

Harris Creek Baptist Church

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### **2023 Review/Update**

We were on vacation; our family was on vacation at the beach, you know, lots to do. At the beach, you can go snorkeling, swimming, or collect seashells. We like to walk. We enjoy walking along the beach and seeing other places, exploring other resorts. There are so many different things to do, meet people, and even build sandcastles.

Right, there's a lot to do at the beach. So, what we did was a puzzle. Okay? Has anyone else done that? It's like you go on vacation, and there are all these things to do, and you think, "This is the right time to do a puzzle." So, we started putting the puzzle together. It's kind of like, when you're not eating or not doing something else, the family is just huddled around the table putting the pieces. If you've done a puzzle, you know how it goes—it's exciting and satisfying. You find the corners—first celebration; then the edges, and once you've found all the edges, you've got the frame. After that, you start grouping things by colors, and it's so satisfying. It's like creating a landscape with beautiful flowers. We start putting the puzzle pieces in, it's so satisfying.

As you get closer to the end, the more time you want to spend on it because you want to feel that feeling of completion. Everything is building, and then we panic. You know why? We're missing pieces. Who would do that? Who would take an incomplete puzzle and put it in a cabinet of an Airbnb for us to find it, so that we can start it, and get to the end and not have that satisfaction? What an emotional roller coaster—fun, building, going to be awesome, pretty, beautiful. Oh no,

panic—we're missing a few pieces. So, we go digging, pulling out drawers, we look in the cabinets, and we found them in the crevice of the box, stuck to the side of the box. We found the pieces we need, we got all the satisfaction of taking that last and final piece, and putting it in place, and completing the picture that was there.

I start with that because I think it's a beautiful image of what the church is and should be, and really, what we've been experiencing. My favorite part about my job—what I love the most about what I do vocationally—is preaching the gospel and watching the dead come to life. For whatever reason, the way that God wired me, my spiritual gifts, whatever that is, it's just so satisfying for me to see someone trust in Jesus Christ, understand the narrative that they've been set in, and that they're going to live forever with God because of what He did for them through Jesus. I love it; it energizes me and makes me feel closer to God.

My second favorite part about what I get to do vocationally is watching members of the body fall into place like a puzzle piece. They begin to serve within the body of Christ, using their gifts and talents. Being reluctant at first, saying, "I don't know if there's time, I don't know if I enjoy this, I don't think I want to do this." Then all of a sudden, they start doing it, continue to serve, and I hear this all the time, "I've never felt so alive; I'm using my gifts, I'm growing." So, it's that third part of our mission statement—empowering members for service—which really feeds the second part. They say, "Hey, I'm growing, I'm being equipped in my faith, I'm learning the Bible, I'm meeting other believers, I'm locking arms, I'm pushing back darkness, I'm building the kingdom," and it's a ton of fun. I see it every week here.

As I look back on 2023, I pull into the parking lot, and I see Braxton, Lucco, Kenny Boyd here way before me, setting out cones and serving. I see Christian in the back; you guys don't know he's there, but he plays such an incredible role in everything that happens here this morning—all of the things happening on time, me walking out on time, and all of the stuff, right? Just a faithful servant. I see Jess Hedges up here afterward, praying with strangers. People come up to me like, "Who is that? What member of your staff is that?" She's not on staff; she's just a faithful volunteer. I see Nate Landreth everywhere I look, doing something for the church. I see Steve and Pam Wilson serving on the community team, and a long list of other people. I could keep going; we could spend the entire morning naming faithful people who have carried this mission forward.

One of my favorite stories or two of my favorite stories from 2023 is me saying, "Hey, we need a parking lot." Someone coming up afterward saying, "Hey, I happen to build parking lots for a living. I got you." Then I just show up one day to work, and there are trucks outside. I'm like, "What are they doing? What are these trucks?" They're stealing our dirt. No, they're building your parking lot. And then they just disappear. I'm like, "Where did they go?" They're like, "We're done." And I'm like, "Who is it?" And they're like, "The only thing I ask is you'll never share my name." "You got it."

