



The Harsh But Good News-Part 3

The Gospel's Assault on the Egocentric

Pastor Mike Fabarez

So my 14-year-old son comes back recently from his last physical checkup telling me that his doctor said that he is now taller than me. Which I replied, No way. Not possible. Can't happen.

Friday, my wife leans over to me and says, You know, I could really see it. Now, when our son stands next to you, he is taller than you. So I decided based on that, that I'm going to create some cutouts of myself that are about 20% larger, that whenever my son gets anywhere near me, I'm going to go get one of these cutouts and just place it there in front of me, so that everyone can see my towering figure over my children. And so if ever you, you know, I don't want to take a picture of my family. I don't know why you'd want that. But I just—I would need a little warning because I need to go get one of these cutouts for the photo, and then I could place that picture in front of me and then everything would be as I want it to be.

Now if that were my response to my son's surpassing height, you might say something like, come on, man, get a grip here. I mean, your son's taller than you—deal with it, man. It's reality; come to grips with reality, Mike, just the way it is. Now for you to tell me that—that would be really helpful and good advice.

As Christians, when we study some important biblical themes, I think what we'll find is that precise advice is terrific advice. Sometimes we just need that advice, particularly when it comes to the height of our accomplishments, or the height of our intelligence, or the height of our, you know, our—our—just our lives, or even our potential or our good. Our importance, our abilities. Because what I find is we prefer to present to everyone something that's just a little bit more inflated than the reality of who we are.

Now, here's the problem with this whole virtue of humility. You and I are students of the Bible. And we know this is an important biblical virtue, right? The Bible says God is opposed to the proud. So if we're going to be Christians, we need to be humble people. But the problem with that whole discussion of the virtue of humility is that most Christians think this is something we have to manufacture. We have to create it, we have to generate it, we need to work it up. See, but the reality with biblical humility is, it's not that at all. Matter of fact, biblical humility is just an exercise in coming to grips with reality. That's all it is.

The Bible doesn't want you to kind of create some false view of who you are, trying to work up this lesser view of yourself. The Bible just wants you simply to think rightly about who you are—to get



yourself in perspective, to come to grips with the fact that you're not the tallest in your abilities and your intellect and your life. You are not the tallest; you never were and you never will be. And if you really want to talk about things that are important, like the things that God values—man, there's really no comparison. Just come to grips with reality, man, you're not all of that.

Now, that doesn't sit well with the world's culture. Because every day you work your way through the world that I live in, and they're constantly telling you different—whether they're selling, you know, hair color, or, you know, I don't know, the experience of car shopping. You know, it's all that you're worth it and it's about you, and it's all about inflating your view of you, and all of this world and all of its pleasures—it's all there for you to enjoy. But in reality, that's a myth. The Bible peels back the curtain and says, here's the reality. Here's what life is all about. Here's why things like food and marriage and parenting and jobs and even being a sentient being—why all these things were created, and it's not for you. That's not what it's about.

Now, just deal with it. Stop trying to live with this cutout of something that is really not reality about who you are. And we all know there's a distance between who we really are and who we want people to think we are, and even how we want to operate in this life regarding things that we experience every week. I mean, we like to think we're at the center of all of this. But the Bible says, just come to grips with the fact that you're not, and come to grips with the fact that you're not the best.

And think about—even as Christian parents—we always say to our kids, you can be who you want to be, you can do whatever you want to, you're limitless possibilities. Well, none of that is true. It feels good. I suppose there's an entire industry trying to create an inflated view of who you are. We call it self-esteem these days. And somehow since the '70s, we've all accepted this as a positive thing. But in reality, the Bible says biblical humility is about just coming to grips with the real truth of who we are. And there's something freeing about that. There's something refreshing about this. This is not to pound us into submission. It's to get us to live with the truth. And there's nothing better than embracing the truth in any situation.

Jesus has revealed to us who His favorite preacher in the Bible is, the greatest prophet. And as we've learned in our study in Luke 3, that's John the Baptist. John, this prophet who was the forerunner of Christ—Jesus later says in His ministry, looking back on John the Baptist—this was the greatest. He was the greatest. When it comes to the greatest preacher in Jesus's mind, he was never one to have people think wrongly about who they are. As a matter of fact, talking about a straight shooter and telling it like it is—that's what John the Baptist was all about. Just here's the reality, here's the truth.



What's interesting, as we continue our study of Luke 3, as we get to verse number 15, what we see here is an opportunity for him to display that in his own life. And we'll start with those two verses in verses 15 and 16. And then we'll watch that develop as he turns the attention back to what he's there for.

So if you haven't already opened your Bibles to Luke 3:15, let's pick up where we left off and look at the crowds who were anticipating the coming Kingdom. And the Kingdom needed a King, and the King according to the Old Testament was the Messiah. And some people started to say, Man, you are head and shoulders above all of us, John. Are you the Messiah? Is it you?

Verse 15, look at it with me: As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ. John answered them, verse 16, saying, I baptize you with water. But he who is mightier than I is coming—how much mightier, more important, is he than you?—the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie.

Let's just start right there: the strap. Now, we don't have an equivalent to that, because you're not running around with sandals that strap up your calves unless you're in a, you know, a Roman play or something, I suppose. Or—I know some of you gals shop in strange places, I'm not sure how that works. Maybe that's in vogue, I don't know. I don't notice your shoes. Girls notice everybody else's shoes, but I don't. But even if you wear some strappy sandal, unstrapping that sandal is not something you're going to ever task out to anybody, because, you know, it's just—you take your own shoes off.

But in an ancient world, if you were a very well-to-do person, I suppose you could assign this task to someone because it was a dirty job. And it usually came with, because of all these dusty streets, the cleaning of your feet. So you would have this person take your sandals off, if you were extremely rich and had a servant that was assigned to this task. And it was the most menial task. You could have pulled out his basin and his washcloth, and he could clean your feet and then put those nice, you know, ancient Near Eastern first-century slippers on your feet or whatever the equivalent was, now that you're home.

