



Christ's Perfect Provision-Part 3

When the Task Seems Impossible

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Well, if you're here this morning, as I would think most of you are, as folks that have some deference to the Bible and call yourself a Christian, there's really no surprise to recognize and just acknowledge that, as a Christian we're called to be evangelical, I think that through. I mean, clearly God has not called us to get our ticket to heaven, so to speak, and then circle the wagons. That was very clear that he calls as a pattern his people to himself, and then he commissions them with a job. And he calls his disciples and says, "Go be fishers of men." And we open up the Bible, we find we're not just supposed to, you know, cheer that we got right with God and reconciled to him. But now we're commissioned with this message of reconciliation to take that and share it with other people.

And we understand that—that we are called to be evangelical or to evangelize people—yet there are many in this room who claim grace that don't engage in that. And frankly, because it's hard. I mean, can you pick a topic that's more incendiary, or more polarizing, more inflammatory than religion? I mean, I'd rather talk about politics than religion in your workplace, the lunchroom, with your neighbors. That is a topic that's hard to bring up and discuss and then try to then impose—this is what it feels like—our view of God on people. And it's just, it's very difficult. People are entrenched in their views, and everyone's got an opinion. And everybody's very tenacious about their own view. And they don't like people questioning them. And so we come up with these images of "cramming our religion down other people's throats," and we just don't like that. And so we recoil from that. And that's why many people—though they know that Christians are called to be evangelical, to be involved in evangelism, trying to make disciples—they don't want to do it, because it's just a very uncomfortable and distasteful conversation to have with people.

We've reached the 18th verse in Luke chapter 9, where Jesus is in a scene with his disciples and has an exchange with them that, if you're familiar with the Bible, is very familiar to us. Matter of fact, it ends with a question that is often used in sermons as an evangelistic tool where Jesus looks at his disciples and he says, "Who do you say that I am?" And I've heard it preached, I'm sure you have too, and people use this as a time for people to think about, you know, "Where do I stand with Christ?"

But if you look at this text—and I won't have time to cover these three verses here that deal with this one scene, verses 18, 19, and 20—you'll see that this is not an evangelistic context at all. He's talking to people that are called to be evangelists. He's not talking to the crowds and saying, "Hey, crowd, who do you say that I am?" He's talking to his team, and he knows where they stand. So we almost have



this interesting setting for a text that we have to kind of look beneath the surface to figure out: What is Christ doing here? I mean, what's the training going on in this particular scene with his disciples?

And I think what you'll find is that the climate in the first century, in many ways, is not different than the 21st century, in that when it comes to Christ, everyone's got an opinion. And their opinions are pretty entrenched. And yet he, against the backdrop of that day—when everyone's got an opinion on things—calls them out to be reassured about their position and understand exactly what they are to stand for, and to clarify the message that they're supposed to bring to their generation.

So let's glean from this text, noting carefully the context in verse number 18. Luke chapter 9—if you haven't opened there yet, please do—look at this very short section of Luke 9, verses 18 through 20. Let's get beneath the surface of this if we can, and make some observations that I think will be very timely for our climate here in the 21st century.

Now, it happened that he was—verse 18 says—that he was praying alone. Okay, so he's off praying, he's not with the crowds, and he's ensconced here with his disciples around him; the disciples were with him. And he asked the disciples—right, he's asking his crowd, his team, people that are followers and devoted to being evangelists and representatives, fishers of men—he says to them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answered, “Well, some say you're John the Baptist, others say Elijah, others that one of the prophets of old has arisen.” And he said to them, “But who do you all say that I am?” And Peter answers for the group, and he says, “You're the Christ of God.”

Now, when Jesus starts asking questions, it's not because he's lacking knowledge. Let's start there. When he asks in verse 18—and let's just start with that first verse—he asks the question of his disciples after he has been praying, I'm sure touching on themes of his mission, the reason he's there. He gets his disciples now, and he says, “Let's talk about the opinion on the landscape out there. Who do people say that I am?” Now Jesus knows full well the varied opinions about himself, he gets that, but he's going to ask them so that he can highlight this. He can highlight the fact that everyone's got an opinion about Christ, and it's all over the map.

Now, sometimes we look at our generation, we say, “Well, the reason the world doesn't get this straight—this message of Christ—is maybe because the church is failing in the clarity of their evangelism.” Maybe that's it: more evangelistic training seminars. And I'm all for that; we should be trained to share the message of the gospel. But you need to remember that the varied opinions about



Christ were evident in the first century when Jesus himself was doing the preaching. And I think you would quickly agree that Jesus is good at sharing the message of who he is.

Matter of fact, if you look through the Gospel of Luke, you'll find many statements about him going with phrases like this: "in the power of the Spirit," preaching about the kingdom. I jotted down Luke chapter 5, verse 17: he's got people coming to him from every village in Judea and Jerusalem, and "the power of the Lord was with him to heal." Now think about that. Not only is he preaching clear messages about who he is, but convincing messages about who he is, because now he's able to take this blind man, born at birth, and make him see, and everyone can see that he's got this power from God. So if there's ever a time when there shouldn't be any confusion about Christ, that's when Christ himself is doing the preaching—you'd agree with that. And yet, he wants to say, even with that, "Disciples, I want you to realize everyone's got varied opinions about who I am."

Let's make that first observation and just camp on that just a little bit. Number one on your outline—hopefully, you're jotting this down this morning—number one: we need to expect religious confusion. Even when we're doing a great job in evangelism and apologetics. You want to defend the faith, you can do it excellently. I'm sure you would concede that Christ was good at defending the faith. But you need to realize that no matter how clearly and convincingly we present the message of the Bible, there will always be theological debate. There will always be religious confusion. There will always be people that go to their separate corners with different ideas about what we're saying. And they will come to entrenched positions that are not the truth. We just need to realize, we're always going to have religious confusion, we're always going to have theological debate, we're always going to have people saying, "Well, I think to get to heaven, you do this," and it'll be in opposition to what Christ has said. "I think that Jesus was really this," when in reality, Christ clearly presented himself as something else. And we've said it clearly. So there's always going to be this confusion.