Somebody else comes and says, "Hey, your landscaping is horrendous." "Thank you, thank you." But have no fear; I happen to do landscaping for a living. I have got access to rocks and plants and crews and shovels and all of the things, and we will landscape this entire place as our service to the church. I'm like, "What? Who does that? That's hundreds of thousands of dollars." People

who get it, puzzle pieces that fall into place and say, "Hey, I'm ready; let's go. I want to serve the body of Christ in that way."

So, coming off the holiday that we're coming off, every year we take some time to look backward, give thanks and praise to God, and it would be an enormous miss if we didn't celebrate all that he's done. That's what we're going to take some time doing today. In the second part of the message, I'm just going to empty everything in my head, so you know at least everything that I know. I can't promise that you're not going to leave more confused because it's a scary place up here. But I'll also say this, as we try to put these pieces together, it's going to feel a little bit disjointed. If this is your church home, you understand what we do every week. I take a chunk of scripture, almost always divide it up into three sections, or whoever is teaching divides it into three sections. Read some Scripture, explain the Scripture—who said it, who they said it to, what it meant, then what it means now. That's what we do almost every week; that's what I love to do.

Today is one of those, "Hey, we're going to talk to the body; we're going to let you know. This is a good time when we're all gathered just to say, 'Hey, here's where we're at, here's where we're going, here's what we know, here's what we don't know,' and to say all of the things. If you're left with a question, certainly, we can have a conversation afterward. Myself and any of the elders can be available to you at any time or your life group at any time if that is helpful to you. We will spend some time; what it's going to look like is just looking backward, as I said, giving thanks, looking forward, talking about the future. If you're a member here, before you leave, I just want

you to know I'm going to ask you to press in deeper to your local church; that ask is coming. That's a big part of what today is about.

If you're a puzzle piece still in the box, we want you to be picked up and put in place. No longer just coming and saying, "Man, I really enjoyed the worship. I enjoyed the teaching. Hey, I'm thinking about what was shared." But rather of just sitting there consuming a message or an experience, contribute with your spiritual gifts. That is a big part of what today is about as we move into a new year, and, specifically, Advent. If you wonder why we're doing this here, it's because the month of December, we spend in Advent celebrating the birth of our Savior, preparing our hearts and minds for Christmas.

In the spirit of celebration and looking back, thanking God for His faithfulness, I really want to start with a video. This is our end-of-year recap. Would you guys watch this?

"When I started coming to Harris Creek last year, I knew who Jesus was, but I didn't really understand what it meant to follow Jesus. Harris Creek has helped me better understand that and got me plugged into a life group. I commenced from the Regeneration program this year. I love Jesus because he died for our sins. I haven't had a relationship with my mom since I was 16. We talked this summer, and the Lord really softened my heart going into that conversation with her. The Lord allowed me to forgive her and show her a lot of grace. The Lord has been moving in my life, teaching me how to surrender to Him, my time, my schedule, relationships. God has been so good to me and my family this year. Last Thursday, I found out that I'm 5 years cancer-

free. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2018, and the Lord has graciously seen me and my family through that.”

It's been an Ephesians 3:20 year; He has done more than I could ask or imagine, and He did it. There's a part of looking at numbers that tells a story. It's helpful information exchange; it's I hope good communication with the body. There is a personality that will listen to that and think, "Man, that seems boastful, that seems prideful. Why would we do that?" It would be boastful if it wasn't a miraculous act of God's kindness in spite of us, which when I lay down at night, I believe with all my heart. You just need to know that those aren't empty words. That's not preacher talk. That's not something I say because I'm supposed to say it. I've got a 2-year degree in art from a school that you would have never heard of, except it's in your city. None of us are that good, and we're just, so thankful. Two weeks ago, I shared some of my own anxiety journey with you, and one of the things I started practicing in that time was starting every single day, writing five things I'm thankful for. I learned, and this comes from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, that gratitude can increase your happiness, well-being, life satisfaction, and overall health while decreasing things we all want less of, like anxiety, depression, and anger. It can be a powerful practice to cultivate, especially if you struggle with anxiety or depression. It goes on to say that the latest psychological discoveries tell us that our brain cannot be grateful and anxious at the same time. That it can't process the positive emotion of gratitude and the negative emotion of anxiety at the same time; that our mind has to choose one, and that was fascinating to me because it seems to give way to Scriptures written thousands of years ago.