None of us are thinking about that kind of thing. There are things, I suppose, that are menial and, you know, even gross—because that's what it was for them, a menial, gross job—that we do deal with. And that is, if you have toes that grow toenails, we all have to cut them. This, I suppose, would be the equivalent of John saying, There's one coming who's mightier than I—or the parallel passages say He outranks me—and He's so important, He's so mighty, so authoritative, that even if He asked me to cut His toenails, I would turn that job down—not because it was beneath me, but because it was above me. I don't even deserve to do that.



Now think that through: if I said there's some old cronies on the Aliso Viejo City Council, they can't bend over to cut their nails anymore. So we've got a table out on the patio. We need a few people to sign up to go to their houses and cut the old man's toenails. I doubt many of you are going to pass by the table thinking the job is above you. You're not going to pass by the table going, Let's give that job to someone else because you think that ministry is beneath you. You don't want to cut some guy's toenails, right? You don't mean like cutting your own toenails, do you? This is not a job you want.

He says, This guy is so important, I would not even be worthy to cut His toenails; I wouldn't be worthy to unstrap His sandals, take them off, clean His feet. I wouldn't even be qualified for that.

Now that, I should say, is not what a lot of Christians think humility is—some manufactured, artificial view of John's self; that he's some self-loathing, self-hating, I'm-just-a-poor-miserable-worm. John doesn't have a false view of who he is. He understands who he is. He even understands the importance of his role. You don't think he connects his ministry, as he later confesses to the people in the Gospel of John—he knows he's the forerunner to the Christ, he knows he's the fulfillment of Malachi chapter three. He knows that. He knows he's important in this thing. He just recognizes, If you want to measure me to the real important standard, and that is the standard of Christ, I don't—I don't even come close to measuring up.

Let's start there. If you're taking notes, just dealing with verse 15 and the first half of 16, we need to be humbled as Christians by Christ's authority. And that's the place we should always start in just measuring ourselves, our intellect, our abilities, our accomplishments, our importance, or our potential: you're not the Christ.

Now, I don't know—do we need to make that comparison? Yeah, we do. As a matter of fact, the Bible says the problem with most folks is they start to think that they're important in an inflated view of themselves; they run around with a cutout of themselves because they've lost sight of who God is. And in this particular case, the embodiment of God—God in human form—Jesus Christ. And John had biblical humility not because he lied to himself about being a miserable worm, but he felt very, very unworthy. If you ever said to him, Let's talk about how important you are—man, maybe you're the King of Israel. I'm not. You want to talk about the Christ, the coming King of Israel? I wouldn't be worthy to unstrap the straps of His sandals.

Once you've jotted that down there, turn with me if you would to John 3. In John 3, there's a text here that I think is the one we often think of when you think of John the Baptist's humility. Because he says in a very short verse here in John chapter 3 something that's kind of a catchy little phrase,

but I want you to understand it in context. His humility is not a manufactured, worked-up feeling. It's simply a check on reality. And I love the illustration that he brings us here in this chapter.

Drop all the way down to verse 25. After the whole important statements here earlier, it says this in John 3:25: Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew—rather, a singular Jew—over purification. Verse 26, And they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—the one you talked about that's coming—look, he's baptizing, and all are going to him. They're going over to him; they're joining his clan. Your ministry—you're so important, you're the prophet, you're the important guy—your crowds are diminishing and his are growing.

John answered, A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. Now there's a good place to start. Before we even get to the second person of the Godhead, let's talk about the first person of the Godhead. The Father grants everything to everyone. As Paul put it, What do you have that you haven't received? And one thing that will keep us thinking rightly about ourselves is to recognize that everything I have—including the brain cells that snap all at the right time to earn me a paycheck if I happen to be good at what I do, or you happen to be accomplished in what you do—whatever your talent, whatever your skill, whatever your brain, whatever your accomplishment, whatever you have, the Bible says, has all been given to you. So let's keep ourselves in that perspective.

Then he says, You want to talk about being a person walking around on the planet—you need to always measure yourself against the King of Kings. Verse 28, You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ. This isn't about me, but I have been sent before Him. Verse 29, The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. You see all these people clamoring around Christ? Well, that's because this party is for Him. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly—that's me—at the bridegroom's voice. I'm glad He showed up. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete.

Now, here's the phrase we remember, verse 30—it's worth highlighting: He must increase, but I must decrease. Now again, this feeds into the false impression of humility that people have if we just picture John thinking normally, as we often do, about God as being the big man upstairs, or Christ kind of, you know, my homeboy Jesus—right?—my Savior, my buddy, my friend. We often start to picture John kind of having this really, you know, self-loathing, this I just want to be small, I'm not important—He's got it. That's not the point at all. He recognizes the Christ for who He is. And that is that the party is for Him. And I don't just mean this because he's in ministry. I mean this because he's a human being walking around on the planet. What is everything for? It's not for us. Why did God create all of this? Not to bring glory to us. What is all this work for? Our pleasure? It's not for our pleasure. Everything—your job, your intellect, any accomplishments that you have, your parenting, anything you do—the Bible says is to be for the glory of God. And here's what God



says: He keeps pointing direction to His Son. Look at Christ. As Philippians 2 puts it, everyone's going to acknowledge His greatness to the glory of God the Father.

So He says to all the human beings running around on the planet, The party is not for you. You're like a groomsman, if you will, a friend of the bridegroom. I've done a lot of weddings. And on rehearsal time, I always get to meet the people you chose to have in your bridal party. And I get to recognize that there are some real weirdos that you've chosen to be in your bridal party that aren't very cooperative. And many times they start to irritate me as the pastor trying to figure, you know, get all this organized and run through the ceremony and do all that. And I've only had to do it once that I can remember—I've been irritated many times—at people that think that this whole thing is about them. And they're not even—it's not—you're not getting married here.

