

Harris Creek Baptist Church  
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Series: Ephesians  
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How God Changes a City  
Ephesians 1: 1-2

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: <sup>2</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Well, in 2011, I made what will forever be one of the best decisions of my life, because in 2011, I decided to go to Baylor University. There we go! Come on. Yeah, I just had the best time at Baylor. I really did. Four of the best years of my life. Met my wife at Baylor, got connected to Harris Creek at Baylor, won a couple of big 12 titles while at Baylor, and just had the best time there.

But, I'm originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota. And in 2011, I was a senior in high school. Whenever I would tell people in Minneapolis that I was headed to Baylor, I would hear just about the same thing every single time. Because they would all say, "Why in the world would you want to go to Waco? You know David Koresh is from Waco, right?" That happened like clockwork. I experienced that about a hundred times. I'm like, yes, I do know that. And in that time, Waco wasn't really known for a whole lot of good things. But in these last 12 years, things have changed. Because things have changed from going, why in the world would you ever go to Waco? To people are moving to Waco from all over the place! In fact, last week in meet and greet, I met a couple here who's new to Waco, and they just moved from one of the most beautiful places in the country. I'll let you decide where that might be. And then a couple weeks ago, I also met another couple who, was honeymooning in Waco. Yeah, yeah, I know, that would not have happened 12 years ago.

Well, you know, being here these last 12 years, it's been really fun to get to see the city change. I'd even say it's been supernatural to get to see the city change. Because this city really does have a weird past. And in fact, it's not even just a weird past, but there's like an evil past in Waco. Because you know about the 1993 David Koresh Branch Davidians compound, where 79 people died and 21 kids under the age of 16 also passed away. And this relatively small town created national news.

That's not the only time this small town has created national news. In 2015, there was a biker gang shooting right at Central Texas Marketplace. It was a normal, beautiful May day, and then all of a sudden, nine people are shot and killed and over 200 people are taken into arrest. And once again, national news.

And then before that, you probably know about the Baylor football scandal. But in 2003, we had a Baylor basketball scandal, where one player on the basketball team shot and killed another player on the basketball team. And then the coach at that time, a former coach, tried to cover it up because he was illegally paying for one of their scholarships, so he said that one

of the people who died got shot and killed because he had a drug problem. Which was not true. Once again, small town creating national news and not for good reason.

And then before we were known for the whole David Koresh thing, Waco was actually known for something else. Because in 1916, about 10,000 people gathered downtown on Washington Avenue, what is now known as Heritage Square. And they gathered to hang and lynch a 17-year-old named Jesse Washington. Now, this moment, it became notorious, not just because it happened, but because of how much it was celebrated. Because at this lynching, it's believed that the mayor sanctioned for a photographer to be there and take pictures of the whole process. And then these pictures were then taken and turned into postcards to serve as advertisements for our city. And there are things that happened in that lynching that I can't even say from this stage because they treated him like he wasn't even a human.

I was writing this message from a coffee shop here this week, and as I was looking at some of these pictures because it truly shows the whole thing. I was looking at these pictures, and I wanted to throw up. That's our city.

Another thing our city had been known for, is we had one of the longest running red-light districts in the state of Texas. I didn't know that prior to this week, but it went all the way to 1917. The red-light district, it was this two-block area called The Reservation, where prostitution was legal. And again, it's not just that it was there, but it's that it was celebrated because it helped the economy. In fact, people loved it so much, that there's a man named JT Upchurch, who tried to start a ministry to help serve these prostitutes and bring them out of prostitution, but his church kicked him out of his church. Like that's our city and that's our past, but I don't think that's our present, because God has changed this city in a number of ways, one of them being Chip and Joanna. Obviously, they have done a lot to change our city.

