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GOD IS BIG ENOUGH TO COMFORT MY SUFFERING

By John Ortberg

Text: The Book of Job

Topic: Living our lives through the transcendent power of God

Big Idea: There is purpose in our pain.

Sermon Outline:

Introduction

- *Introduction:* Ortberg once helped to teach a sermon series on the seasons of spiritual life. Living in Chicago at the time, he didn't have a hard time coming up with associations with winter. In California, however, winter is avoidable.
- But there's another kind of winter from which you can't move away: the winter of the soul.
- The Book of Job might be the most famous of "wintry" Bible books.
- Job's remarkable story digs deeply into the human condition and is a great place to learn about the God who is bigger than our sufferings.

The two stages

- Job lives in the Land of Uz. He's not part of Israel, thus making his story more universal.
- Job is a righteous, pious, good guy, and he's living the good life.
- He's reverent before God and even offers sacrifices on behalf of his children-- just in case they had sinned.
- The amount of blessing he experiences is directly proportional to the amount of obedience he offers to God.
- In verse 6 there's a radical shift in scenery, which is very important.
- It can be helpful to picture the story Job as a play with two stages and action going on at two different levels. There's a lower stage (earth) and an upper stage (Heaven).
- Job does not know what's going on in Heaven when Satan challenges God about Job's righteousness and motivation of obedience.
- Job loses everything, including his children.
- We are told Job grieves, he worships, and he speaks words of blessing and praise to God. In all of this he did not sin.
- Satan then says to God, "A man will give all he has for his own life, but now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 2:5).
- The Lord gives consent for Job's testing.

The root of reverence

- Many people think the key question in Job is, “Where is God when we suffer?”
- The key question on the upper stage--or really for the structure of the whole book--comes when Satan says, “Does Job fear God for nothing?”
- Essentially, Satan says to God “You think Job loves you. He doesn’t love you. The truth is he loves you the way children love the ice cream man. God, you turn off the faucet of blessing and you watch how fast Job will turn off the faucet of devotion.”
- This is the core issue underneath it all--the whole idea that a covenant of self-giving love is just a farce.
- But God says that this view voiced by Satan is cynical, warped, misguided, and wrong--that at the core of the universe and at the core of our lives is self-giving, self-sacrificial, even suffering love.

Mourning with those who mourn

- Job gets hit with a second wave of suffering—now his body is afflicted.
- Job’s wife says to him, “Job, curse God and die” (Job 2:9).
- Though her response was not encouraging, the reality is that she has lost everything too and now faces the death of her husband.
- In this suffering, Job did not sin in what he *said*. In his heart he is struggling.
- Job’s friends hear about his troubles and decide that they will come and speak to Job.
- The Hebrew verb for sympathize was a very physical verb. It refers to body movement, shaking back and forth, nodding the head.
- Job’s friends’ love is so great--their grief is so intense for Job--they plan to sit next to him and take on his anguish in this way.
 - *Illustration: This became a Jewish tradition; to this day Jewish people will sit Shiva, which literally means sitting sevens. Friends will come and sit with one who mourns over a period of a week.*
 - *Romans 12:15*

Making sense of suffering

- Interestingly, after seven days Job’s friends speak a lot and get in trouble for it.
- After this period of time, Job opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth. And for the next 28 chapters, Job pours out a staggering level of bitterness, anger, and confusion towards God.

- In response to Job's anger, his friends express a fundamental idea over and over again--one basic idea that's a part of a genre of literature in their day: Whatever you are experiencing is what you have called on yourself by how you live.
- That's the whole big middle section of the book--that argument over and over again--because the writer wants us to understand how mind-numbingly crushing that idea is to the human condition.