But one day, I had to literally pull a guy aside and say to this guy, Listen, do you understand you're not the groom? Right? You realize this party is not for you. Right, Mr. Jokester that wanted to interrupt everything every two minutes. In the ceremony rehearsal I said, You are here for this guy. You're his friend. This is not your party. You recognize? Well, the world keeps saying everything is here for you: you're worth it; we'll make you important; all of this will make you happy; it will bring pleasure to you; it'll make your life easier. That's not the perspective of John the Baptist. Here's the right perspective of anyone who walks around on the planet: the planet and everything on it is for Christ—that brings glory to God. Everything, whether we eat or drink, the Bible says, the glory goes to Him.

Now, think about how that changes everything. It begins to put me in the right perspective—to think rightly about me and who I am. Now, if you think—and I already briefly referred to it—if you have the perspective most people have about God and Christ, we unfortunately have a hard time with this perspective of humility, because we don't view God right. And I guess that's the challenge: it's not to think less of yourself. What I want you to do is to think rightly about Christ, which puts you in great perspective.

Let me turn you to why John would be so quick to say I'm not worthy to untie the strap of His sandals—because he understood the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Christ. Let me turn you to one of them that should blow your mind as you think about how Christ was expected to come. Daniel chapter seven is where I want to take you. Please turn in your Bibles to Daniel 7—not hard to find—good text for you to look at. Important, matter of fact; it's the key to understanding something that Jesus said often. Almost at times in the New Testament, Jesus is referred to—and many times He refers to Himself—with the phrase the Son of Man. Does that sound familiar? Twenty-five times in the Gospel of Luke alone, we see Christ either referring to Himself, or people around Him—Luke, often in the narrative itself—calling Jesus the Son of Man.



Now that's kind of funny if you think about it: Son of Man? Why? Because He wasn't—think that through—wasn't the Son of Man. The Gospels start with what? That He was born of the Holy Spirit. Man was not involved. You're not the Son of Man. As a matter of fact, when Luke later in chapter 3 of Luke begins His genealogy, he talks about the supposed son of Joseph, right? He's born of the Holy Spirit. He's not—I guess you're the son of a woman, but you're not a son of man. What's this all about? Why did Jesus love this phrase so much more than He loved the phrase calling Himself the Son of God? He liked to call Himself the Son of Man.

Here's why. Here's the key to understanding that phrase, used almost at times in the New Testament. It came from the prophecy about the coming of the authority of God to earth. The authority of God would be embodied in one like the Son of Man—like a son of man. Right? And the point would be, He really wouldn't be—it's not a reference to the virgin birth. It's a reference to the fact this is no ordinary person. It is the authority of heaven embodied in one who appears to be a son of man.

For some context, let's start in verse 9. If you were to read verses 1 through 8, we're talking about some future rising of powers and the falling of powers, and they're all referred to in this apocalyptic text as horns growing up and being bigger than the others and all the rest. Well, by verse 9, we turn the attention to heaven: As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days—here's a picture of God the Father, first person of the Godhead—He took His seat, and His clothing was white like snow, this picture of holiness and perfection. And the hair of His head was like pure wool—this kind of simile and picture of the analogy of wisdom. And His throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire—this picture of power, unmitigated authority. A stream of fire issued and came out from before Him, and a thousand thousands served Him—wow—and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

Now, if you've been to court before—I mean, if it wasn't in Kentucky or something—you went to a courtroom, they usually have these rooms that have this sense of majesty to it. Can you imagine this? This courtroom, and the One who walks in has thousands of thousands serving Him, and ten thousands of ten thousands out there all around in court. And here we talk about, "All rise," right?—when He walks in. This is unmitigated authority, fire coming from the throne.

Then a little interlude, verses 11 and 12, about the horns, right? The horn that was so great—it says it was killed, body destroyed. Verse 12, the rest of the beasts and all their dominion—it was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. Now, you've got to get all that in another sermon—it's a different context. I mean, the idea is the replacement of these rival powers.

But here's the part I need you to catch. Verse 13: I saw in the night visions, Daniel says, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one—underline it—like a son of man. Picture this:



this is not earth-originated; this is heaven-originated. See, John the Baptist and everyone else just like you—we started down here; our lives had a beginning down here. Jesus continually goes back to the fact that I was before I got here; I came from there; I preexisted. Now that's not something the rest of us can claim. And this person generated from heaven here, at least the image of this person generated in this context, which is the eternal second person of the Godhead, was like a son of man.

Now that's the loaded term of the Messiah. And he came to the Ancient of Days—so the Son here comes before the Father—and was presented before Him. And to Him was given—look at this phrase, verse 14—dominion: power, unmitigated power; glory: the majesty of that power; and a kingdom: everyone under Him; that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. And His dominion isn't like the other dominions that are short-term and temporal. This is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed.

That is the unmitigated power of the Ancient of Days embodied in something that looks like the Son of Man—like a son of man, a person. Now, when John grows up studying texts like this from Daniel, and then someone says, Oh, are you the Messiah? Right? Because he rightly understands Christ, what's his response? I couldn't even unstrap the sandals of the Messiah.

Now that disparity isn't like Jesus is just a little bit taller than him in the family—which is sometimes how we view Christ, as our buddy. It's like standing next to the U.S. Bank Tower in downtown L.A. and saying, You want to compare heights? It's a joke. There's no comparison here. This is Christ, and I am a servant. I am someone so small in authority and power and rank. Don't ever try and mistake me for someone I'm not because I understand myself rightly next to the authority of God—the embodiment of Christ.

Now, here's the deal. How do you, just pastorally speaking, think of that Christ? What comes to your mind? How do you speak to that Christ? What are your prayers like? And how do you refer to Him when you talk to other people about you being a follower of Christ? Do you still picture that—kind of the white, you know, top robe, maybe with a blue sash, and, you know, butterflies floating around and Jesus smiling with children on His lap? How do you picture this person? In His humbled state as a traveling itinerant rabbi—I understand there was the state of humility—but that's over. You do understand that, right?

Revelation chapter 1 pictures Him now glorified—which He couldn't wait for in John 17. He prayed for this reality, to have His glory restored to Him—looking like this. How do you speak of that One? See, if Jesus is just a little bit taller here in our little spiritual family, some preacher gets up yakking about humility, you think you've got to come up with this generated false view of who you are to consider yourself a lowly worm. You don't need any of that if you rightly understand



who Christ is. Because then you get it. Then you say, I'm nothing compared to Him; I'm unworthy even to serve Him.