But they're not the only people who have impacted our city. Because think about our city, think about our past. In our past, we had a basketball program that had one of the greatest scandals in NCAA sports history. That's our past. Now in our present, we have one of the godliest coaches in the country leading that team. In our past, we had a mayor that sanctioned photography of an evil and brutal lynching. In our present, we now have a mayor that meets with JP and other pastors every single week to pray over our city. Maybe you didn't know that. Every single week, the mayor meets with JP and other pastors to pray over our city. That's our present. In our past, we had a red-light district that was one of the longest running red-light districts where prostitution was legal and celebrated in our city. That's our past. Our present now is that our last remaining strip club, which was named Showtime off of LaSalle, now looks like this. (Picture shown of the demolished strip club.) Yeah.

You see, our city is shifting. It's changing. And why is that? It's because God is raising up godly men and women in the classroom and in churches and in the government and in businesses, and even home stores that have said, not in my city. No, as for me and my house, we're going to serve the Lord, and we're going to do all we possibly can to help our city serve the Lord. And this city has shifted, but we're still not where we need to be, and we're still not where we can be.

So how can we shift our city? How can it be turned from being known about all the evil in our past, to instead being a holy city? A city set apart for the name and the renown of Jesus Christ. A city on a hill, a beacon of godliness in our country. How can we change our city?

And that's what we're going to talk about today. The title of this message is "How Can We Change a City?" We're going to talk about that because we're entering into a brand new sermon series on the book of Ephesians, where every single week we're going to preach verse by verse through the book of Ephesians, and we're going to be in it for a few months. So bring your Bibles, bring something to write with, to take notes with, and if we do a good job preaching and you do a good job taking notes, by the end of this sermon series, you're going to have an entire commentary on the book of Ephesians, and you're going to get to know the Bible better than you do right now.

And just to let you into the behind the scenes a little bit, I was slated to teach Ephesians 1, 1 through 14 this week. We got together on Monday with our sermon team and I read that text and we realized, man, that's a lot of texts to explain. That doesn't really allow for a whole lot of setup. And in that meeting, JP said, "You know, Nate, we don't just want to teach from a book, we want to teach a book." Meaning, we don't just want to like teach the verses. We want to teach the who, what, when, where, how, and why of these verses. We want to teach everything around them so we can better understand the verses. So today what we're going to do, is we're not just going to teach the theology of Ephesians, but we're going to talk about the church in Ephesus so you can know who this book was written to. So for the rest of this sermon series, you can have some better background on this book and on this church. So you might understand the text a little bit better. And this sermon might feel a little bit different. It might feel a little bit more like a classroom, but I think you're going to learn something this morning.

So let's start with some background on the city of Ephesus. Here's where it is on a map. It's on the Mediterranean Sea, in what is now modern-day Turkey. Now, currently it really isn't much of a city at all. But back then it was a major city because it was stationed on the sea. So it was a major thoroughfare for trade and travel. And the economy of this city was, it was really large because of that. But not just because of that, because this city was actually primarily known for something else. It was known for one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And it was the great temple of Artemis. Here's a recreated picture of it. It doesn't exist anymore, but at the time this was one of the seven wonders of the world. And in fact, it was so large, here's the diameters of it. It was 400 feet long, so it's 1.5 football fields. 225 feet wide and 60 feet high with more than 127 columns. This thing was massive.

Now, who's Artemis? Who's this temple to? Well, Artemis was the Greek goddess of fertility. And at that time, childbearing was the number one way for young women to die. So people would come from all over the world to Ephesus to bring clothing and money, and they drop that off at the temple. Then they'd also buy these little statues of Artemis because they thought that Artemis would protect them in childbirth. So this city had a major economic boom because of this temple to Artemis. And Acts 19 even says that there was a meteorite that fell on the city, that even increased the renown of the city because they thought it was sent from the goddess Artemis. So it's known for being a worship to a false god.

But that's not all. The city actually gets darker. Because the city was also known for its love for like dark arts and magic and spells. In fact, if you wanted to learn witchcraft in that time,

you'd be in Ephesus. Because in that time, the phrase Ephesian writings, it wasn't talking about the book of Ephesians. In antiquity, the phrase Ephesian writings was used to describe any book with spells in it, because most of them came from Ephesus. So this is what the city was. The city's economy ran off of a false goddess, and it also ran off of magic and dark spells. Now, how did it go from that, to all of a sudden, very quickly in Ephesus, became the largest and most influential church in the early church period. In fact, it would grow so much that Timothy and John would be the pastors over this church. And Paul himself would actually spend two years in this city. So how did it go from being known as one thing to going to know that it's something entirely different? How did this city change?