A God of abundance

- Finally Job challenges God: "If only I knew where to find God. If only I could go to his dwelling. I would state my case before him. I would fill my mouth with arguments" (Job 12:3-4).
- God speaks to Job out of the storm.
- What you notice when you read through the text here is that when God shows up, he doesn't get around to answering Job's question of why. He doesn't explain to Job what happened on the upper stage in chapters one and two.
 - *Illustration: A scholar named Allen David points out that in the Old Testament, God's questions indicate something about the kind of person God is.*
- God simply asks Job a series of questions Job can't answer, like "Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, and uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland, make the wasteland sprout with grass?" (Job 38:25-27).
- Why would God water a land where nobody lives? Because there's something about this God; this God is good, sometimes for no reason at all.
- The whole section is about God creating, caring for, giving to, and delighting in animals that aren't good for anything at all.
 - *Illustration: Annie Dillard says, "The Creator loves pizzazz."*
- Job never finds out about the conversation that takes place in heaven, because Job's story is our story, and on this earth we live on the lower stage.
- But Job finds out about something better: he finds out who God is--that God is loving beyond Job's wildest imagining.
- God comes down from the upper stage to the lower stage so that Job can see who God is.
- It's almost a glimpse of the day God would come down to the lower stage in the person of Jesus—the day God would take on Job's suffering and your suffering and my suffering and our sin on the cross.

Blessings restored

- The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part.
- The writer of Job lists the names of Job's new daughters—all names pertaining to beauty and extravagance.
- The writer also points out the Job shared his inheritance with his daughters. This was unheard of in a male dominated culture.

Our suffering matters.

- The central question in the Book of Job is, can a human being hold on to God and faith and life and love when it does not seem to pay off at all?
- Job's faithfulness and suffering was being used by God to vindicate God's whole adventure in covenant love.
- The writer wants us to be encouraged by Job and to encourage those around us who suffer, who anguish, who agonize, who hurt, who question, who don't know, who don't understand.

Conclusion

- We live in the Land of Uz; every one of us will suffer.
- Does our response matter? More than we can possibly imagine, more than we can even dream, so don't let go.

Sermon Transcript

Introduction

I was once part of a sermon series at a church called "Seasons of the Spiritual Life," and I was to speak about the idea of spiritual winter. We lived in Chicago at the time, so it was easy for me to come up with words I associated with winter: death, ice, hypothermia, wind chill, death, snow, shoveling snow, shoveling more snow, buying a snow blower, death, salt trucks, black ice, dead batteries, frostbite, gangrene, thermal underwear, ice fishing, diminished mental capacity, seasonal affective disorder, recreational eating, and death. These are all things I associate with winter. I know, some people say, "God made winter. It must be a good thing," but I want to point out there is no mention of winter in the Bible before the fall. In the beginning of Genesis, we read of trees that are bursting with fruit and people who don't even need clothes to wear. The Garden of Eden was clearly not in Milwaukee in January.

In California, you can avoid the brutal Midwestern winters, but there's another kind of winter from which you can't move away. There's a winter of the soul, and it's inescapable because we are all headed there. The Bible has some books that we could describe as "wintry" books--books of wintry spirituality. The Book of Job might be the most famous one. Job's remarkable story digs deeply into the human condition and is a great place to learn about the God who is bigger than our sufferings.

The two stages

The story starts in the Land of Uz. The text says that Uz was east, so the question is, east of what? Well, where did the people of Israel live? Israel, of course. So the point is that Job was not part of Israel—his story is not the story of Israel; it's the story of everybody.

In the beginning everything is the way we think it ought to be. Job is a righteous, pious, good guy, and he's living the good life. He's reverent before God and even offers sacrifices on behalf of his children--just in case they had sinned. God gives Job this wonderful life, and--this is key--the amount of blessing he experiences is directly proportional to the amount of obedience he offers to God. There's a perfect relationship between blessing and obedience. But trouble is coming to Uz, and bad things start happening to a very good man. Uz is a place not only where suffering hits, but where it hits without warning or explanation, leaving a wake of chaos, confusion, and despair. And the truth is, everybody here will spend some time in Uz. Some of you have. Some are there right now.

In verse 6 there's a radical shift in scenery, which is very important. It can be helpful to picture the story Job as a play with two stages and action going on at two different levels. There's a lower stage and an upper stage. Job and his friends are on the lower stage, where earth is. The upper stage is Heaven—where God is. As readers of the story, we know what's going on in both settings; the writer intends for us to see both stages. It's crucial that we understand, however, that Job does not know what's going on in Heaven. He only knows what's happening on his stage.

Let's look at verses 6 through 12:

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord. Satan came with them. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth going back and forth in it." The Lord said to Satan, "If you consider my servant, Job, there's no one on earth like him—blameless and upright, fears God, shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household, everything he has? Blessed is the work of his hands so his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has and surely he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very

well, everything he has is in your power but on the man himself do not lay a finger” (Job 1:6-12).