What we really need in the modern church, right, is not some kind of phony humility and self-loathing being passed around in our churches. What we need is a new, fresh, biblical, accurate view of Christ. And then we can say this, which is the exercise of biblical humility: just come to grips with the reality here. The party is not for you. And really—it connects to Him. You're not anybody. You are, as Jesus said, when you've done everything He's asked you to do, lowly servants only doing what we ought to have done. That's the perspective. And that's an important perspective for us.

And I don't have time to turn you here—I want to—but another pastoral implication of this in Malachi chapter one. If you're a copious note-taker, jot it down: Malachi 1:6–8. It's just the heart of that section in Malachi 1 which says this: it's not just an exercise of your mind; it will bleed out into your life. It will express itself in how you serve, how you give; not just how you pray and how you think, but how your life responds to the call of God in the Bible. What you do will be reflecting your view of Christ. If you say, Oh, I'm not egocentric, I'm Christocentric—I'm all about the centrality of Christ—your life will prove that by not giving God your leftovers, by not casually approaching Him. When you worship Him, there's going to be a sense of you understanding His greatness. And that's lacking, unfortunately, in the church today. So it's a good reminder for us to say as bluntly as we can: you and I, as Christians, need to be humbled by Christ's authority.

Back to our text—now it's printed in your worksheet—the bottom of verse 16 we didn't read yet. We started the comparison when he said, Hey, I baptize you with water. That's one thing. He—bottom of 16—will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now, you do understand the problem with the word baptism that we have. It's what we call a transliterated word. It's not translated; it's transliterated. And you know the difference. Like *angelos* is the Greek word for messenger. Well, we don't translate that. If we did, every time you got the Greek word in the Greek New Testament *angelos*, it would translate it messenger. But we don't—we transliterate it. So we come up with a new English word that doesn't really exist, and we say the word angel. Well, that's true with a lot of words that come from biblical Greek, and one of them is baptism. So we don't translate it; we just transliterate it.

And when you look at the word baptism and you say, Well, what does it really mean? You would have to understand the word, if you define it, as being placed into, being submerged, being dunked—I mean, if you really want to be irreverent—being dunked. Or, how about this word: being enveloped in something?



Now, in this text—and I know commentators will debate this, but I don't think it's that hard to figure out—and that is that they're going to say, Okay, Christ is going to come and baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And the way that it's said, it sounds like that's one thing that Christ will do that has two aspects to it. I don't think that's how we should understand it. And the reason people will say that is because, you know, if you look throughout the New Testament for that picture of fire, sometimes it's represented as a good thing. Sometimes, even in Acts 2, when Luke continues to talk about the early church, we see the Spirit and fire paired together. And so you know what, that's a good thing. And often it talks about the purification of people, and fire could be a good thing.

Well, I understand that we need to interpret the Bible with the Bible. But you know what? Here's another principle: we should be using the immediate context to help interpret phrases before we use the extended context of the rest of the Bible. And if you look quickly at verses 17 and 18, he goes on to talk about the fire, and the fire that's going to be used in the baptism is the distinction between the wheat and the chaff that's thrown into unquenchable fire. Therefore, when he says Jesus is coming and He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire—picture this now—there are two audiences here. He's talking to the people he's called the brood of vipers that don't want anything to do with real repentance, and the people that are contrite, saying, What should we do, John? And he tells them, Here's what repentance looks like. And for one party, they get enveloped by the Spirit, and the other party gets enveloped by the fire. The baptism that Christ brings is twofold—there are two kinds. You either get placed into the Spirit, which is a radical transformation of your life, or you get placed into the fire, where you get assigned judgment for the sins that you've committed. There's only two options here.

And we're going to save verses 17 through 20 for next time. So if you're looking to miss church some weekend, next weekend would be a great weekend to miss because we're going to be talking all about the judgment of God and the fire of God. And so you don't want to hear a message on hell, I'm quite sure. So that's what I'm preaching on next week—good day to call in sick, I suppose, to church. I've warned you. I'm not going to be angry; I'm just going to tell you what the text says regarding God's judgment.

This week, though, let's focus on the first half of that: baptize you with the Holy Spirit. If you're going to avoid the fire of judgment—which I understand is an analogy of that judgment—then what you need is to be enveloped or baptized by the Spirit, or with the Spirit, or in the Spirit—same Greek particle translates all the same way. In the sphere of the Spirit you need some kind of enveloping in that sphere instead of the sphere of judgment. What does that look like? I'm glad you asked. Turn with me, if you would, to Ezekiel 36.

Now we're into the second point, and I haven't given it to you yet. So I guess once you turn to Ezekiel 36, let me have you fill it in—but let me illustrate it first. Because I don't think we feel the



reality of what I'm talking about until I can get it into where we live every day. John is saying you've got two things, two choices, two options. You've got, because of our problem, either judgment or this encounter with the Spirit that—as we're going to see in Ezekiel 36—is going to change everything about you. As a matter of fact, he says it's the replacement of your heart.

When we have two options based on a severe diagnosis like that, it does something to our hearts and to who we are—our spirit. Think about it—here's where we live every day. We're all subject to sickness and disease and death. You've been there; someone you love has been there before—sitting across the desk from the doctor. The doctor has gotten the lab results back; the blood tests are back; the X-ray, whatever it is, is back. And he's got bad news for you. It's a bad diagnosis. And let's just say it's me, and it's my heart. And the doctor—I'm speaking to my cardiologist—and he says, Listen, Mike, your heart: ticking time bomb. We just got the test back. Your heart could explode any day now. You're going to die, and it's going to be horrible. But the good news is we know how to do open-heart surgery. So we can wheel you into surgery, and let's schedule it for tomorrow morning, and we can do heart surgery—or you're going to die. Heart surgery or your heart explodes and you die. You got two choices. There's your two options. I either cut your chest open and crack your ribs open, and we dive in there and put your heart on a table and replace a few valves and put it all back in—or you die.