That say things like in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, **Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will.** What is God's will for me? So many people, I want to know God's will, what is God's will, what does God want for me? For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. It is God's will that you would be thankful in all circumstances.

Another scripture that we looked at two weeks ago is in Philippians chapter four. **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** God is so kind to say, 'Hey, you want a healthier mind? Practice gratitude.' So, it would be a miss for us not to do that this morning, to take time to say thank you.

The first time I preached in this room, okay, had the privilege of preaching to this church body; there were 425 people present. This year, we've had well over 600 people join the church, become a part of this family. Over 600 kids have heard the gospel; 500 every single week are equipped over there with the Scriptures. It's not babysitting; you're not checking your kids in to be watched for an hour. You are checking your kids in to be equipped with the Word of God. Over 400 people are going through regeneration, our recovery, strike that, our *discipleship* ministry. Because those 400 people are some of the most healthy people in the body. Because every single one of you, every single one of us has struggles. They're the 400 that say, 'Hey, I want to work on mine. I want to take a season to talk about it and have others speak into my life and to grow through this thing that I'm struggling with.'

We have nearly 200 adult life groups here at Harris Creek. That means 200 little churches gathering throughout the city, being equipped in the Word of God. The numbers are interesting; they certainly tell a story, and they tell one of growth. But the growth that I'm most excited about is the growth that happens at an individual level. Because if the people in the body aren't growing spiritually, if they're not coming to know God in a more intimate way, it's all for not. It's amazing to me; you're looking at numbers, some of those are millions of. I mean, this, I just never knew. I remember, I moved here, and I walked into a hallway. Nate and Kathy were set up with a little makeshift podcast studio. So, hey guys, what are you doing? They were like, 'Hey, we're starting a podcast.' I said, 'Man, that's cool. You know, I had a podcast I just let go of. I wonder if we could do one together.' I said, 'Sure, you can join us.' The first time we did it, Nate was like, 'Hello, Waco. Here's the weather today.' I was like, 'Hey, I bet it goes beyond Waco.' And he was like, 'What?' I was like, 'Yeah, I bet people listen in other places.' So, we began to do this podcast that equips people in the Word, and it's crazy what God has done with it. The numbers, they're interesting, the stories behind the numbers, the emails every week saying, 'I'm reading my Bible for the first time. I've never been to church in my life, and I just trusted Christ. Hey, I want to take this. I forwarded this to my cousin who's an atheist, and now he's a Christian. My friend just asked to go to church with me this Sunday.' These stories behind those numbers, it's incredible. And it would be a miss not to thank God for that. The growth again that I'm most encouraged by is the growth that I see happening in each of you.

The biggest challenge that I face, as the one who gets to serve this body, has the privilege of serving this body, is around this word 'church.' Because when I say 'church,' you have an



experience behind it. You have a tradition that informs your perspective of what church is. When I say 'Church,' you think, 'Oh yeah, a building. Oh yeah, that place we go to Sunday morning.' And it's like I almost have to erase the whiteboard and say, 'No, I'm not talking about *that* kind of church. I'm talking about a place, a place where people can drive in a car silently because they haven't talked to each other in weeks. And they step into this place, and they're reminded of these promises that they made before God called vows.' People come around them and remind them, "Hey, here's what you promised before God in a covenant that you made with him." Their marriage, which was so hopeless, is restored to the point where they stand in front of people and share their testimony. They say, "This is what God has done between us, and we now love each other. Our kids see a mommy and a daddy who love each other."