So Satan leaves to go to Job. Job loses his livestock, his wealth, his servants, his children—everything--and we wait to see how he will respond. We are told Job grieves, he worships, and he speaks words of blessing and praise to God. In all of this he did not sin.

The story switches back to the upper stage where Satan again comes before God and claims he can gain power over Job, if only Job himself were physically tortured: “A man will give all he has for his own life, but now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 2:5). The Lord gives Satan his consent, so long as Satan does not kill Job.

The root of reverence

From this point on, the action in this story switches back down to the lower stage, so we need to talk for a moment about what’s going on in Heaven; it seems very strange when you read through this at first. Many people think the key question in Job is, “Where is God when we suffer?” That is a huge question, but it’s not the fundamental question presented in the Book of Job. The key question on the upper stage--or really for the structure of the whole book--comes when Satan says, “Does Job fear God for nothing?”

Satan is saying, “God, Job is devoted to you and worships you, but it’s all out of self-interest. It’s just quid pro quo: You scratch his back. He scratches yours.” Satan is charging God with being naive. He essentially says, “You think Job loves you. He doesn’t love you. The truth is he loves you the way children love the ice cream man. God, you turn off the faucet of blessing and you watch how fast Job will turn off the faucet of devotion.”

This is the core issue underneath it all--the whole idea that a covenant of self-giving love is just a farce. The reality is that everybody’s looking out for number one--dog eat dog, survival of the fittest. That’s what is at the core of this odd universe in which we find ourselves. And, therefore, the suffering of individual creatures is just meaningless. This is actually a very current philosophy. In Richard Dawkins’ book called *The Selfish Gene*, you’ll read that there is nothing behind the universe--nothing behind the force of life beyond the drive to survive.

But God’s answer to Satan’s question is, “No.” God says that this view voiced by Satan is cynical, warped, misguided, and wrong--that at the core of the universe and at the core of our lives is self-giving, self-sacrificial, even suffering love. Therefore, hope makes sense because this self-sacrificing God is bigger than our suffering. That’s what’s at stake in this story.

Mourning with those who mourn

Now we read: So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of the feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes (Job 2:7-8). Job gets hit with a second wave. This time there are some subtle differences in his response. This time he does not fall to the ground in worship. This time he does not say, “May the name of the Lord be praised.” This time he sits on the ash. Maybe it’s an act of grieving. Maybe he’s thought to be a Leper, and so it’s an act of isolation.

Job’s wife says to him, “Job, curse God and die” (Job 2:9). Her response could not have been encouraging to Job. I ought to say a word at this point about Job’s wife, because she gets dumped on a lot when people teach on this passage. Job’s wife has also lost everything she has. She too has lost all her children. She now will have to care for a horribly diseased husband until he dies, and then she will be left alone and destitute. She knows all this. So she’s just giving voice to thoughts that have surely occurred to Job. Notice what he says to her: Shall we accept good from God and not trouble, not evil? (Job 2:10). He’s struggling to understand God at this point. Is God the kind of person who sends trouble? Is God the kind of person who sends evil? Is God really good? Job is struggling. The verse goes on to say, “In all this Job did not sin in what he said.” Remember that after the first wave of tragedy the Scripture says, “In all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God” (Job 1:22). Now there’s this little qualification. Job did not sin in what he *said*. In his heart he is struggling.

We’re now told that Job’s friends hear about his troubles and decide that they will come and speak to Job. Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite all come together. This book is full of irony: Job, who was once famous for his wealth and greatness, has now become equally famous for his problems and sufferings. So it goes in the Land of Uz.

The Hebrew verb for sympathize was a very physical verb. It refers to body movement, shaking back and forth, nodding the head. You see this sometimes when a person goes into trauma—he or she will rock back and forth like a mother rocks to comfort her infant. This bodily expression is very visceral and goes very deep. Job’s friends’ love is so great--their grief is so intense for Job--they plan to sit next to him and take on his anguish in this way.

Job’s friends arrive, and they begin to weep when they see him; they tear their robes and sprinkle dust on their heads when they see his condition. Usually when you visit someone who is suffering, you try to cheer them up. You tell them it’s not so bad. To visit someone and immediately burst into tears upon seeing them might not be a good thing. But that tells you how desperate Job’s condition is. There’s no use even pretending. His friends just weep. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him; his suffering was great.

