mix. It adds another layer to the whole equation and not just one of false hope and heartbreak, right?

Well, uncomfortable confessions. When I was a young person growing up here, I gotta be honest, I hated football, hated it.

Maybe I just didn't like the culture of it. I didn't like the game. Because I played a real sport, I played soccer because that's what true athleticism required. So I didn't play football. I didn't care for it, I'm just kidding.

But I didn't like it. And so when I left and I graduated from high school, I went up north to college, I moved out west, I kind of moved all over the country, moved to Tennessee, I met my wife, we got married, we had my daughter, and we had my son.

My son is getting older and by the time, I don't know by the time he could form words, one of the first things out of his mouth, what did he say? Football. The kid loved football. He loved it, he loved it, all his friends loved it. And I was thinking to myself, oh my gosh, okay, we're gonna do this.

And all of a sudden, I'm like, okay, we'll do this together, and we began to teach him about it, and I began to learn about it. And I'll tell you what happened.

In a very short amount of time, we had a football problem in our house. We love football. We were consumed by it. We had Jags jerseys in Nashville during the height of the Derek Henry years when he was playing for the Titans. And that was very hard to be a Jags fan there. We flew the flag, we were very proud. We suffered it because we loved it so much. Why did that happen to me?

Why did that happen?

Because when you love someone,
you begin to love the things they loved.

I loved my son, and he loved football, and I looked at it through the lens of his heart and my relationship with him,

all of a sudden, it began to change my affections, and I began to love football as well. I could say the same thing about my daughters. I could tell you what, I'm not a natural demographic for Taylor Swift, but I can sing you some Tay Tay songs

because when they were little, they liked Taylor Swift songs, and I can tell you that I could sing them because I love them.

See, when we experience the depths of God's love,
we fall in love with God.

And when we fall in love with God, we begin to love the things that he loves.

Facts.

So when Jesus tells us to stay ready and to live watchfully,

the only people, the only way to live watchfully, is to love the one or the thing for which you are watching for.

It's not about putting toothpicks in your eyelids to stay awake.

It's about anticipating this Jesus who comes to serve, to love you, to nourish your heart, to replenish you, to recreate you. To transform you.

It's not about white knuckling it.

What does it mean for us to love the things that he loves? What do you do when you're loving the things that he loves?

You're doing it right now.

You go to church,

you sit and listen to me,

you sing worship songs,

you open the scriptures, you study them, you study them on your own,

you grind those indicative into your hearts, you love each other the way that Jesus has loved you.

You move with love and mercy into the world. You value truth and you value grace at the same time.

Do you know Jesus in this way?

Do you know Jesus in such a way that it has re-or-

the loves of your heart. Are you willing to know Jesus that way? Are you willing to be willing to know Jesus in that way? Let me tell you why I'm saying that

because I know everybody in this room, and I know some of you are strapped into that roller coaster right now, and some of you are going up to the top, and you're looking over, and there are things that are terrifying on the other side. Things that we love, good things that we might be losing.

I don't know what it is. You know what it is.

And I can tell you I want to speak over you, hear the words of Jesus as he points to his father, and this is for you.

Fear not, little flock. For it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

That's for you. It's for you. It's for me.

All we have to do is be willing.

And to pray for that. So let me pray right now, and then we're going to step into something different. Father, I thank you for everyone here.

Lord, I know in this room we are all strapped in some way, sure, perform to that ride where you take us to the top and we look over the side.

And our anxiety and our fear begins to bring ourselves and our loves into focus.

Lord, I pray right now.

That you would show us where we love things in this world and trust in the things of this world more than we trust in you.

And I pray right now, Lord, that you would show us and convict our hearts that we are your little flock.

And that it is your good pleasure to give us the kingdom.

And where we ask for something and you say not yet or wait, or you even say no, Lord.

Give us the grace to know that you're not saying no because you don't love us or you don't care, you've forgotten about us.

But, Lord, your answer is coming. And it's coming. And when Jesus calls us to recline at the table and he serves us in those ways.

Lord, give us hearts to serve others in that way, to wait expectantly and lovingly.

Father, I thank you and I pray all this in your name, Jesus. Amen.