We're going to do our best to take a look and see how it happened. And we're going to look at Ephesians chapter one. We're just going to look at verses one and two. We're just going to look at the greeting and we're going to use that greeting to dive into Acts chapter 19. Because Acts chapter 19 details the start of the church in Ephesus. So those are the two places we're going to be, Ephesians chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, and then Acts chapter 19. And we're going to see how did Ephesus change? Well, let's start reading chapter 1, verse 1. **“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”** I'm just going to stop there for right now. So Paul wrote the book of Ephesians, and Paul was the number one person that God used to change the city of Ephesus.

Some background on Paul. He was formerly an evil man and his one mission in life was to persecute the church. Scripture even says that he was someone who was overseeing the brutal killings of Christians. Until a moment in Acts chapter 9 when he was on the road to Damascus, where he was going to persecute more and more Christians, until he was blinded by a bright light and Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, (he used to go by Saul) why are you persecuting me?” Then Jesus sent him into that city to meet with a man named Ananias. Ananias restored his sight, and from that moment, his life's mission shifted from persecuting the church, to building up the church. And he was sent out on that day as a missionary to the entire world. And he'd go from city to city to city as a certified messenger of Jesus with the message of Jesus, telling people how Jesus had changed his life. And that message from Paul would change life after life, after life, after life, which would then in turn change entire cities. And this is what we see happen here in Ephesus. The life change in Paul brought about life change in Ephesus. This is the first thing we can learn about how to change a city.

### *1. God changes a city by changing a person.*

So Paul was radically transformed by the gospel, and he wanted to do everything he possibly could do to make sure other people got to experience that same sort of life change. And this is exactly what he does here in Ephesus. And we're going to take a look at it and see how he does it in Acts chapter 19. Paul arrives in Ephesus and this is one of the first things that happens once he gets there. Reading in verse 8, it says this: **“<sup>8</sup> Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. <sup>9</sup> But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup> This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, <sup>12</sup> so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”**

Now I'm going to talk about those last two verses in a minute. I'm going to explain what's happening there in just a second. But I want to point out the one thing that was interesting to me. And it's that phrase in verse 9 that says that he had discussions daily with the people of Ephesus, and then it said this went on for two years. I don't know about you, but whenever I think of the book of Acts, I tend to think of the miraculous and the massive conversions where thousands of people hear the gospel and thousands of people are being saved. But that's not really what is being described here. What's being described here, is Paul going day in and day out sharing the gospel every single day for two years.

And he doesn't even necessarily see these massive conversions every single day he's doing ministry. And yet this is how the city was changed, which is important for us to understand, because I don't know about you, but at least for me, I think, you know, only the important people can change the city, you know, like the mayor can change the city. JP can change the city. The important people can change the city, I can't change the city. But here's what's true, it's not necessarily the important people that change the city. It's God's people that change the city when they live on mission every single day just like Paul did here. This is how the city is changed, when you're daily sharing the gospel.

In fact, here's how the city is changed. This week we got an email from a business owner here in Waco, and he wrote us an email about a member of our staff, who you have probably never even heard of unless your child is in her ministry. And in this email to our staff, he said this: "My coworker was moved to tears as she told me how she was engaged by Elise, prayed for by Elise, heard the gospel from Elise, and was invited to church by Elise, all in the Walmart produce section."

Our city will change when the gospel isn't just preached from this stage, but when it's preached in the Walmart produce section. Like that's how you change the city. When people step up, like my friend Elise. And they're like, I'm a minister of the gospel. I'm going to bring the gospel wherever I go. And think about that interaction, that interaction in the Walmart produce section, the most unlikely place, can change that person's life. She can go from death to life, which could then in turn change the dynamics of her entire family. And then she could bring her life change into that company and that could change the culture of that entire company. And then if that entire company's changed, that could change our entire city. Just because one person is faithfully sharing the gospel. Imagine if we had more.