Now, what does that do to you, hearing that? I mean, you're not going to start planning your next vacation at that point. You're not thinking, Oh, I wonder what I'm going to do this next week; I need to clean the garage. I mean, you're immediately humbled by that—if you believe the diagnosis. If the lab results are accurate, you're not sitting there thinking, Well, you know, if my wife calls me—How did the meeting with the cardiologist go?—and I said, Well, he told me my heart's going to explode and I'm going to die or I need to go in for surgery tomorrow. What are you going to do? I am not going to worry about it. Well, you need to make a decision. I'm not going to make any decisions right now.

You understand? It's like the old adage from the evangelist: no decision is a decision. You get that? If I don't decide to go have heart surgery, then I'm deciding that I'm going to allow my chest to explode and I'm going to die. I cannot—there's no third option. There's no neutrality. When the diagnosis is accurate, I have—there's no—there's no way. I want another choice. My doctor says your heart's going to explode, or you need surgery. I—option three? What else can we do? Well, nothing. Those are your options.

John comes on the scene and says this: I'm not the Christ. I understand. I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals. But let me tell you this—when He comes, this Mighty One I'm talking about—He'll give you two options. You either need radical surgery that takes place by the hand of the Holy Spirit and you're radically changed, or you face the judgment of God. Those are your two choices. That is a humbling that you cannot go on living the same after hearing that.

Number two in your outline—just jot this down, then we’ll read Ezekiel 36: We need to be humbled by our dilemma. We need to be humbled by our dilemma. There are people standing there in line that say, I don’t want the wrath of God, but I don’t want to repent. They want a third option. There is no third option. That’s why John keeps coming back to: you’ve got two options—turn or burn, right? Oh, we don’t like that. I get you; you don’t like that. That’s because no one’s being trained anymore in seminaries to preach that. I’ve been to seminary—way too many hours, way too many years. I understand that what we’re teaching pastors today is to avoid all that. Don’t talk about it, because that doesn’t grow any churches, you know, and that’s the whole point—bring the masses in. That’s what we want. I’d love to bring the masses in to see people saved. But the problem is, if I don’t tell them what we’re being saved from, or what the dilemma is, I’m just—I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m into Zig Ziglar. I’m just preaching about having a better life. I don’t get it.

If I read the Bible and understand the dilemma that we have is sin, then when Paul writes his magnum opus on salvation, he spends chapters talking about what right out of the gate? Sin. You’re sinful; you’ve got a problem. You are, to put it in the very dramatic terms of the Apostle Paul (Romans 2), storing up for yourself wrath for the day of God’s judgment. If I don’t ever get to that place and understanding the diagnosis, I don’t understand Christianity. Now, I don’t know what the pastors are doing who are avoiding that throughout their ministry, because then I don’t understand what this is all about. I don’t get it.

The point, though, according to the Bible, is we’ve got a solution to that problem. But it’s going to involve an encounter with the Spirit that changes everything about who you are. Just to start in verse 25, which I think is helpful, because even the imagery of baptism brings people’s minds to forgiveness. Because remember, we said this early in the series: repentance and forgiveness are always paired together from the beginning of the Old Testament all the way through the commission of Christ at the end of the Gospel of Luke in Luke 24—repentance, forgiveness. The picture of baptism was symbolic of that act of being washed and forgiven.

Verse 25, Ezekiel 36: I will sprinkle clean water on you—speaking metaphorically—and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. If God wants to forgive you of your sin—and from all your idols I will cleanse you. We’ll get God at the center. This is what idolatry is, by the way—moving the hub to something else; something else is central. And I will give you a new heart—now you need surgery here—new life. And a new spirit I will put within you. (See that a small “s”—our translators got a small “s” there because we’re not talking about the Holy Spirit; we’re talking about your life being so completely changed that the center control panel of your life, which is all metaphorically referred to as your heart, will mean that you, as a person, are different. As the New Testament puts it: if anyone is in Christ, they’re a new creation; old things go, new things come.) I’ll remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My—here’s the capital-S encounter with the Holy Spirit—My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.



Now, here's what people say all the time to me: I don't want to become a Christian because I don't want to change. I like my life the way it is. Back to the doctor's office: Mike, your heart's going to explode or we need to do open-heart surgery. I love cheeseburgers—I don't want to—I'm not going to choose any of that. I don't want judgment, and I don't want surgery. I like my life the way it is. I want everything to continue the way it is. You can do that, I suppose—go out to In-N-Out for, you know, a quadruple-quadruple, or whatever they're making now—do it. But you're ignoring the diagnosis. And the diagnosis is: you've got a problem, that if you do not encounter the Spirit of God the way that John spoke of that Christ would inaugurate, you're lost; you're going to face the only other alternative.

If you're not humbled by our dilemma, then you stand in a long tradition of a lot of people, unfortunately, who—though they cling to some form of Christianity or godliness or religion—they think that this is really something that is about comparing my life with the people around me. And as long as you make those lateral comparisons, I call it, you will never understand the dilemma that we face. Because you can always find someone more sinful than you. I mean, you're not out shooting cops and hiding in the mountains. We watch that on the 11 o'clock news and go, Wow, that guy, huh? Right? I'm glad I'm not like that.

Turn with me, if you would, to Luke 18. Luke chapter 18. Jesus addresses this problem. Much like John, who was clear in his thinking that I must compare myself to Christ—the center of the universe—not me, comparing myself to anyone else. I'm not comparing myself with other people. And so it is for people that genuinely understand biblical humility, when it comes to the problem of my relationship with God and my problem of sin. If I continue to make that lesser than it is because I see people with more sin than me, then unfortunately I'll begin to trust in my relative goodness, and miss the grace of God altogether.

That's what Jesus addresses in verse number 9, when Luke says, He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. Now you can sit here all day long and say, Well, I'm a good person. How many times when you share the gospel with people do you hear that? I'm a good person. Really? What does that mean? It means you're better than people on the news—that's what it means. I'm better than some people at work. I'm better than most people I see getting drunk at the bars or beating their wives or committing adultery. I'm better than that guy. I understand that. And you may be—and congratulations, keep it up. But that's not the point of biblical Christianity.