Let's go a layer beneath that to see what the rest of the Bible says about why. Now turn to a classic text with me in Romans chapter 1, and let's just think through the problem. If Christ himself, as the evangelist and the apologist, cannot get everyone in his generation that he preaches to, to get clarity about who he is, then we need to know: What's the problem with everybody? If the problem isn't the preacher, if the problem isn't the presentation, what's the problem?

Well, here's the problem. Verse number 18—if you can not stumble over the first few phrases of this, let's get to the last phrase of it quickly. I mean, not that this is not a worthy topic to talk about, but in verse 18, against the backdrop of verse 17, we've got the idea of something else besides salvation being revealed from heaven. We also have God's wrath being revealed from heaven. And it's aimed at those who are ungodly and unrighteous. And these ungodly and unrighteous men—now here's the part I want



you to underscore—“who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” In other words, here are people exposed to the truth, and now they’re going to stuff that down; they’re going to suppress it; they’re going to ignore it; they’re going to come to decisions that are not in keeping with the truth. And the text here says “because of their unrighteousness.”

Now, the next verse is interesting. It helps us think through the reality that not only in the first century was Christ preaching clearly, but in the 21st century God is teaching clearly about the truth that really is the foundation of our theology. And that is: God is right now teaching about himself—in chapter 1, we’re going to see here in verse 19 and following—through creation; and in chapter 2, if we had time to articulate all those verses, in conscience. And just think about those: through natural revelation, God is teaching through creation and conscience.

Let’s look at the verse beginning in verse 19: “What can be known about God”—these unrighteous people—“is plain to them.” Now, let’s think that through. People have the truth being made plain to them, and this is even without a preacher, or an evangelist, or a fellow Christian at a restaurant table—don’t need anyone—for the truth about God, at least the articulated truth that he’s about to itemize here, being made plain to them. Why? “Because God has shown it to them.” So God is teaching right now. He’s making his truth clear. And the Bible says, for instance, his attributes—which are the foundation for the gospel; to understand the gospel, we start with God and his character—and he says, you know, nature shows us that: namely, his eternal power and his divine nature “have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” Now, in the margin—it should be there, I suppose, in any reference Bible—but you can jot down, as a classic text that poetically expresses this, Psalm 19, right? “The heavens declare the glory of God.” We’ve got stars, we’ve got planets, we’ve got the moon, we’ve got the sun, we’ve got all the things on planet earth that reflect things like symmetry, and order, and beauty. And those things, if you look at creation, speak to something beyond ourselves that does things beautifully, orderly, and in some kind of symmetrical, timely way.

And then I look in the mirror at my own life, and I realize I wish my heart and my mind and my life could be orderly and beautiful and timely in all the things that I see in creation out there that reflect the glory of God. I don’t see that glory in myself. I don’t see that kind of operation in my own heart. So I start to—even with that—when I understand the glory of God, against the knowledge that I have of myself (which chapter 2 is going to talk about, which we won’t have time to look at), my own conscience says there’s a gap between the Creator that is transcendent and out there and the way that I am in my own thought life and my own behavior.



Even there, I'm set up for the gospel. Even there, I recognize I need to seek the God who created; I need to know that there has to be some solution for the problem. If I'm ever going to be acceptable to God, I cannot bring him the imperfection of who I am. I need atonement. I need forgiveness. I need my guilt to be dealt with. I need propitiation from this just God for the sins of my life to be removed. Now, that's a lot of implications from those basic things. But if day after day and night after night I begin to take in something of the created order, I will start to realize God's teaching me things about myself that should clarify and underscore my need for him.

The problem is, people don't respond to that. It's enough for them to be "without excuse," the bottom of verse 20 says. But that knowledge that's out there that I'm exposed to—though "they knew God," verse 21—the problem with people is they choose—now this is a decision—"not to honor him as God." Now there's someone out there, but I'm not going to honor the God that I even see testified to in creation and conscience; I'm going to deny the reality of that. I'm going to believe there is a God, as most people do—even in our very Western mechanized technological society, right? Over 90 (what sometimes is as high as 95) percent of the people believe staunchly that there is a God, right? I'm just going to believe that God is not the God that I clearly see in creation and conscience. I'm not going to honor him as God. And I'm not going to give thanks to him as though everything that I have is dependent on him. And I'm going to try to create, in my own mind, a different way to look at this God.

The Bible says that's the point when "they became futile in their thinking," and "their foolish hearts were darkened." And there's a compounding problem in my thinking as I move away from the truth that I see in creation and conscience. "Claiming to be wise," I think I've got it figured out; I got God domesticated in a box; I figured him out. That's the ultimate height of folly—I've become a fool. And "exchanged the glory" of God that I could trace out in conscience and creation—even if I've never had a preacher talk to me—I exchange all of that, and I say, "Well, I'm going to settle for this: something that's more on my level, something like imperfect people and imperfect animals and birds and creeping things." I'll come up with something else to live for, something else to honor, something else to find my joy and satisfaction and fulfillment. I'm going to go after something less than the God that I see in creation and conscience. That's going on all the time.

And the point is that no matter how clearly God teaches—and you want to add us to the mix, fine—through us in sharing the gospel with our neighbor, or defending the truth of the gospel to someone at work, the tendency of mankind is going to be to suppress the reality of that and find some other way to view God.

Now, people, once they come to a conclusion about God, are going to tenaciously fight for that. And they are, because you've got to realize that everything they believe in, right, is something that they are



banking their lives on. Most people believe in life after death. I know there's a small segment, and they're very vocal these days, where they don't believe that, but even the naturalist, the evolutionist, the atheist, the agnostic—they believe that there's something beyond this life. Very few—and there are exceptions, yeah—there's "something" there. And whatever is there, I know that in my conscience there speaks to two realities of a good afterlife and a bad one. And so I want to think about how I can get to that good one. So I have to come up with a theology about God that I feel comfortable with, and I'm going to bank on that.