And this is what Paul's doing in Ephesus day in and day out. He's just faithfully sharing the gospel because changed people desire to change people. And the best way I know how to describe this mindset is this, this mindset that Paul had. If you've ever seen a zombie TV show or a zombie movie, like the most well-known one is The Walking Dead. Now you don't need to have seen any of these shows or movies before, personally, I haven't even seen them, because they all follow the same plot line. And they all go exactly like this: One person is alive, and they become infected with death, and they turn into a zombie. They are now the walking dead. And now, as a zombie, their one mission in life is to go and find all the alive people and infect them with death so that these alive people would die. So they spend their entire life trying to find all the alive people to make them dead.

Now our story looks the exact opposite of that. We were dead. We were walking dead, and then we became infected with the gospel, which made us alive in Christ Jesus. And now that we've gone from death to life, our one life's mission, our one life's purpose is to go out and

find all the dead people and infect them with life. Like, we've got the gospel, so every single day we should be waking up going, where are the walking dead at? Where are the dead people at? I want to bring them life because changed people desire to change people. And this is what Paul is doing here. He's going, who's dead? And who can I bring the good news of life to? And this is how the city changed.

Now I want to explain what's going on in verses 11 and 12 because I said I would, and it says this, I'm reading it again, it said: **“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”** Here's what's most likely happening here. As I mentioned before, Ephesus was the center for dark arts and spells. Like if you wanted to be trained in witchcraft and magic, Ephesus was the place for you to go. So what's likely happening here, is Paul shows up onto the scene and God allows him to do these amazing miracles, where the things that are just touching his body can be taken to the sick and they can be healed.

Now I believe God does that specifically in Ephesus because the city in Ephesus was overrun with people thinking that they had access to power. They thought that since they had this, these spells and this dark magic, they could do extraordinary things. And then Paul comes onto the scene and God allows him to do even more miraculous things. Just so God could say, I'm more powerful than your dark “power”. Because ministry isn't always done the same way in every single city.

This is how ministry is done best. It's done best by attacking the beliefs of that certain city. That's what God's doing here in Ephesus. And just a couple other examples of that. In Athens, Paul showed up there and he didn't do miracles like this there. Because that city was incredibly well educated and they devoted themselves to logic and reason. So Paul showed up in Athens and reasoned with them about the belief, about the reason why God should exist, does exist. In Jerusalem it was steeped in Jewish history and tradition. So Peter did ministry in Jerusalem by explaining the Old Testament and saying that the Old Testament is pointing to a Messiah and specifically, Jesus. And then in Ephesus, it's a town overrun with dark magic. So Paul steps up onto the scene and God allows him to do extraordinary miracles to say, I'm more powerful than your power here. That's how ministry is done best. You attack the beliefs of that certain city. And here in Ephesus, we can learn that from the moment Paul steps onto the scene, he begins to change the city, because changed people desire to change people, which in turn changes places.

This is what happens with Paul. He daily has discussions with people there about the gospel. He does these extraordinary miracles, and then people's lives are changed. So, for the rest of this series, we just need to know this, just for some history and some background. Who is the one person that changes the city? Who's the one person that changes the city? Just so we know, the rest of the series. (Audience responds with Paul) Yeah, yeah. No. Jesus! The message of Jesus changed the city. The power of Jesus changed the city, because Jesus changed Paul, and as Paul allowed himself to be changed by Jesus in the person of the Holy Spirit, he went and he changed the city. Which is a relief for us, Paul didn't change Ephesus, Jesus changed Ephesus.

You're not going to change Waco. I'm not going to change Waco. Jesus is going to be the one to change Waco. So point number one, first thing we can learn is that God changes a city by changing a person.