Think about the power of this act—sitting in silence for seven consecutive days and nights. This became a Jewish tradition; to this day Jewish people will sit Shiva, which literally

means sitting sevens. Friends will come and sit with one who mourns over a period of a week. It struck me that this practice may be the greatest example in the Bible of what Paul says when he writes to the Romans, “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15).

I’m also struck by the things that we try to do when people are mourning—things that Paul does not tell us to do. Notice Paul does not say, “Give really good advice to people who mourn.” He does not say, “Fix people who mourn.” He doesn’t tell people who mourn to snap out of it and get with the program. Paul says, “Mourn with them,” because that very act of self-giving, self-sacrificial love is redemptive. Mourn with those who mourn, and God will work in ways beyond our understanding that go way deeper than words.

Making sense of suffering

Interestingly, after seven days Job’s friends speak a lot and get in trouble for it. Like Job’s wife, his friends have taken a lot of heat over the subsequent years for their words to Job, and for good reason. But let’s remember that their silence was a gift, and maybe one of the reasons why Job is able to struggle and persevere with God is that he had a few friends who sat with him in silence for seven days and seven nights with no answers and no advice. Do you have any friends that would do that for you? Is there anybody you would do that for?

After seven days and seven nights of silence, Job speaks. If he can just repeat what he said in chapter one--“God gives, God takes away but the name of the Lord be praised”--then his test will be over. It will be a short book. But after this period of time, Job opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth. And for the next 28 chapters, Job pours out a staggering level of bitterness, anger, and confusion towards God. I’m amazed that his words made it into the Bible. Job’s words are so strong that his pious friends start to argue with him. They all express a fundamental idea over and over again--one basic idea that’s a part of a genre of literature in their day: Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature. This genre is similar to the self-help books in our day and culture. Here’s a very central idea from Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature:

Whatever you are experiencing is what you have called on yourself by how you live.

If you are prospering, it’s because you have done good and have pleased and honored the gods, whoever they are. On the other hand, if you are suffering, you must’ve done bad things and have angered the gods, whoever they might be. This idea spread through Israel and beyond. It’s still around today, even in Christian circles. Job can’t stand his friends saying this, but they do it over and over again.

You may notice that the middle of the Book of Job is a little boring. This is actually quite deliberate on the part of the writer. There’s a lot of action at the beginning, and then there are these endless arguments between Job and his friends. It’s a very deliberate strategy on the part of the writer. He wants to hit us over the head with this idea expressed in the conventional wisdom of its day: “Job, you must have done something wrong, because if you hadn’t, how would you explain your suffering?” And Job does not claim to be perfect. He

essentially says, “You know, my life used to be great. Now my life is terrible. I’m still the same guy, so whatever is going on, it’s got to be something deeper. It’s got to be something a little more complex, a little more mysterious than that I’ve done something wrong to deserve this. But I don’t know what it is.” That’s the whole big middle section of the book--that argument over and over again--because the writer wants us to understand how mind-numbingly crushing that idea is to the human condition.

A God of abundance

Finally Job challenges God: “If only I knew where to find God. If only I could go to his dwelling. I would state my case before him. I would fill my mouth with arguments” (Job 12:3-4). In chapter 38 Job gets his wish. The text says, “Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm.” Can you imagine what that moment was like? Have any of you experienced an earthquake? Can you imagine God speaking out of a storm?

What you notice when you read through the text here is that when God shows up, he doesn’t get around to answering Job’s question of why. He doesn’t explain to Job what happened on the upper stage in chapters one and two. He just asks Job a bunch of questions he can’t answer. Sometimes I wonder why God does this to Job; because it seems a little cruel. But I believe God is pointing out that Job has a finite mind and a limited point-of-view, as all humans do; we don’t have a heavenly perspective. And there’s more going on here. A scholar named Allen David points out that in the Old Testament, God’s questions indicate something about the kind of person God is. This is really the hinge of the whole story: Job begins to understand the character of God. This is the primary move in this story. God says: Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, and uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland, make the wasteland sprout with grass? (Job 38:25-27).