Biblical Christianity says we have a problem: because God is so holy, that if we don't deal with the problem, at whatever extent it seems to be in our lives, then we have no hope but the judgment of God. Don't trust in your own righteousness, and certainly don't treat others with contempt.



And the story He tells begins in verse 10: Two men went up to the temple to pray—one a Pharisee (that seemed to be the top of the heap in their day) and the other a tax collector (which we've already noted in our series is the lowest of the low in first-century Jewish culture). The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: God, I thank you that—now here's the next phrase to underline that is the critical problem and the fatal flaw of this man's life—I'm not like other men. See, John didn't do that. And John didn't preach that. John said, You've got two choices: you either face the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, or you face judgment. Well, I don't need the transforming work of the Spirit as much as that guy does. I understand that. This guy clearly—watching the 11 o'clock news—what comes next? Extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this guy in my small group over here—praise God I'm not like him. You see someone there on the Temple Mount—the tax collector—and he says, Man, let's just think of how much better I am than that guy. I fast twice a week; I give a tithe of all that I get. And those tax collectors are always ripping people off. I don't rip people off; I give God the full 10% of my income.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me—now here's the two key words in his prayer—a sinner. Question: The Pharisee—a sinner? Yes. Does he see his sin? No. Why? Lateral comparisons—always looking at other people, always saying I'm glad I'm not that guy; I'm glad I'm better than that guy.

That's what needs to change in our thinking about what it means to be a Christian. We have a dilemma that we can't fix, no matter what kind of relative goodness we may have as we compare ourselves. Jesus' commentary on all this, verse 14: I tell you, this man—the tax collector—went down to his house—only time Jesus uses this key word in theology—justified. Paul picks it up, writes a whole book on this one thing. How is one declared righteous and accepted? To put it in terms of Ezekiel 36—washed and cleansed of their sins, new heart in their lives, now driven to walk in step with God. How do you get that? You have to acknowledge you're a sinner and in need of it, rather than the other one who was better, arguably, than other people.

Now, you want to tie this all together with our theme of the morning? Verse 14, bottom half of the verse: For everyone who exalts himself—whether you're doing that with lateral comparisons or however you might do it—will be humbled, debased. But the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Did we want the Pharisee going around saying, I'm worse than that tax collector? That's not the point. Don't manufacture some kind of false view of yourself. Compare yourself with the holy, righteous standard of God. And then you'll understand this: you're in need of a Savior; you're in need of someone to solve your problem for you.

You're a better swimmer than me—congratulations. We're going to swim to Maui. Let's make it Japan. We're going to swim to Japan. We start at 3 o'clock. Meet me out here. We're going to meet at Crystal Cove, and we'll get a nice meal there at that little shack and have a nice lunch. And then we'll get in the water and we're going to swim to Japan. Last one there is a rotten egg. Let's go. You're feeling really good when I'm cramping up 100 yards offshore. We get—"the pastor—what a



joke.” Congratulations—you’ll die by Catalina, likely. I don’t care how much further you get than me. You can’t do it.

You see the gospel in this? This is the point. The Pharisee and the sinner, the tax collector, have something in common: neither of them can measure up to the standard of God. And I’m sorry if this sounds like old-school evangelism, but this is the gospel. You must be humbled by the dilemma that you face, even if you’re better than the next guy. Even if you can look around at everybody in your small group and they don’t seem half as godly as you—it doesn’t matter. Be humbled by our dilemma. You either need the radical change of life that comes by being enveloped in the Holy Spirit (which we’ll deal with more in the Gospel of Luke as it unfolds), or you’re going to face the judgment of God—more on that next week.

Verses 21 and 22—let’s drop down to that. We’ll deal with the intervening verses next time, Lord willing—that’s the plan. But let’s end with these two verses here: Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened—something visual happened up in the sky—and the Holy Spirit descended on Him not like a Russian meteor, but it came down like a dove. Now it was in bodily form, but it was a gentle descent. And a voice came from heaven—first miraculous event surrounding Christ’s public ministry starting here—You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.

Here’s the contrast you have to get. Don’t miss this. Everyone’s lining up to get baptized. This is the crowd now that sees themselves as sinners. These folks are contrite; they know we don’t measure up to God’s standard—we need God’s grace and mercy. Now we have someone in line to get baptized in that group that gets the megaphone from the sky that says, Love this guy. Totally well pleasing to Me. What are You doing in this line? We’re a bunch of sinners here, confessing our repentance. That’s the contrast we need to get. And that’s the rest of the book of Luke: the One who comes unblemished and spotless will exchange His life for our life.

As a matter of fact, over in John 1:29, when the story is told by John—John the apostle—about John the Baptist, it says when he saw Christ coming, he said, Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Now, how does that work? Well, that’s the picture of the sacrificial system where you brought the unblemished lamb, the one without any defect, a year-old lamb, and you brought that for sacrifice. And you got to leave in this symbolic picture forgiven, while the lamb suffered and died and was eaten by the priest and his family. That picture of His life for your life is the transaction of the gospel.

You can jot this one down if you want; I’ll quote it for you: 2 Corinthians 5:21—God made Him who knew no sin—perfect, unblemished—to be sin for us (afternoon, Friday, Golgotha, the cross), so that in Him—if we now are in Him by faith—we might become the righteousness of God. Who



was righteous? He was. His righteousness—my sin. My sin goes on His cross; His righteousness now accounted and attributed to me. I’m accepted before God because of Him.

Now, I could put it this way—number three on your outline—I could say it this way, and I’m not going to say it this way: be humbled by the solution. He solved the problem you couldn’t fix. But the gospel is more positive than that, because the reality is this: we revel in that; we celebrate it. To put it this way—number three—you need to be confident in God’s solution. I’m absolutely confident that the reason when I die I’m going to be before God and hear this: “Enter into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Why am I going to get His approval? Not because of my résumé, but because of His unblemished life, and because my sin was all pinned to His cross. That’s the great exchange of my life for His life. And that not only humbles me that He solved the problem I couldn’t fix—a greater response in my heart is I celebrate it. I’m excited about it. I’m trusting in it. I’m confident about it. That’s the essence of biblical faith.