So continuing in Ephesians 1 verse 1, he's going to tell us who he's writing to. Paul says this: **“To God’s holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.”** So Paul addresses who he's writing to and he says to the Ephesians, the holy people. Now, whenever we hear that word holy, we tend to think that's a person without sin or that's a person who doesn't have a past, and that's not really what that word holy means. That word holy means set apart for God. It means they have removed their heart from what their heart used to be for, and now their heart is connected to the heart of God. Really what it means is, they have forsaken their past idols and are now worshipers of God. And you know, we say that word idols in church and you maybe read it in the Bible and you don't know what it necessarily is. An idol is anything your heart loves more than God. And what we're going to see here in Acts chapter 19, is that the people became saints by forsaking things that their heart used to love, and now they're going to connect their heart to God. And this is how a city is changed.

And we see this in verse 18. Paul continues to do ministry. There's even a story about the evil forces fighting back. And then we see this in verse 18: **“Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. <sup>19</sup> A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.”** That'd be about 7 million dollars today. And in this way, listen to this: **“<sup>20</sup> In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”** So there's a specific reason why they kind of had a dramatic showing of burning their scrolls in public. And it's because all these spells were secrets. The only way you had access to these spells was on these scrolls. So they got together and in public burned them in order to say, this power, this dead power is nothing in comparison to the alive power I found in Jesus. And I'm not going back. And once they forsook their idols, what it says here is that: **“<sup>20</sup> In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”** Because this is how a city has changed.

## *2. God changes the city by removing idols.*

And two of the main idols in Ephesus were the worship of Artemis and these dark spells. But the tide begins to change, because person after person began to forsake these things, which made the rest of the city nervous, because people don't like when status quo gets shifted, because they're going, okay, I see that you're giving up your idols, just don't take mine, which created a bunch of nerves in the city. And we actually see this happen next in the text said this in verse 23: **“About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. <sup>24</sup> A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. <sup>25</sup> He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: “You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. <sup>26</sup> And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. <sup>27</sup> There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.” <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the**

**Ephesians!”** <sup>29</sup> **Soon the whole city was in an uproar.”** It's because people don't like it when their idols are under attack. And I don't mean here the idol of these man-made idols of Artemis. I mean here, the idol of money. The reason why this man, Demetrius, was so upset, is he was afraid he was going to lose out on money because the rest of the city was changing from their idolatry to worshipping God, and that was going to have an effect on him. And he's going, you changing is having an impact on me, and I don't want to lose my idols. But this is how you change a city, when you run from the idols of your past, the rest of the city starts to take notice.

In fact, there's a great quote on this from a pastor, his name is Tyler Statton. He now pastors a church in Portland, but he used to pastor a church in Brooklyn. And here's what he had to say about his ministry. He said this: “In order to minister to the people of Brooklyn, I had to free myself from the idols of Brooklyn.” Which is a great quote because if you look just like the city, you have nothing to offer the city. So he's saying I need to free myself from the idols of this city so I have something to offer this city. And that's exactly what's happening here in Ephesus. The people are leaving their idols and they're pursuing God and they have a unique and new message for the city.

So if we were to take that quote and apply it to Waco, Texas. We need to free ourselves from the idols of Waco so we can minister to Waco. So we can have something to say. So what are the idols of Waco? We made a list this week: Comfort, youth sports, Baylor sports, alcohol, sex, money. I probably could go on and on. Now I'm not saying you can't partake in those things. I am saying though, if those things have your heart more than Jesus has your heart, run from those things. And when you run from the things that this city holds on to, people will start to take notice, because point number two, God changes the city by removing idols.

Now let's look at verse two in Ephesians chapter one, moving ahead one verse, it says this: **“2Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** So Paul, he starts all of his letters this way, whether you look at Philippians or Colossians or here in Ephesians; Grace and peace to you from God, our father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems like a throwaway line. It's not a throwaway line because point number three, third thing we can learn.