This is what would jump out in Job’s day. In Israel life depended on rainfall. Theirs was a dry, thirsty land. They would never waste water. So why would God water a land where nobody lives? Because there’s something about this God; this God is good, sometimes for no reason at all. He is a God of gratuitous goodness. He gives just because he loves to give, even when it doesn’t appear to be strategic. All these questions keep revealing this Creator who delights in his creation, who serves, who cares for the land and animals that are of no apparent use.

Chapter 39 talks about the ostrich. The ostrich is a goofy looking animal. The writer basically says: “She flaps her wings joyfully like she thinks they are going to get her somewhere when they aren’t. She has a limited IQ, she lays eggs, she can’t even remember what she did with her babies, but when she runs,” the writer says, “oh my, the ostrich laughs at horse and rider.” God endows the ostrich with the beauty of speed, delighting in this goofy little animal.

God goes on to say, “I made the behemoth”—probably referring to the hippo. The ancient world considered this a monster of chaos that should be destroyed, but, “[the behemoth]

ranks first among the works of God” (Job 40:15). God goes on to talk about how he delights in the wild ox that will never plough and the wild donkey that will never be tamed and the mountain goats who will give birth in the secret places where no man will ever see. And the Leviath that no one will ever eat. Nothing on earth is his equal. The whole section is about God creating, caring for, giving to, and delighting in animals that aren’t good for anything at all. Why would God love a world like that? Because, Annie Dillard says, “The Creator loves pizzazz.” The Creator loves pizzazz. He revels in the beauty of his least strategic creature, because he’s just gratuitously good, he’s uncontrollably generous, he’s irrationally loving, and he just gives and gives because it’s his nature. God loves pizzazz.

In all this conversation, Job finds out the kind of person God is—irrationally loving, gratuitously good, irremediably generous. Job never does find out about the upper stage. Job never finds out about the conversation that takes place in heaven, because Job’s story is our story, and on this earth we live on the lower stage. But Job finds out about something better: he finds out who God is--that God is loving beyond Job’s wildest imagining.

That’s why Job makes this amazing statement: “My ears had heard about you...but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5). That’s enough. God comes down from the upper stage to the lower stage so that Job can see who God is. It’s almost a glimpse of the day God would come down to the lower stage in the person of Jesus—the day God would take on Job’s suffering and your suffering and my suffering and our sin on the cross, and then God would say to everybody on the lower stage: Anybody, whatever you are going through, come to me and give me your suffering. I’m a great big God and I will give you hope and I will give you comfort and I will hold your hand and never let it go. And it matters what you are going through. I know, I see, I will come down, I will redeem. Self-giving, self-sacrificial love is at the core of reality. That’s the story of this book.

The book ends with an epilogue in chapter 42. It seemed strange to me until I began to understand it more. In chapter 42 God speaks to Job’s friends, to his comforters. He says in verse 7: I am angry with you because you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has. To see the drama here, you’ve got to understand the friends’ amazement. Job has been complaining about God. They think that they have been sticking up for God. They’re sure they’re in the right, and then God shows up and essentially says to them, “Nope, Job was right. You guys are wrong.” God says, “But if Job will pray for you, I will forgive you.” I imagine Job and his friends had a very interesting conversation at that point and that the tone of it was very different than what had been said until then. So Job prays and God forgives.

Blessings restored

The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part. He had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yolk of oxen, 1,000 donkeys, he had seven sons, three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Kezjah, and the third Keren Happuch. Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers (Job 42: 12-15).

I know you can't replace kids when they're gone, so in some ways, it's hard to imagine this blessing would suffice. But there is some stuff in this story that we miss—stuff that would jump out to ancient readers. The first thing that they would notice is that the writer gives the names of some of Job's children, specifically, his daughters—not his sons. In Hebrew genealogies that's unheard of-- unprecedented. And the names are strange! In ancient literatures names are very significant and are a big part of the story. People delighted in names, and they were generally very serious—they almost always expressed great character virtues, hopes for great virtues that parents had for their children, or theological truth of one sort or another, but the three names of Job's daughters are all about beauty. They're all extravagant.

Jemimah was the Hebrew word for “dove”—a bird the shade of color considered particularly lovely in that culture. The second daughter is named Keziah which was their word for “cinnamon,” a prized spice. The third daughter Keren Happuch, has the strangest name of all. Keren Happuch meant “horn of eye shadow.” Job names this kid after make-up. It's like naming your daughter Estée Lauder.