And if it is, as most people would say—talk to them this afternoon—"When you die, you're going to go to heaven?" "Yeah, I think so. Going to be a good place." "And I'll end up there." "Why?" "Well..." and then most people, at least in our culture, talk about these scales. "Well, we've got to look at my life, and there'll be enough good in my life because I'm basically a good person, and it'll be better than the people I see on the 11 o'clock news at night. So I think God's going to open up the doors, and I'll go to the good place after I die and not the bad place. And that's my view of God."

Now listen, if you want to talk about a different kind of God than that, I'm going to fight you. Why? Because I'm banking everything on this. It's like going to the horse track or the dog track—which I've never been to, going to make that clear. I prefer you not go either. All right, you want to throw your money away, you can just send it on to the church if you'd like. But that's not what I'm preaching about right now, and I'm using a great deal of self-control not to preach about that right now. But let's just say we're all track people; go to the track; we're at the track, and we're going to bet on our horse—let's make it horses. And we're going to choose and, as I would say, in reality most people (I would hope, and this isn't always the case), they're going to bet what they can afford to lose. That would be good—good counsel for you if indeed you go to the track (I'd prefer you not go to the track). But if you are so stubborn to go to the track, hopefully you're only going to bet what you can afford to lose.

But let's just say, as you think about the person putting down their money on that horse, and that horse is going to run, and they're going to cheer for that horse because they want to double, triple, quadruple their money or whatever it might be. They're hoping that horse wins, because they know there's an advantage to winning and there's a consequence for losing. But let's just say—like theology—that everything about my future rides on my theology. So we're going to go to the track this afternoon (which, of course, we're not; this is just an illustration; if you're flipping channels and just tuned into this line from the preacher), if we go to the track this afternoon and I say, "Whatever horse you bet on, it has to win, or everything in this bet—which is your entirety of your life—you lose it. Okay? If you win, then you win everything. But you have to put on the horse that you choose everything—everything you own, everything about your future—everything is banked on that one horse." Now, the race hasn't started yet. You put all your money on horse number three. I put all my money on horse number seven. We're going to sit around and talk about which horse is right; which horse is the winner.



Now the problem is: the reason people are going to tenaciously hold to their theology is because they really intuitively recognize their entire future hangs on this. If you believe that God is going to get you before him and pull some scales out and say, “Well, you’re better than the people you saw on the news every night in L.A.,” well then you’re banking on that. And if I come up and say, “That’s not how God is going to judge you. Here’s what the Bible says. Here’s what Christ taught. Here’s what Christ did. Here’s the only way to be right with the living God,” and it disagrees with your theology, you’ll say, “Well, I don’t want to do that; I’d rather believe in this.” You recognize there’s going to be debate and argument. There are going to be people that fight to the end for their theology.

Here’s the other thing—and it might be worth jotting down Psalm 50:21. I know I quote this often, but Psalm 50:21, the whole context is good, but the punch line is in verse 21, where it speaks to the issue of people shaping their theology about who God is. And they do that—and they do it with an ardent zeal—and they do it with this impunity because God hasn’t zapped them. In other words, you put all your money on horse number three; I put all my money on horse number seven. Horse number seven—let’s just say I’ve got the inside line and it’s going to win; your horse number three is going to lose, and you’re going to lose everything about your life and about your future. But you’re sitting there, while you put all your money on horse number three, and nothing bad has happened to you yet. Matter of fact, they’re coming out and serving you complimentary beverages, and giving you a parasol or whatever (clearly, my views of the track are all shaped from movies and TV; I have no idea what it’s like; I’ve never been there—have I made that clear? “Can I take the pastor to the track?” I don’t want to go to the track). You bet all your money, and now you sit there and wait to see who wins. It hasn’t even started yet—the festivities, the crowds. “People, what did you bet?” “I bet on horse number three, man; that’s what I’m betting on.” Nothing bad has happened; everything’s fine.

Psalm 50 says this: when God watches us choose a theology and then live in keeping with that theology, and he remains silent (there’s the words of verse 21), we then conclude that God is altogether like us. In other words, “We chose rightly; he likes my preferences and proclivities and opinions about him. And clearly the God of my imagination is the real God because I didn’t get zapped yet.” Well, here’s the one-liner that should be remembered: everyone’s theology is tested at the moment of their death. Am I right? When you die, you find out whether your theology was right or not. And if you chose to disregard the theology that creation, conscience, and Scripture were clearly teaching you, and you suppress that because you wanted a different theology that matched with your proclivities and your preferences, you need to realize there’s one day when the gate is going to be opened (just to stretch my terrible illustration here), and the horses are going to go down the track, and we’ll find out which theology was right—which will be no surprise, because God is going to say, “I told you the right theology, and this is the only one that wins.”



People love to believe that they can imagine whatever God they might want to imagine, and they're going to be right. But the Bible is very clear—and it's what Jesus is doing with this Socratic question in verse 18, saying, "Let's think about it, guys. I've been teaching the truth. Now, what's the conclusion of most of the people out there?" "Well, it's all over the map."

I think of it like students in a classroom, I guess, because I've got a couple of high schoolers that come home and talk about their exams that are coming up. And we care about their grades, and they care about their grades. And they can talk with their friends and text their friends about what they think is going to be on the final exam. But if you're like some of the teachers, they will have this pre-test, or this test, or this summary of what's going to—and the teacher will be very clear about what's on the test. And you can debate that, but if the teacher who's giving the exam has given you the direction and the information for that exam, then it doesn't matter what you think. It doesn't matter—your speculation. It doesn't matter—you don't think the teacher should have that as the criteria for the exam. If the teacher has revealed what's going to be on the exam, then that's what's going to be on the exam. And all the speculation of your classmates doesn't matter.