### *3. God changes the city with the message of his grace.*

He's saying grace to you. This is the message that changed the city. Let me show you why this message of grace was so particularly needed in Ephesus. I'm going to read the passage that's at the beginning of Acts 19, the very first thing that Paul does when he gets into Ephesus. And I've heard this passage taught incorrectly before, and I bet you have too. It left me with questions, and I think I have clarity, so I'm going to do my best to offer clarity to you as well. So here's the very first thing that happens once Paul reaches Ephesus in Acts 19 verse 1. It says this: **“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples <sup>2</sup> and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. <sup>4</sup> Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.”**



So it says that these twelve men were disciples, but they didn't have the Holy Spirit. Does that mean that these men were Christians and didn't have the Holy Spirit? No, because it says that these men were disciples, they just weren't disciples of Jesus. They were disciples of John the Baptist.

So this moment is not believers in Jesus who don't have the Holy Spirit, becoming believers in Jesus who have the Holy Spirit. This moment is people who do not yet believe in Jesus, who come to believe in Jesus, and then they receive the Holy Spirit. You can't be a believer in Jesus without the Holy Spirit.

And then it says here: **“They received the Holy Spirit and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”** In certain church circles this has been used to say, you can only know you have the Holy Spirit if you speak in tongues. And I don't believe that's the case, because here in verse six, it says that **“The Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”** That right there, it's describing what happened. It's not describing what happens. It's not saying when you receive the Holy Spirit, this is what happens. It's saying when they received the Holy Spirit, this is what happened. This can happen. It doesn't always happen.

Now here's why this message of grace was so important for these 12 men. It says that they had been baptized into John the Baptist baptism. And here's what that baptism signified. In Matthew chapter three verses one and two, it says this: **“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea<sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** His message and his baptism was all about repentance, and it stopped there. A message without grace is not the gospel. A message without Jesus is not the gospel, because look at the baptism we now have received because of Jesus. Peter declares this in Acts 2. **“<sup>38</sup>Repent and be baptized, every one of you.”** (That's the same, here's what's different) **In the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”**

This isn't a message that just says repent and stop sinning. This is a message that says repent and receive the grace of forgiveness. Any message without grace is not the gospel. A message that says you have to work your way into acceptance is not the gospel. But here's what's really, really important for us. The incomplete gospel of Ephesus is eerily similar to the incomplete gospel of Waco, Texas. Because oftentimes I'll talk with people here in Waco and I'll say, “Let's say God's at the gate of heaven and he says, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’” And the number one answer I hear is “Because I've done good things.” And you've also done some bad things.

So what are we going to do? Like what's going to happen? The only way you get in heaven is if you follow the law perfectly. And the story of your life is that you have forsaken the law. The story of scripture though, is that God has not forsaken you, because he sent his son as atoning sacrifice for your sins so that now you are no longer under the law, but you're under grace. And Paul will say later in Ephesians chapter two, that **“We are saved by grace through faith and not by works so that no one can boast.”** And this is the message that changed these 12 men, but not just the message that changed these 12 men who were disciples of John the Baptist, but who changed the whole city, the people who worshiped Artemis.

And here's why. In that day, if you were to worship a Greek god or goddess, your worship would look like this. You believed you had to give a gift in order to receive a gift. This is why people would travel from all over the world to this great temple of Artemis. They'd leave clothes and money, and they would give a gift to Artemis because they believed that's what would make Artemis give the gift of a safe childbirth to them. They believed you had to give in order to receive.

The good news of the gospel is the exact opposite of that false message. Because we don't give our gift to God first, he first gave a gift to us, and that gift came in the form of a baby in a manger 2000 years ago in a small town named Bethlehem. And he gifted us the good news of grace and forgiveness and salvation, so that we might pour out our life as a gift unto him. We do not give in order to make our God respond. He's given to us so that we might respond. We're not giving in order to get, he's given first. And this is the message that changed Ephesus and this is the message that can change Waco, Texas as well.

So in summary, point number one: God changes the city by changing a person. Point number two: God changes the city by removing idols. And point number three: God changes the city with the message of his grace.