When I say church, I'm talking about parents that come in and say, "What do we do with phones? What do we do about social media? What do we do about the next generation that's coming up? They're so distracted, and it seems overwhelming with friend groups, vaping, and we just don't know what to do." We say, "No problem, we got you. We'll equip you in that effort. We will come around parents. We have access to lots of parents—some who didn't do it well and learned from that, some who have done it exceedingly well, and they want to teach from that. We'll help you disciple your children at home."

When I say church, I'm talking about kids coming into this place and learning the gospel and the overarching narrative of 66 books written by 40 authors over 1500 years on three continents in three languages. They understand the role they play in the story. Then they go home, and their

parents are now equipped to continue that story. They're growing in the faith so that as they grow old, they do not depart from it.

When I say church, I'm talking about addicts coming in completely enslaved to some substance or activity they can't shake. They say, "There's no hope for me. I'll be addicted to this until the day I die." We say, "No, not according to my God." They say for the first time, the thing that has enslaved them and the enemy's grip on their life becomes looser. Suddenly, they start experiencing freedom. They get people around them who are praying for them, laying hands on them, giving them hope for a future. One day they say, "You know what? It's been months since I..." and the next day they say, "You know what? It's been years since I..." Now they're walking in freedom and teaching others how to become free. It's amazing.

When I say church, I'm talking about people who have experienced something called Church their entire lives. For the first time ever, they begin to confess sins to each other, and pride in their life cracks like a piece of glass. They begin to grow in a new kind of way. They begin to read their Bible in a new kind of way, experience the Holy Spirit in a fresh kind of way, and walk as a disciple, and share their faith in a new kind of way.

When I say church, I'm talking about people coming into a building who have never read the Bible as a practice their entire life. They start reading it every morning, and suddenly it starts making sense to them. The Spirit of God begins to shape their life through the Word of God, and their life changes.

That's what I see happening here week in and week out every single week—puzzle pieces falling into place. You better believe it inspires me. The passion you hear in my voice right now is because it's inspired me. I'm thankful to God. I am moved and motivated by what He's doing here. I'm well aware that when we show numbers that display growth, that's a turnoff to some of you because you're like, "I don't want to be big. I miss a small church. I miss being known by everyone, gathering in a smaller room." I get it. I grew up in a church of about a hundred people, all services combined. I totally understand where you're coming from. I don't want to be big either. I want to be Biblical. I want to be everything that the Word of God calls the church of God to be. I want to be faithful in that. If God wants us to be big, we'll be big. If God wants us to be small, we'll be small. If God wants us to plant, we'll plant. If He wants us to revitalize, we'll revitalize—whatever He desires. I hope we're listening to Him and doing every single thing that He asks of us.

So, in our family, we play the thank you game. The thank you game is simply where you go around and say what you're thankful for. The first person to hesitate is out. Then you keep going around, say what you're thankful for, and you can't repeat—no repeats. If you repeat or hesitate, you're out until there's one clear winner. So, I just thought as a body, we would, in an individual kind of way, play the thank you God game. You would spend time right where you're at. You don't need to move. If you want to turn to the person you're with and pray with them, you can. If you want to pray individually, you can. Just spend time thanking God for all that He's done. I'm going to start praying, and then I'm going to lead us in a time of prayer, and we'll worship. Then we'll do it all over again. That's what's coming the rest of the time.

So, Father, I do just say thank you for all you've done. Thank you for the corporate growth, but thank you for the individual growth. For the prideful, now walking in humility. For the materialistic, now walking in generosity. For the angry person whose heart is now filled with peace. The super sad and depressed who now have a pep in their step and a heart full of joy. Thank you for the kids, the arrows that you fired from this place. Thank you that 10 percent of Baylor University is in a life group here, gathering in a small church here around the city and being equipped. For nearly 200 life groups, I just want to encourage you to continue to give thanks.