There's a lot of debate about religion, and there will always be—no matter how good we are with evangelism and apologetics, no matter how good of a teacher God is in creation and conscience and Scripture. We've got to be ready for that, because we know that the desire of man's heart is to shape God to be a perfect match to their preferences, their desires. Expect it.

Verse 19—they answer: "Well, some say John the Baptist; some say Elijah; some say one of the prophets of old." Now, let me make a philosophical observation from this. And I'll start by just explaining: if someone's there, they're imagining that they've encountered—who says, "I think Christ is the resurrected John the Baptist," like those that we saw earlier in chapter 9 came to King Herod and said, "Here's the thing that Jesus is doing." "Well, I think this is the resurrected John the Baptist." If someone really thinks that Jesus is the resurrected John the Baptist—whom Herod Antipas had beheaded—then all you'd have to do, if Jesus is not the resurrected John the Baptist, is take that person to the body and the severed head of John the Baptist and say, "No, here's John the Baptist; he was beheaded and laid in this grave. And here's Jesus. And clearly, if he was the resurrected John the Baptist, we wouldn't have a body here and a live person here. So your view of the resurrection is wrong."

If I said, "Well, I don't think he's John the Baptist; I think he's the Elijah that is to come." And I say that because that's when people in Jewish theology looked at the Old Testament, like Malachi chapter 3 and Malachi chapter 4—there was this prophecy that Elijah, that one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah, would come before the Day of the Lord, before the Lord showed up. Of course, that's not



what was taught about Jesus, because the prophecies we read in chapter 1 were: this one would not be the Elijah that was to come. The John the Baptist figure, born from Zechariah and Elizabeth, was going to be that person. And Jesus was the one that he was the forerunner for. So John the Baptist was the forerunner, and we had Christ now as the coming of the Lord that Malachi 3 and 4 talked about. And so we know that if you looked at theology and you understood what Jesus said—that he said it was John, “if you care to accept it,” who was the Elijah to come, and “I am the one he was preparing the way for”—then you’d say, “Well, Jesus would disagree and say, ‘I’m not Elijah,’” and he’d say, “You’re wrong.”

“One of the prophets.” In the parallel passage in Matthew 16, some were even naming Jeremiah as the risen prophet of old. “Maybe it’s Jeremiah,” for whatever reasons they had in their views of Old Testament prophets. They thought, “Well, I think this is Jeremiah, who’s come back, who made all these promises, and we’ve been reading in our daily Bible reading about the coming one who would sit on the throne. Maybe it’s Jeremiah.” You can’t be right if you believe it’s Jeremiah and, in fact, it’s the resurrected John the Baptist. You can’t be right if you believe it’s the resurrected John the Baptist and it’s, in fact, Elijah. You can’t be right if it’s really none of those three and it’s completely, entirely someone else—but you claim it’s the resurrected John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah. You can’t all be right.

And that’s the philosophical point I’d like to make: number two on your outline—let’s just remember that in all of our dialogue, in our very relativistic society, everyone cannot be right. It can’t be that everyone who claims opposing truth about what Christ is, about what he’s done, or how you get right with the living God—that cannot be right. And yet, that is the fare for the day. Everyone likes to think that’s what it is—that you can have a preference about your imaginary god, and that preference cannot be overturned by someone else’s conflicting preference, because when it comes to religion, that’s all it is: preference.

Now, let me make this clear: biblical truth claims—let’s call them religious truth claims—if Oprah wants to sit on a stage in a chair and make a claim about the living God, she can make a claim about the living God. And unlike the religion editor for the Washington Post, who likes to make the case often that the realities we speak of in religious discussions are different kinds of realities than the realities we speak of in other discussions, I want to make this clear: if there is a God, and Oprah wants to talk about who that God is, and I have this information that I say, “No, no; my assertion is: God is this and not that,” and these are conflicting truths, those truth claims are no different than any other kind of truth claim. And truth, in the dictionary, is defined as simply a correspondence with reality. So the correspondence with reality—if there is a real God, and he sent a real Son named Jesus to this earth—your claim about Jesus is either right or wrong based on the reality of who Jesus is, and the reality in this case of who God is, and the reality of his rules. There is a God; there is a Christ; there is a heaven and hell—if indeed there is. But you can’t now play games and say this is simply preference.



For instance, I was on this trip, and I was talking to a guy who had a serious life-threatening heart problem that almost took his life. And so he had to rush in, and they had to have this surgery. It was very controversial in some ways because the kind of heart disease he had was very complicated. And where it was, in the branches, it was just such a difficult situation that all these things that were done—as I heard him discussing it—phrases like this stood out: “Well, this is what had to be done to save the kind of diseased heart that I had.” So when I talked to him about his heart disease and the fix, it was a conversation that was a sober conversation about right and wrong, this and that, and serious consequences attached—if this was right and that was wrong. I mean, that was the kind of discussion we had.

Then Friday, I come and I’m sitting there, and I get someone who looked me up because they’ve got a preborn child who’s been diagnosed with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, which is the same thing that my daughter was prenatally diagnosed with. And so there are all kinds of surgeries that require brain surgery, spinal surgery, leg surgery—all these things that need to be done if you have the same kind of disease my daughter has. And so you talk through those, and I’ve read the medical journals and looked up the research and done all that kind of stuff about some of these experimental surgeries. And so this guy calls me and says, “I’m looking at this experimental kind of surgery. And so let’s talk it through. What do you know?” So two dads sit on the phone and talk about, “Well, I’ve read this medical journal, and it said this, and at least that was some years ago, so things may have changed.” “Well, I’ve read this,” and “Let’s talk about the risks, the options, the consequences.” And we talk about those things with point and counterpoint, argument and counterargument, because we know there are grave consequences that are associated with that.