Well, in the commons, we have a mural that says "Seeking the welfare of the city." And it's right over there. If you're watching right now in the commons, just look right that way, and you can see it. Seeking the welfare of the city. It's been here ever since this building was built. And maybe you've seen it before, maybe you haven't even really recognized it before, but maybe you've seen it before and you don't really know why it's there. Well, here's why it's there. It comes directly from scripture. It comes from Jeremiah 29: 7. I'm going to read from the ESV. It says this: **"7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."**

So the prophet Jeremiah is speaking to the people of God. They're in exile. They're in a city they don't want to be in. And he's saying, your life is intertwined with your city, whether you like it or not. What happens in this city impacts you. So you should care deeply about this city. You should, when you pray, you shouldn't just pray for you, you should pray for your city, because when your city has found its welfare, you will find your welfare. What happens in this city impacts you. And that word there for welfare, it really means wholeness. And it doesn't take much to know and see that our city is not yet whole. There's brokenness all around us in our city, but God can change that. Scripture right here, Jeremiah, tells us to ask him to change that, to pray for your city.

So what are you praying for your city? Are you praying for your city? What if you prayed for your city in such a way, that if all your prayers for this city came true, that a hundred years from now, when people are talking about the history of Waco, they're not talking about the evil in our past, but instead, as they're talking about the history of Waco, they're going, man, something crazy happened in 2024, all of a sudden there was a revival, and every single person in that city came to know Jesus. What if a hundred years from now, people are talking about the history of Waco, Texas, and they're saying, you know, something crazy happened in 2024, divorce was eradicated in that city because it was home to the healthiest marriages and the healthiest families.

What if a hundred years from now, as people are talking about the history of our city, that they begin to say, Waco, Texas became the number one mission sending city in our entire country? But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare, because the city came around our college students, our Baylor students, MCC students, TSTC students, and youth students, and poured into them, and disciplined them, and saw them as the number one way that we could change the world here in Waco, Texas. Because we trained them up, disciplined them in who Jesus is, and to send them to every corner of the globe, whether it's Dallas or Dubai, and what happened in Waco, Texas, then went and changed the world. What if that's what happened because that's what you were praying for? The question is, do you believe it can? Do you care enough about this city to pray for this city? Do you believe this city can change?

Well, how can it change? How do you change the city? A program is not going to change the city. A political platform is not going to change the city. Just having economic progress is not going to change the city. A person though, he can change the city. It's not you, it's not me. Jesus can change the city. The message of Jesus can change the city. The power of Jesus can change the city. And the more you allow him through the power of his Holy spirit to change you, the more you're going to get to see change in our community. And then the thing is, there's already change underway. The question is though, are you going to take part in it? Are you going to fight back against darkness? Are you going to do your part? Are you going to pray for your city? Cause I tell you what, we can't wait for the important people to change the city. God's people can change the city. Well, let's pray that we would.

Father, we just want to come before you and first, just acknowledge the ways in which every single one of us has brought brokenness into this city. The moment we stepped into this city, we brought in all sorts of sins and brokenness. And Father, we repent for the ways in which we have added brokenness to this city. But God, we also come before you asking that you would change our city, believing that you can change our city, because you have changed us. All of us have a story. If we're a believer in Jesus, that we used to have all these desires and sins and brokenness and we've seen you change our heart. You've molded our heart to start to love the things that you love. You've changed us, and so we know that you can change this city. And we just ask that you would do that. We've seen it in this text that you changed Ephesus from a dark city, an evil city, a city that worshiped a false goddess, to the largest, most influential church in that region. And if you changed Ephesus, you can change Waco.

So God, we ask that you would do it, and we want to be willing participants in it. So would you send us where you want us to go? Would you give us the courage to say whatever it is you want us to say? Would we do whatever it is you want us to do? And would you use us, just like Paul, just like Elise, to push back darkness and to bring life to people who are dying.

So God, we ask that you would save every single person in this city, eradicate divorce from this city. Would Waco be the number one mission setting city in this country. Would you do it? We believe you can. And Father, we want to play our part. We want to play our part because of one thing, because of one truth, because of our one great hope. And that's the fact that Jesus is alive and with us and for us. It's in his name we pray, Amen.