There are prompts on the screen, so this is your time to talk to God. Don't be distracted by your neighbor. Focus your mind and your heart on Him. If you don't do this often, it might feel really awkward, but God can see your thoughts. You can pray out loud if you want. You can get on your knees, lay down, or go somewhere else. Just take a minute to give Him thanks. Thank Him that Harris Creek reached millions of people with the gospel this year, both in person and online. Just say thanks.

Pray with *gratitude* that: Harris Creek reached millions of people with the Gospel this year, both in person and online. Over 500 kids heard about Jesus every Sunday morning. 97 people expressed their faith in Christ through baptism.

Focus on God. Keep talking to God. Your hearts and your minds are before the Lord. Sometimes I picture myself bowed down before the throne. Millions of people heard the gospel. Thank Him that over 500 kids are equipped in the Word every single week. Every week, 500 children are

learning about Jesus and what He's done for them. God, we thank you. Would you just thank Him where you're at? If your mind has wandered, bring it back. You're talking to God. Thank Him that 97 people were baptized here and began a new life in Jesus Christ. It's really hundreds, and some not here, some in swimming pools, some in ponds, one I heard of in a bathtub. Just thank God for the new expression of faith that people have experienced because of His work in and through this place. Play the thank you game. If you run out of things to say, look around you. There's lots to be thankful for. Focus your heart and your mind on giving Him thanks. If your mind wanders, just bring it back. For some of you, this would be the longest time you prayed in a long time. This has to be normal for us, extended time talking to the Father as His children. Every parent loves when their kid comes to them with lots to say.

Well, in this time, we're taking communion together. There should be a cup on your seat or under your seat right now, the elements. This is just if you're a believer, a follower of Jesus, if you've trusted in His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sins. If you're not a Christian and you're just exploring the faith, no need to participate in this part of the service. We're just glad that you're here, and you can hear the communication today and celebrate alongside us.

But Jesus, when he was with his disciples, it was the Last Supper, the Passover meal, and there was bread there. He said, he takes the bread, He picks it up, and He teaches from it. He says, "This bread represents my body, the body that will be broken for you." There are really only two wrong ways to take communion—one is hastily, if you're hungry, we're not trying to eat for nourishment right now. And then secondly, not focused on the nourishment that we receive from

Jesus Christ. We're reflecting on the Gospel. Our heads and our hearts have to be meditating on the Gospel.

So Jesus, He's with his friends, He picks up the bread, He says, "This bread represents my body, which will be broken for you." And He breaks it, he says, "Whenever you eat of it, do so remembering that my body was broken for you on your behalf, so that you won't be broken, so that you won't have to pay for your sins. He's paid for our sins—the body of Christ."

There would have been a cup, a chalice full of wine, and he picked up, continuing his teaching. He said, "This cup represents the New Covenant that I'm going to do, a new work, that my blood will be poured out." **Romans 8:1, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Second Corinthians 5, **God is no longer counting your sins against you.** The prophet Micah says, "It brings God delight to show you mercy. He does it for fun." He says, "Whenever you drink of this cup, remember that my blood was poured out for you—the blood of Jesus."

We'll move toward giving thanks through song. I'll be back in a minute.

There was a time where, if you wanted to reach the nations, you'd have to invest thousands of dollars, get on a plane, and go somewhere. We're still very much doing that, and we've really ramped up that effort. But it's interesting—the most engaged cities on Harris Creek's social media, number one is Waco, and number two is Dallas. Okay, tied for number two, with Dallas tied for Dallas at number two, is Lagos, Nigeria. Okay, which is like, what in the world? Number

four is Houston, number five is San Antonio. Like, who knew there's a Harris Creek movement happening in Nigeria? I'm not even sure I'm saying the name of that town correctly. And if you're watching, you know, thanks for tuning in, and we're continuing to send people there. We're continuing to make financial investments there, and we will give over \$100,000 this year to international partnerships. We will invest over \$70,000 in local partnerships here in Waco. That's where we take your faithful investments in this place, and we reinvest them into partners that we've vetted, that we believe are doing a good work with financial resources, and that they're being deployed in a way that we think is God-honoring.