Well, also on my trip, I talked to people about pizza—pizza from Chicago, pizza from New York; thin crust, thick crust, pan pizza—and everyone had point, counterpoint; argument, counterargument. And then the next day, I was sitting at this large table and they started talking about ideal places to live. Now, of course, I’m the out-of-towner guy, so I’m from Southern California, and, you know, I kind of feel like you should all know this is the best place to live. But they had all these points and counterpoints and arguments: midwest and urban and suburban and country and northwest and all these things—they were saying that this is the best place to live.

So I talked about pizza crust and zip codes in a very different way than I talked about heart disease and brain shunts. Because one, I realize, has to do with real consequences because they affect real things in the real world; the other has to do with simply claims about what I prefer. Now, I understand it may be a true statement that Pastor Mike likes thick crust better than thin crust—sorry to tell you that. Now that’s true. What kind of truth is it? It’s a true assertion of what I prefer. It’s not like saying, “Well, this



kind of surgery has this percentage of success in these situations with this kind of prognosis.” That’s a different kind of truth claim.

The realities that I’m talking about in terms of God, Christ, and salvation can never be put into the category of zip codes and pizza crusts. Because what really matters is the objective correspondence to reality: who was Jesus? What did he come to accomplish? Did he die on a cross and actually physically, bodily rise from the dead? And if so, what did he say about those things? How does it affect my sin problem? What does it do with my relationship to the living God? Now, you want to say something, celebrity friend wants to say something, people in some church—like this Lutheran pastor I heard talk about the afterlife—who said (believe it or not, seminary-trained), “Whatever you want to happen to you after you die is what will happen to you after you die.” Wanted to defrock him on the spot. “What are you talking about? You claim to be a pastor—what are you saying?” See, because to him there was no real concrete objective reality to those truth claims, because you could tell he plays fast and loose with all that. Why? Because in his mind—I don’t know—it’s a different kind of reality.

It’s like Professor Lipton from Cambridge, who’s a philosopher of all people, who speaks about his belief—he’s dead now, so his theology is perfect. But he said (now it is), but he said this while he was still alive, teaching in Cambridge: “I stand in my synagogue and I pray to God”—he was a Jew—“and I have an intense relationship with God. And yet I don’t believe in God.” Do you follow that? “I have an intense relationship with someone I don’t believe exists.” “Religion,” he says, “is nothing more than reading a novel; you can get pleasure and meaning from the experience, even though you know it’s not true.”

So think about how people have taken—as Francis Schaeffer used to say—these two levels of truth and have now divided them into two different stories and have said, “Well, religious truth is in the area simply of imagination and opinion and preference.” But when it comes to other truth claims, well, those are true truth claims; and they have to do with reality. And what Francis Schaeffer was getting at, saying: when it comes to religious truth claims, they’re no different than any other truth claims. And when we speak as Christians about what Jesus was, what he did, and who he said he was and what he accomplished, we’re talking about true truth. That’s our claim. Now, if we’re wrong, we think there’s hell to pay for that.

Now think about this. Turn to this passage with me—just one text on this point—1 Corinthians chapter 15, another familiar text. But let me tell you that the Bible gives us no room to simply make truth claims about preferences, because your preference or my preference doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t. It’s like the kid who stood in front of the blackboard with the wrong answer—I saw this cartoon—and the teacher is looking at this child who clearly got the wrong answer on the board, and he’s got this



frustration on his face. And there's just one caption on this one-frame cartoon. It simply said this; the boy said, "It may be wrong, but it's how I feel." Okay? If your math answer is wrong and it doesn't add up, I don't really care how you feel, and neither does a good teacher. What matters is the correctness of the answer—does it correspond with reality?

Now Paul speaks to people that, in some ways, are no different than us—who started to say, "I want to believe in a resurrected Jesus, but I won't believe in the literal resurrected Jesus. I mean, I'll believe in life after death, but not literally; it's kind of an imaginary thing. And if it brings me comfort in this life, well then so be it." Verse 14, 1 Corinthians 15—1 Corinthians 15, verse 14: "And if Christ has not been raised"—which they were saying, "Well, let's be really astute about this; people that are dead don't rise from the dead. I mean, that really breaks the laws of science and nature, so it didn't happen"—well, he says, "If it didn't happen, then everything we've been preaching about is in vain." Don't take that word and update it in your mind—it's just blowing smoke, it's nothing, it's futile, it's ridiculous. "And your faith"—this thing we've been trying to cultivate in your life, trust—"well, that trust is in vain." You're trusting in nothing, because if he hasn't been raised, that's the whole point of the assertion of the gospel.

Verse 15: "We're even found to be misrepresenting God." We're liars, because we've testified about God that he raised Christ—"whom he did not raise if it's true that the dead are not raised." So he's saying, "Listen, I've been preaching about this, and the apostles have been preaching about this, and they're all liars." "Well, I just like my religion because it makes me feel good," Professor Lipton. "I just like my belief in God because I get satisfaction and pleasure from that. So I don't believe in the reality of those things; but it makes me feel a certain way, so I like them. That's why I'm a religious person, or part of this denomination or this religion." He's saying this: you're following a lie. So a lot of people get into religion because they like the morals of it, or they think it helps keep their kids on the straight and narrow. Well, it doesn't make any sense—you're going to liars and a book filled with lies, intentional lies, to try and derive your grid, your construct of morals and ethics.

Verse 16: "For if the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised." And "if Christ has not been raised," verse 17, "your faith is futile"—there it is again; it's in vain—"and you're still in your sins," because the forgiveness of your sins was rooted in the historic event that Christ actually rose from the dead. Verse 18: "Then those also who have fallen asleep"—euphemism for death—"in Christ"—they trusted in Christ—"have perished." You're never going to see them again, because our truth claim about afterlife and blessing and reunification with our lost loved ones who trusted in Christ is all based on the resurrection of Christ.