Two quick questions that should rise in your mind when I’ve got Jesus in line with a bunch of sinners confessing their repentance. What’s Jesus doing there? That’s question number one. How in the world is He getting baptized? I can see showing up and putting your arm around John and going, Yes, I’m the answer to your sin problem. But why are You getting baptized? Matthew chapter three answers this for us. We won’t take time to turn there, but if you’re a note taker, verses 13 through 15 show the dilemma of what we might expect. Jesus shows up, stands in line to get baptized, and John the Baptist says, What are You doing here? I should not be baptizing You. You’re not a sinner. You should be baptizing me. I’m the sinner—maybe a head above this guy and that guy—but I’m not comparing myself laterally. Against God, I’m sinful. You should be baptizing me. And Jesus—do you remember the response in Matthew 3?—says this in verse 15: Permit it now at this time, so that we might fulfill all righteousness.

What’s the point? God was living the life that I should have lived. And even if I got baptized—here’s the deal, which I have, and some of you have—in response to the obedient call of God—I’d much rather exchange His baptism for my baptism. Because you know what, even in the most righteous moment of my life—who knows—our motives are so skewed. Even if 3% of my motive was a little bit off-kilter, I want His baptism credited to my account. Don’t you? If God asked me to do something, I want His life for mine.

So over in Philippians 3, Paul says, I’ll count everything I’ve done that was in obedience to God—count it *skubalon*—rubbish (the Greek word; trash; “feces” literally is what *skubalon* means), that I might gain Christ. Because I want His life for my life, so that the righteousness that I need comes from Him, and my faith in Him is the trigger. I trust Him. I’m confident. And you ask your neighbors, Are you going to be saved when you die? Are you going to go to heaven when you die? What do they all say? Hope so. Right? Well, here’s the deal: Jesus came so that you could have a ticket to this thing, so you could have a guarantee of this thing, so you could have complete



confidence in this thing—not based on your résumé, but on His. So He was in line to get baptized so that He could fulfill all righteousness. That’s why He was there.

Second question that should come to mind when you read this: What’s with the Holy Spirit descending on Him? You already told me in the whole timetable chart you gave us, you know, three or four weeks ago, He was already 33 years old at this point at least—maybe 34—30 to 34 years old. You’ve been devoid of the Spirit for the first 33 years of your life? Dude, John had the Spirit when he was in the womb of his mother. Isn’t that what Luke 1 says? Which is strange. You mean to tell me that Jesus lived without the Spirit for 33 years? You’re going to buy that one?

We learned in the bottom of chapter 2 of Luke when we studied this that He was 12 years old, sitting in the temple, communing with His Father—calling God His own Father—which was really a bizarre thing to do. That’s a New Testament motif, for the most part. You’re having communion with the Father; you feel like He’s your Father—the first person of the Godhead. Second person of the Godhead is so in tune with the first person of the Godhead, He calls the first person of the Godhead His Father. But you don’t have the Spirit in your life? You think the second person of the Godhead is not in communion with the third person of the Godhead? Nonsense. Of course.

What’s this all about? You think Jesus needed a visual and audio statement that the Spirit of God rested on Him? Do you think Jesus needed that? He didn’t need that. Who is this for? Everybody else. What’s the point of this? For everybody to know He’s the Christ. This was something that was—to put it in a brief word—symbolic. Why was the Spirit somehow coming down on Him that day? To show everyone He was the Christ. Christ, by the way—you know this, right? The word in the Old Testament we transliterate “Messiah” is the word “anointed.” Anointed means when something is poured on you—the oil was poured on the king to inaugurate the king. Right? That was the anointing of the king. The picture of that is now played out here symbolically as—look carefully at it, verse 22—something descending in bodily form that represented the Spirit, like a dove. This was a symbolic statement to show the world, I’m the Christ. I’m the One the Old Testament expected.

And I guess I should deal with this little phrase here—which I hate to do—but if you see that phrase there, “descended on Him in bodily form, like a dove,” what do you picture? Well, everybody pictures the dove. All the other three Gospels say the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove. “Like a dove” is the simile that describes the mode of transport. “Like a dove.” When I say it wasn’t a Russian meteor—and they didn’t have “helicopter” or “jetpack” to use as an example of hovering down upon Him—what they had as a simile was that the dove comes gently down and gracefully down. Luke is the only one that describes the form itself. And it describes the form with this word “bodily.” What’s the point? Some kind of bodily form came down visually for people to see, resting on Him, and the transport was like a dove. Don’t picture some feathery cartoon dove coming out of the sky. Most experts will confirm this for you if you want to look this up. But the description of the



dove was a description of the way this came down. Didn't say "came down on like a helicopter," right? But that was the idea—came down on top of Him.

That brings me real quick—and I've got to deal with this before we quit—to baptism. If repentance is the trigger of forgiveness, then the baptism is simply an expression of the cleansing that I receive with forgiveness in John's baptism. If Christ already had the Spirit in His life and was clearly, as the second person of the Godhead, in communion with the rest of the Godhead, then this descent of the Spirit was a symbolic, external picture of something already a reality in His own life. That's the picture of Christian baptism as well.

Don't have time to look at it, but jot it down. Anytime we talk about it, we should reference 1 Peter 3:18–21, just to get the whole context. And that is that when it comes down to verse 21, it makes it clear the kind of salvation that we all need comes not from the removal of dirt from the body when we get baptized. It's not the physical act of being immersed in water; it's the appeal that we make to God. That's the trigger, humanly speaking. If you're ever here at a baptism, you've heard me ask the question—I start everyone this way: Does baptism save you? And everybody answers with a question. And the question is, Which one? Because if you want to answer the question, "Does baptism save?" you can't answer it without more information. Are we talking about being enveloped in the Spirit, being placed into Christ by the Spirit, having my heart changed and forgiven of my sins? That's the baptism that does save you. If you're talking about being dunked into water, that's not the baptism that saves you.