So, all the while, you know, here at this place, on some Sundays, we're turning away 60 cars. And that's not like, "Come back." That's like, "Hey, you can't attend Harris Creek today." Some Sundays, there's 400 people sitting in the lobby. So, we just acknowledge that there are challenges here. And if I were out there, I would be asking, "What are you going to do about it?" And I would say, "Hey, Mr. Pastor, I only want to hear 'I don't know' for so long because we need to do something about it." And so what I'm going to do right now is show you the steps that we're taking, but I need you to trust that I'm telling you everything, which I am. Meaning, you're going to—some of you, gosh, you know, there are some skeptics in the church. They say, "I wonder what they're not telling us. I wonder what that means. I wonder what they're really going to do." And I'm telling you everything.

So what we've done is we've engaged three architects. And when I say engaged, I mean we interviewed three architects that have taken a really broad brush, pro bono look at where we're at—the property that we own, that we bought 46 acres across the street, but still, this side of 84.

They're saying, "Hey, what's the best use of that?" And they've taken kind of a big picture, first stab. And so I'll show you some of those because it's fun and exciting to think about. And yet, I just want you to know there's not a plan to move on any of these yet. So here's the first option that was presented to us. The gray there is our current building. The white represents a potential expansion of an additional 3,000-seat, 3,500-seat auditorium. We would use the land across the street as parking. You can see a bridge there going over Stageline. Picture kind of what it's like at McLane, only much smaller and more economical. And so that would be if we added to this building and then we kept midweek parking on this side of the street, and then Sunday parking would move across the street.

If we wanted to start over on the 46 acres that we purchased, it could look something like this. And so you have a rendition of a building there, a 3D printout of a building there that is kids' space. It represents an auditorium, classrooms, office space—all there. And then kind of using that area around the building for parking. Then, you know, you would, of course, figure out the egress, ingress—how people would get in and out and where they would exit on 84. There would actually be a curve cut there on 84 under this one that's not represented in that schema.

Here's another one that is over there. So this is just a different setup of a building with additional parking. You see a creek there, trying to figure out how you would make that space foot-traffic-friendly. It really is just another example of the first.

But then here's the one that I get most excited about. It's just a drawing, but the white building represents the church there. The parking lot would be shared, and then what we would do is



either sell off that highway frontage or we would partner with the developer. You know, whatever we needed to do so that we could choose who our neighbors were. And we would love to see that mixed retail, coffee shop, restaurant—that sort of thing there. So it creates this kind of foot traffic environment in a park-like setting. We would resell that and recoup the investment that we made in the entire land being a church. We can be a buffer between that and the neighborhood for that to be—it's for commercial—to be allowed there.

And so, that interests me. I think that could be a good investment, but again, there's no plans. We're still praying, we're seeking the Lord. I know who's in the room. This is, I say this not to play the victim, so that you understand all of the opinions are represented here. There's this one over here that says, 'Why have you guys not walked into a bank, taken a loan, and you're almost done with that building yet? What is your problem?' I hear you. You got this one over here that is like, 'We shouldn't have built this building. Why can't we just gather in homes? I don't understand. Who had a building in the first century?' I hear you, and everything in between is here today. That's the challenge with thousands of people is you've got thousands of opinions.

But here's what I need you to do is to pray. Or, I'll say this first, here's what I need you to trust, is that the elders are praying and listening. And because we haven't heard a direction from the Lord yet, we haven't moved. We're praying, we're listening, we're at times fasting, and we're just asking “God, where would you have us go? And what would you have us do? And what is faithfulness today?”