Here's the real statement you've got to highlight: "If in Christ we have hoped in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." Dr. Lipton, this is a really sad thing—that you're holding on to your little invisible blankie, feeling better about life—because in reality, there is no God, and there is no afterlife, and there is no blessing, there is no forgiveness. It's all just a story. And Paul steps back and says, that's really sad—how pathetic is that? And you should pity us.

No time for this text, but jot it down: 2 Peter chapter 1, verses 16 through 21—2 Peter 1:16–21—just to show you another extended text that leaves you no room to say, "Well, it's true for you; it's true for you. If it's not true for me, then I've got a different truth." There's no playing fast and loose with the assertions and the claims of the text. These are supposed to be objectively, universally true—or they're not true. And if they're not true, we should walk away from it.

So, number two was: know that everyone can't be right. Can I just real quickly give you three reasons—maybe four, let me give you four reasons; I'll throw in a fourth—four reasons that we prefer (even though we may not intellectually think it), but we prefer to act like everybody's right?

Number one: we don't like conflict. I don't want to bring this up and act like this is true truth, because if I start talking about Christ being the only way, dying on a cross, you have to repent, put your trust in him, or else you'll be lost—as Jesus said, "Depart from me, you workers of iniquity, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." I don't want to say that because it'll cause conflict. And if you don't like conflict, okay, I can see why you'd not want to bring this stuff up. But just know why you're doing it. And you've got to answer before God one day about your distaste for conflict—the reason you never stood on the truth and recognized that people are either right or wrong.

Secondly: we don't feel the need is urgent. We don't feel the urgency. If I asked you "How important is it that your friends that you go to school with, or the neighbors that you live next to, or the co-workers that you work next to—how important is it that they get the theology right about God and their Christology right about Christ?" I think most of you could say, "That's important." But the reason that wasn't a conversation in the lunchroom this week is because you didn't think it was urgent. "I think people have time. I think they'll figure that out." We always envision this, this kind of assumption that people have all kinds of time to figure this out.

Now, I almost died last Sunday. I don't mean to be overly dramatic, but I mean, I did. I was pulling out of the church parking lot where I was preaching back in Virginia. And as I was coming out of this parking lot and people are filtered out, there's just a few stragglers left, and the guy in front of me,



pulling out of the church parking lot, came through—light turned green—and we pulled out of the church parking lot. And this giant truck came and barreled right into that car that was 15 feet ahead of my bumper. And I just thought, “Oh no.” And I had just preached a sermon on Thanksgiving in the church. And I ran out there, pulled my car over—you know, glass everywhere, this car spun around—and the guy was banged up in the car. And I run up, and I don’t know if the window was broken where he was, or he rolled it down, but I came up to him and I said, “Are you okay?” And I try to stabilize—“Don’t move; let’s wait; let’s see if you’re injured”—I’m having all this conversation. And he’s dazed, and trying to get a sentence out of his mouth. And then he stops; he says, “Wait a minute, you’re the preacher,” which was kind of funny. I said, “Yeah, I know. I am the one that just preached on Thanksgiving, so let’s be thankful here for a moment.” No, I went in to try and do the triage, trying to help this guy.

Now, this guy would have been dead were it not for the fact that that truck hit right at the rear axle—snapped the axle; the car was totaled. But had it hit him just a little bit up—I mean, I just can’t imagine the guy could have survived; he was banged up as he was—but that truck barreled. And I thought, too—I thought to myself, “I was the next car here. I was right behind this guy.” And it reminded me those simple words of James: we don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. Anything we plan, we should say, “If the Lord wills,” because our life is like a vapor: we are here, and tomorrow we could be gone.

All I need to say to you about sharing the absolute truths—and by that I mean claims that we believe have an eternal impact; they have consequence—we just need to know we don’t necessarily have all the time. We ought to feel a sense of urgency about this message.

Thirdly: we don’t like to think. We’ve become—I mean, I don’t want to impugn an entire generation—but we’re not real good at linear thought anymore. I mean, even the way we read now; we’re used to reading web pages where our eyes are just bouncing around. I mean, a lot of people don’t ever sit down with a book and, for a good hour, just read the text of that book and follow their mind along. And when it comes to trying to really discuss and reason with people about the truth, we’re not good at that anymore. And yeah, I understand—you’re going to have to turn off the television a little bit more often and read a book and think carefully through the claims of Christ. Not only read your Bible (which we’re trying to train everyone in our church to do—at least annually, get through the entire Bible), but to be able to think through it, and not just kind of feel our way through it.

Fourthly—I said I’d give you four—how about this one: not sure we really love people. Should we really love people? Let me give you a passage for this: Acts 24, verses 24 and 25—Acts 24:24–25. You put yourself in the sandals of the Apostle Paul: he’s imprisoned in Caesarea; he gets asked now to



speak to the magistrate—in this case, the provincial governor of Judea. His name is Felix; he’s got a wife named Drusilla; and he is now asked to come and address that person. Now picture him: he basically has, metaphorically speaking, the keys to the jail on his belt, and you get a chance to speak to him. And he wants to know, “What is this all about?” Now Paul’s in jail for preaching the gospel, so he gets a chance now to address Felix.

Now think about this: if there’s ever a time for a seeker-friendly sermon, I’m thinking it’s now. Let’s talk about the love of God and the joy of God and, you know, maybe five steps to a better marriage. I mean, this is the time to make that guy feel good so he can let you go. Now, if you know the story of Felix, he had wooed away someone else’s wife. So he’s sitting there with a gal— notorious; I mean, it was in all the rags, I’m sure, in Israel; people knew this was a scandalous marriage the guy was in.