"Woo—I don't have to get baptized; I still get to go to heaven without being baptized." Do you think that makes any sense? Really? Right here is Someone who asks you to do something—who has all authority, all dominion—and we're all called to serve Him, and He says, Get baptized. So now's the time, by the way, to feel that pang of guilt and conviction right now if you haven't been baptized. Guilt. That might—guilt. If you have not been baptized, here's how you can resolve the guilt right now: you can just type it into your phone or you can write it on your worksheet—mark@compasschurch.org. You can write Pastor Mark Kelly at mark@compasschurch.org, and get signed up for the next baptism.

Water baptism is an external expression of you being cleansed by God by responding to the gospel with repentance—not only of your sin, but more importantly, as this text now is beginning to do in the Gospel, directing your confidence to Christ: repentance and faith. If that's a reality for you, please obey Christ and be baptized in water. If you need more on that—which I know a lot of people may—on the back, as they do every week, I have some books for you. And there are a few of them on the topic of baptism. Maybe if you're Presbyterian, or you come from a Catholic background, and you need some clarification as to what's happening, what's not happening, and what about if I got sprinkled as a baby, or blah, blah, blah—you can read about this in some of those books. Or just write Mark—Mark can talk to you about getting you on for the next baptismal schedule.



Now, I know the world—immediately when I’m done with this sermon—you’re going to walk to your cars, you’re going to get in the car, you’re going to drive out of the driveway, and the world will pick up the narrative in your life. And it won’t sound anything like this sermon. Some of you are grateful for that. But you shouldn’t be. Because if I’m telling you the truth about what the Bible says, then this whole narrative about you being worth it, and everything being about you, and you have to, you know, read this whole narrative about you first, and you independent, and you self-sufficient, and you being the center of how you should live—it’s a lie.

So I’m going to ask you to fight that. I’m going to ask you to reject that. I’m going to ask you—what the apostle Luke, and I should say, John the baptizer, the prophet John, would say—listen, when I look at myself, I realize this: that this party is about Christ, not about me. As Jesus taught us to say, even when I’ve done everything I ought to do, I say, I’m an unworthy slave; I’ve only done that which I ought to have done. I recognize myself in perspective. Not that I’m trying to manufacture a false, lowly view of myself. I just want to get myself—and I want to come to grips with reality.

And I’ve got a problem that the rest of the world is going to tell you you don’t have a problem. I’m OK; you’re OK—remember that book in 1969 that came out? Tom Harris wrote the book; it kind of started the self-help book craze. “I’m OK.” Here’s the funny thing you may not know—Life magazine reviewed that book, and they said this: it ranks up there with the Bible. That was their review. Look it up. That’s what they said. And I thought, Wow. If it ranks up there with the Bible, we had better reflect the literal truth of the Bible. And I can rename the book, and it really is easy. And the book title should be, I’m Not OK and You’re Not OK. That’s what the Bible is going to say. And you need to be OK. And that isn’t going to happen by trying to get out of your childhood—which Tom Harris is all about: growing out of my childhood—nonsense.

Here’s the thing: you’ve got a problem and I’ve got a problem we cannot solve. And that’s the whole point of the gospel. And when you leave this parking lot, the world’s going to say, There’s nothing you can’t do. You can conquer anything. You can be whatever you want to be. You can—you’re limitless. You’re not. You aren’t. You have a diagnosis that only Christ can solve. The good news is, you can revel in the solution. But you have to trust in that alone. You have to, with the Apostle Paul and the rest of the people in the Bible, not trust yourself. You have to say, I am, at Judgment Day, never going to start flipping through my accomplishments. When Christ comes up and says, Why should I let you in here? I’m going to say, Because I’m allied with Christ. I’m trusting Him.

So reject the narrative of this world. Get back into your Bibles. Don’t just go to your favorite eight verses. Can you get into the Scripture and see what it says about our full dependency on the finished work of Christ, and our need to trust in Him?



Stand with me as we let you go. Let's pray together real quick.

God, as the Septuagint references that Psalm—Psalm 33—to David (and perhaps it is his; he was certainly the inspired psalmist), he was right that the horse is a real vain hope for victory, and a king certainly isn't saved by the strength of his army. But the ones that You save are the ones that trust in You, the ones who fear the Lord, the Psalm says. We trust in Your lovingkindness toward us.

So God, help us please to differ this—this confidence that we have—from ourselves and put it in You; to reject this mantra of the world that wants to keep telling us we're something we're not; to stop walking around with these inflated cutouts of ourselves. Let us just come to grips with reality: that You are the King; the world's about You; we exist for Your glory; You don't exist for ours. And God, we're so thankful that though we have a diagnosis that should end in the lake of fire, You've sent Your Son to perfectly fulfill every requirement that makes me right before You. We cling to that. We trust in that. Give us that clarity about our trust—that we're trusting exclusively in the finished work of Christ. And make that the heart-song of everybody here.

And I know that's going to need a lot of filtering for all that we hear—every commercial, every self-help book, all this nonsense that runs around the landscape and unfortunately infects a lot of Christian books and Christian radio. Let us get back to the biblical perspective of what You say so that we might live in line with the truth—how freeing it is, how satisfying—just to think rightly and to be in line and in sync with the truth of Your Word.

One day, the books will be opened, and the book I know that's going to be opened is the book of Your truth, next to the Book of Life. And we're going to need to respond rightly now to the revealed truth of how we must be saved.

I pray for those here, God, that have been messing with this for a long time; they've never responded by repentance and faith. Maybe today's the day for them. There's no aisles to walk, no cards to fill out, no manipulation, no song in the background, but just an opportunity for people right now to get right with You by turning from their sin of independence and this egocentric mindset that we're all born with, and to turn to You—to trust in the finished work of Christ: that He lived for us and died for us.

And for those that respond that way, God, do that heart surgery You spoke about in Ezekiel 36 and change them, as You've changed others in this room, as You've changed me. Do that work in more



and more people. Do it for Your own glory, that You might produce a kingdom of people that are ready to serve You and live for Your glory.

We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.