What I just showed you are some potential options. It may be none of those, right? The elders would like for me to move forward on what's called a master plan. That's where we would engage one of those architects now for an exchange of money to create a more intense, 'Hey, here's exactly what you would do. Here's what the roads would look like. Here's specifically what the building would look like. And here's what it would cost you. We would have plans that we could actually understand the price tag.' With those plans, my pause, and I'll do it.

I'm always going to listen to the collective counsel of the elders around me. My pause in that is, I feel like we will get that master plan and we will sit it on the shelf. It's like, 'What are we going to do with that?' And it's, we can't do anything until we're 100% invested people in this room, I want to be abundantly clear because I have sat in the congregation at churches and I have heard end-of-the-year pushes for giving, and I've rolled my eyes, and it's felt like a time-share pitch. And this ain't that. I'm not asking you for money. I'm asking you to be 100% committed to the church that you attend. If that's Harris Creek, awesome. If it's not, if it's somewhere else, may the Lord bless you and keep you and let his face shine on you. But if it's here, I'm not concerned about the percentage that you give. In, you know, in Old School Baptist tradition, it's tithing, which means 10%, I think that's a great starting place. I don't think tithing is a Biblical idea. I think sacrificial giving, that's what I see in Mark 12 with the Widow who gave out of her poverty. I think sacrificial giving is a Biblical idea, that we would give each give in a way that we've determined with the Lord that we can give cheerfully and in a way that we feel, right?

This is not an ask for money. This is me saying, 'Hey, I want to make sure that you are serving with your gifts, that you are contributing, that you are being faithful with what the Lord has entrusted to you.' And for Monica and me, we've gone all in with Harris Creek because I get to see how Harris Creek stewards those resources and even deploys those resources. In our need, we still deploy those resources in other areas. And so, we give to our church and through our church.

And in fact, if there has been a time in the past 5 years where I thought we weren't good stewards of resources, like, and what I mean specifically by that if I think we spent too much on a meal or we went somewhere too nice, then Monica and I have paid for that out of pocket. And I tell you that not to receive the glory for it, but so that you know how I'm thinking about it. That my commitment to you is to be the best resources of your investment here. I've always loved to buy and sell since I was... I remember in the second grade, I would take candy, trade them for GI Joe's and then sell the GI Joe's. And I've always been that way as long as I can remember. I love seeing a return on my own investment, if you will. And at 43 years of age, I've just learned that that earthly return is going to pale in comparison to a kingdom return. I've just been spending time in the Book, and I know that there is literally going to be a day where we receive an eternal return on our gifts here on earth.

I just believe it with all my heart. Jesus taught it; it's taught throughout the Scriptures. I believe it with all my heart, and so we've just personally doubled down here. And again, I don't care what

specific percentage you give; I care what percentage of us gives. And I hope that's 100%, that we are one of the churches in the United States of America where everyone there contributes to the effort that God is doing there; every member there, obviously. If you're a guest with us, I hope you hear the way we talk about this and give consideration to where the church that you would be a part of.

I heard this story this week; I don't know if it's true. I don't follow sports all that closely, but it's college football. At halftime, not Baylor, not Baylor, at halftime, that somebody had gone down and talked to the athletic department; they had raised \$100 million to replace the coach. I heard that, and I just thought, how crazy is that? Like, what a tragedy that we wouldn't invest millions of dollars so that our team will win. I am utterly convinced the question that God is never going to ask you in heaven is who won what game. I don't think we will spend one second ever thinking about those kinds of things, but that we are turning away 60 cars and have 400 people in the lobby, and that someone would say, here's \$100 million so that our team can win.

It's not a money problem; that's not what we have here at all. The cattle on a thousand hills belong to God. If you have experienced church hurt and you hear someone saying things like this and you're turned off by it, please, for your own spiritual sake, don't give a dollar. We will be okay; all right? We will always figure a way to pivot to teach the Word and proclaim the Gospel. But again, my commitment to you is, as you invest your time, talents, and treasure here, we're going to maximize your kingdom return on that money. And I believe one day you're going to see that that was the greatest investment that you could have possibly made.