Let me read you what the text says about what Paul decided to preach on that day: he called for Paul, and he “reasoned with him about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment.” Now, if you’re his consultant at that point, you’re saying, “Bad sermon choice, Paul. I mean, how long do you want to be in prison here? This is not good for you to talk about righteousness (and he’s notoriously sinful), self-control (he can’t control himself; he sees a woman and he’s willing to steal her away from another man), and then—can we just leave hell off the table here—the coming judgment? Do we have to preach about that today? This guy can let you out of jail, Paul.”

Now, why would he preach about those things? Well, because he’s standing before someone who is a notorious sinner, who should recognize with the fear of God that his life is going to incur the wrath of God. And if you really care about the guy you’re talking to, I think you’d bring up the issues that are pertinent to his life. Paul cared more about Felix than he did about his own incarceration and his own comfort in his own detainment. He was willing to love the person he was talking to about absolute realities and truth. And he was willing to do something that was going to even maybe cause some controversy. Here’s the next three words of the English text in verse 25: it says, “and Felix was alarmed,” which you might expect. And that’s when you’re sitting back, rolling your eyes as his consultant, saying, “I told you, this isn’t going to go over well.” It doesn’t matter. Paul said it didn’t really matter, the controversy that it’s going to cause. “If I got a chance to speak to this guy and maybe perhaps bring him under the conviction of the Spirit to lead him to forgiveness and reconciliation with the Creator, I’m going to talk about the issues that matter. What matters here? Righteousness, self-control, coming judgment.”

Clearly, Christ was involved in all that sermon, I’m quite sure. We need to love people more, willing to risk a little controversy in our conversations—not to be bombastic, not to be argumentative, but to be loving. I know some people back off of the truth because they think they’re being compassionate.



Nothing is more compassionate than telling people the truth. And we are not claiming a truth that can be molded or shaped by people's opinion. We're claiming that biblical truth and religious truth claims are like any other truth claims: they either correspond with reality, or they don't.

Lastly, verse 20—all these different views of Christ. Great. Then he turns to them, and he says, “Who do you all say that I am?” Now again, there's no distinction in our English second-person pronouns, but there is in the South, and there is in Greek. So this is a second-person plural. He's saying to his team of followers, “Who do y'all say that I am?” Okay. And so Peter speaks up for the crowd. And it'd be like what I hope would take place in a room like this, right? It's the non-Christians out there, I hope, who have varied opinions that they tenaciously hold to about Christ and Christianity. And I'm speaking to a room, hopefully, of converted disciples—at least mostly here. And I want you to do the same thing he tried to get his crowd to do. And he wasn't trying to convert them to Christ, because they're already converted followers of Christ. He's trying to get them to affirm and to, almost in a creedal way, “Can you just say this and affirm it with confident assurance—that you know who I am? Say it. Who am I? I know who you think I am; can you—how do you say that I am?”

Number three on your outline: let's be assured of the truth. Let's have that confident assurance to at least this morning sit here hearing a message like this and saying, “I know the truth.” I know the world thinks the truth is bendable. I know everyone's opinion in the world—they think that everyone can be right. I know that everyone can't be right. But I'm going to come to the place where I recognize what the truth is. You've got to come to a verdict on all this.

Now, I know that you may sit here saying, “I have come to a verdict.” Great. Express it, and in your heart be resolved about that. Walk out these doors today, as you go back to your home and then tomorrow to your workplace, or whatever it is that you do all week long, and go there with a confident assurance that “I know who Christ is, and know what he did, and know what he claimed, and what he called for, and I'm not going to bend on those things.”

Now, I'm not saying do that if you're not reasoned in this—and that brings up the issue of faith. I'm going to do this as a sidebar real quick. People think the word “faith” means that I have a belief in something I know is not true, or I know cannot be proven as true. That is not what faith is in the Bible. Faith is trust. Now I think that's true—it's trust. And I would only put my trust in something—the word *pisteuō* in Greek that's translated “faith” is also translated “trust.” And really, the essence of the word *pisteuō* is to trust in something. I would only put my trust in something if I'm reasonably convinced that it's worthy of my trust. I have to come to that reasonable conclusion that this is trustworthy. So I'm only going to trust in Christ—his death and resurrection—if I'm reasonably convinced it corresponds with reality and it is worthy of my trust; then I put my trust in it. So I have to,



in my own thinking, be reasonably assured. And that's what faith is. Faith is something that—(and I recognize the divine aspects of that; let's not get into that right now; I realize it's granted by God, I get that)—but from a human perspective, I am led by the evidence to get to a place to reasonably put my confidence in something. It's not merely believing in something I know is not true, or I'm believing in something that I know can't be proved. That's not the point.

Now, will every doubt be dispelled? Not every doubt. But even in courtrooms, not every doubt is dispelled. What do they say, right? Well, depending on the case—if it's a felony case—I have to be persuaded beyond any reasonable doubt. And we should all get there. If you're not there this morning, then—as they do in courtrooms—do what? Get more evidence; review the testimony; get back and get to work in being exposed to the evidence; and then come to your verdict. Because what you don't want is people who say, “Well, I've come to a verdict,” but they're not really sure about it.

If you're in a courtroom—you watch your court TVs or whatever it is you watch (I don't even know if that's still around anymore)—but your crime shows, or maybe you're in the arena of law until you see this play out in jury trials. But when the jury comes back, and the judge says, “Have you reached a verdict?” and they say, “Yes, we have,” you don't want the chairman, the foreman of the jury to say, “Yes, we have.” “What's your verdict?” “Well, we just kind of think that probably—I don't know—I guess that he's probably guilty. That's what we think.” That's not what we asked you for. We want a verdict. We want to know that you're assured that this is true. “Well, there could be some doubt here.” Is it beyond any reasonable doubt? You need testimony review? You need to see some more evidence? Great.

That's why I always provide you books on the back of the worksheet that can do a lot more, because it can take you 10, 12 hours to get through a book; I only get an hour with you. So do some more research. And I put some new books on there that deal with the issue of relativity—or relativism, I should say—issues of the veracity of the Bible. Köstenberger's book I put on there, which is a fairly new book, just about the Bart Ehrman stuff. If you're in popular culture, you hear about Ehrman going around and, you know, kicking everybody's confidence in the Bible—maybe that's a good book for you to deal with the truth claims there. Köstenberger's book—do more research.