So, I just want to spend some time praying about that specifically, praying two things: one for wisdom, that you would beg God—I'm sure you have an opinion of what we should do—but that you would beg God that we all would operate under His opinion. And then, secondly, that you would ask God, say, "What do you want me to do?" and just listen. And whatever that is, it may, for some of you, be serving somewhere for the first time. Like, "Hey, I'm going to serve in my church; that's the step I'm going to take." For others of you, it may be the first time you give. For others of you, it may be the first time you give sacrificially. But whatever that is, let me just spend some time praying and invite you to do the same.

So, Lord, we do just as you tell us in James, if we lack wisdom to ask you, and you give it without finding fault. And so that's what we're doing. We're begging you for wisdom; we ask you for direction.

So, I just want to encourage you to do that right now, wherever you're at. Just ask God to direct our steps, to show us the direction that we should go. Pray prayers of protection, saying under no circumstance, please Lord, do not allow us to go somewhere you don't want us to. Continue to pray. If you're distracted, bring your thoughts back. Talk to God; no problem to talk to God. I want to spend a lot of time doing this as a church, as a body.

Pray for *wisdom* that: Our leaders and elders would continue to shepherd the body well. Our staff would cultivate their ministries and make new disciples who make disciples. We would utilize every resource we have with obedience and faith.

Pray for *your part* that: You would find a place or continue to serve at HC. You would commit to discipling others and being disciplined. You would offer your time, talent, and treasure to the Kingdom.

Asking Him for wisdom to guide us and direct us, asking for unity to align all of our hearts. And now, would you ask Him for your part in this? Say, "Lord, would you make it clear what my next step of faithfulness is? Is that serving? Maybe serving at Christmas time. Say, 'God, how do you want me to use my gifts?'" You make it obvious, illuminate Scriptures, bring wise counsel to our lives. Just pray. Focus. Don't think about your neighbor, what someone else is doing. You're talking to God; you're practicing fixing your mind in communication and conversation with the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Let's stay here.

Praise God, a lot to be thankful for. Amen. Indeed, He has been a good God to us. It's amazed me. I mean, literally, I just... I didn't dream big enough in a lot of ways, and then in the other ways, I kind of feel like we're just getting started. And so, who knows? I'm just thankful for 144 years of faithful people carrying this mission forward as a 144-year-old church out here in the country, and now the city is kind of growing around us. The fastest-growing part of the city is all around us right now. So, the opportunity is in front of us.

And I just think, imagine if at our 150th-year anniversary, we have one of the most effective discipline making machines in the world. Translating Bibles, sending out missionaries, raising up pastors, revitalizing churches – that is a lot of fun for me to dream about. Equipping the saints locally, engaging the lost, empowering members for service. So, Lord, may it be.

I want to invite you to pray for that. As you leave, you're going to be handed a prayer card – it's just those three prayer prompts. Put that somewhere that you'll trip over it. I'm asking for 100% participation; every single one of you can pray. It's free, by the way, totally free to pray. Just spend some time praying for God to move through this place. I believe He responds to that in ways I don't even understand. So, I'm asking you, no matter your age, no matter where you're at – if you believe in God, please pray what's on that card.

There are also tables out there with puzzle pieces. Here's the finished picture, just so you see it. I thought that's a picture of the church, you know? Like, if you remember the message of sunflowers – they're slowly turning their face toward the sun. And that we are just a bunch of people that keep our eyes on the sun and do all that the Lord asks. Just a field of God's people. So, as you leave, please do pick up one of those puzzle pieces, put that somewhere that you'll trip over, and just serve as a reminder to you. You can put it on your keychain if you want, poke a hole, get creative – whatever you want to do. Just as a reminder to you that you're a piece of the puzzle of the work that God is doing here.

I love you guys. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.