But if you know—like Peter, James, and John, who sat there—who knew—then all I'm trying to get you to do is what Jesus tried to get his team to do: What is it? Say it. State it. Know it, right? You don't have to say it verbally, but you need to, in your heart, be resolved about it and confidently assured: “Jesus is the Christ.” Great. Ready—break. And then they go out to what? To a world full of opinion about Christ. Now, just know everybody can't be right. Get out there and testify to the truth. That's what's going on in this text.



Let me add one thing, because I just have a minute to do it. I won't turn you there, but jot it down: 2 Peter chapter 1. 2 Peter chapter 1. This is obviously more than mental assent. I know that; you know that. But when we credally—if you will—say, "I'm reasonably convinced, and I put my trust in Christ," know this: the Bible teaches that what happens when you put your trust in Christ is—that work of God to bring you to that place of conversion—the big, big, big thing that happens is you get indwelt by God's Spirit. God now takes up residence in your life in a way that he hasn't before—a lot of conviction by the Spirit, but then boom—he becomes active in your life, in your thinking, in your mind, in your heart, as they say.

Okay, when that happens, he begins to bear fruit in your life—not without effort. Matter of fact, that—2 Peter chapter 1—is all about "make every effort," but you are going to add to your faith; you're going to now pile on that confidence that you have in the truth, and you're going to add to your faith all these virtues. That's what the Bible calls elsewhere "the fruit of the Spirit." When I, in my heart, put my trust in Christ and I believe he is who he says—he's the Christ of God—then what happens is the Spirit starts to transform my life. And that passage says, "You want assurance? Here's the assurance that you have that"—as he says in verse number 10—"makes your calling and election sure." You want to be super confident about the truth? Then you affirm it; reason; faith in the confidence that you have in Christ and who he is and what he did, and then watch the Spirit just start to change your life, as the efforts that you expend start to result in—here's the list—things like virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. Those things start coming out of your life. Then you sit back and go, "Wow." Talk about confidence—now you can speak in the lunchroom with confidence about these things beyond just being reasonably convinced in your own mind, because you can see the transformative work of the Spirit in your life.

I had no time to develop that thought, but it's a good one. If you have a home fellowship group, spend a little bit of time dealing with that. It is what Paul meant, by the way, when he said to the Corinthians, "You are our letter of recommendation"—you are the thing that testifies to the truth because God's Spirit has changed your life.

Speaking of that kid standing before the chalkboard with the wrong answer on the board reminded me of something a pastor friend of mine said this week. A pastor friend of mine, been through theological training for years, and he said, "I've had a lot of bad theology teachers in my life." He said, "But the worst one of all has been my feelings." That's a good line. That's profound. I hope he didn't steal that from someone, because I think he said it as an original thought. What a great line that is. And I think to myself, in a world filled with people wanting to feel their way through who God is, we are not called to do that. We're called to look at the evidence and think our way through this, and then watch what happens when we put our confidence in it and God begins to transform our lives. Your feelings really



are inconsequential. What matters is whether or not what we are saying and believing corresponds with reality. That may sound philosophical, but it is so practical. It really matters—in everything we do. Everything.

Won't you stand with me? I'll dismiss us with a word of prayer.

Let's pray.

God, there are people in this room that, because of the conflict, have not spoken up about Christ. They don't talk about your Son; they don't talk about salvation with people. They're afraid. They don't like the conflict. Maybe just one thing in this message, I hope, will just sit there and work in their minds and hearts and conscience this week. And that's: Paul sat there before the governor of Judea and said, "Here's what you really need to hear." It may not be what you want to hear; it may not be what is conducive to my peace and tranquility or, in Paul's case, my exit from jail, but it is because I care about your future that I want to tell you the truth.

Help us, God, to be more bold, as Paul wrote to Timothy, for instance, 2 Timothy chapter 1, saying, "Hey, there's no room for timidity in this. God didn't give us a spirit of fear." And then he spoke testimonials about the fact that, in his own life, he recognized that what is entrusted to God—he knows—he's convinced of the truth of this. It's not something, as Peter said, of chasing some kind of fable. We believe in the historic realities of what the New Testament says because we've got a good record of this, punctuated by predictive prophecy. And while people are working overtime to try and undermine our belief in those things, our confidence in those things, I pray that we would be good students. And we'd be able to look at the evidence that's before us and recognize the nature of religious truth claims, and then be able to go out into this world with a confidence in what we know to be true, caring about people enough to speak up.

So that, as we started—knowing that we're called to be evangelical—I pray that we would do it with a kind of assurance that is so palpable, so real, so tangible, even in our own experience, that we have made our calling and election sure. God, thanks so much for this team, for this group. I love this church. I love these people. I just pray that there would be something this morning that we've talked about here in this text that would motivate and encourage and fuel us and empower us and be catalytic in our lives to go out and be the kind of church you want us to be—unafraid, evangelistic, speaking up.



And even like Paul—sometimes he reasoned in the synagogue, and at some point they’d say, “Enough; we don’t want to hear this anymore,” and he would oblige these folks and move on. And God, we know that we’re not trying to jam anything down anybody’s throat. But we do want to offer the words of life to our dark and dying generation. So let us do that as long as we have an open door and an open ear to do it. Give us opportunity, and let us speak up for you.

Thanks so much for your word that guides us in this process. And thanks mostly, God, for Christ, who took our sin and took it out of the way, put it on the cross, and was treated as though he were the sinner that we are. Thank you so much, God, for the forgiveness and the cross, and the validation and vindication in the resurrection. We appreciate that. Send us out now today with your blessing and your encouragement, and just your strength—I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.