Not only does Job give his daughters extravagant names, but he gives them a share in his inheritance. In a male dominated society, giving an inheritance to your sons was strategic, because they were going to take care of you in your old age. Giving to your sons was like investing in a 401K. You'd never give your inheritance to daughters, because that money would go to their father-in-laws. You'd never see that money again. Sons were strategic. Daughters were not. Why does the writer include this odd information? Because he wants us to know that Job now delights in giving to those once considered the least strategic of creatures. Now Job is being gratuitously good, uncontrollably generous, and irrationally loving; he's just giving and giving, because his character has changed. Does that remind you of anybody? It is the story of the triumph, the redemption, and the self-sacrificial love of God, the Creator who loves pizzazz.

Our suffering matters.

The central question in the Book of Job is, can a human being hold on to God and faith and life and love when it does not seem to pay off at all? One human could. Job could not see the upper stage. He didn't know that his faithfulness had meaning beyond his wildest dreams-- that something cosmic and eternal was at stake in his life, in his short time on this stage and in his deep suffering, sitting on an ash heap, scraping boils off his skin with shards of broken pots—broke, sick, mocked, confused, abandoned, helpless, hopeless, alone. Job's faithfulness and suffering was being used by God to vindicate God's whole adventure in covenant love. Job's honesty and perseverance have been used now for thousands of years across continents, across cultures, across languages to inspire billions of people who live in the land of Uz. Hang on Job, keep going, don't let go, don't give up. The writer wants us to be encouraged by Job and to encourage those around us who suffer, who anguish, who agonize, who hurt, who question, who don't know, who don't understand. We're all a part of something cosmic and eternal. Our suffering matters more than we can imagine.

Conclusion

We live in the Land of Uz. Every one of us will suffer. Some of us are suffering right now; we're deeply, deeply hurting. Why? I don't know why. How long will it last? I don't know how long it will last. Does our response matter? More than we can possibly imagine, more than we can even dream, so don't let go. Our God is a great big God.

For Your Reflection

Personal growth:

How has this sermon fed your own soul? _____

Skill growth:

What did this sermon teach you about how to preach?

Exegesis and exposition:

Highlight the paragraphs in this sermon that helped you better understand Scripture. How does the sermon model ways you could provide helpful biblical exposition for your hearers?

Theological Ideas:

What biblical principles in this sermon would you like to develop in a sermon? How would you adapt these ideas to reflect your own understanding of Scripture, the Christian life, and the unique message that God is putting on your heart?

Outline:

How would you improve on this outline by changing the wording, or by adding or subtracting points? _____

Application:

What is the main application of this sermon? What is the main application of the message you sense God wants you to bring to your hearers?

Illustrations:

Which illustrations in this sermon would relate well with your hearers? Which cannot be used with your hearers, but they suggest illustrations that could work with your hearers?

Credit:

Do you plan to use the content of this sermon to a degree that obligates you to give credit? If so, when and how will you do it? _____



BALCONY PEOPLE

By John Ortberg

Text: Acts 9:26–28

Topic: How God uses people to encourage greatness in others

Big Idea: That the least will be the greatest is the deepest reality in the kingdom.

Sermon Outline:

Introduction

- *Illustration:* Ortberg shares a number of illustrations—fuel tanks, propane tanks, and Weber gas grills—to show how we all need times of refueling.

The people who fill—or deplete—our tanks

- Everybody you know has a fuel tank, and it's in their inner being, in their spirit.
- You can read their gauge by looking them in the eye, noticing their slumped shoulders, or observing their gait.
- There are some people who fill your tank, breathing life into you and reminding you of how good God is.
 - *Illustration: Gregory of Nyssa offers a metaphor to describe such people: "At horse races, the spectators intent on victory shout to their favorites in the contest. From the balcony they incite the rider to keener effort, urging the horses on while leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hand instead of a whip."*
- There are other people in your life who stick a hose in your tank, take a deep breath, and start siphoning the fuel out.
- These are basement people who drain the life out of you.
- Each of us can be basement people for other folks, but we're called to be balcony people.
- Encouragement, correctly understood, is the language of the New Testament (used over 100 times).
- One of the great characters in the Bible—perhaps the patron saint of balcony people—is the guy we're going to look at today: Barnabas.
- We're going to look at him and dream about what you and I can be.

Barnabas was a balcony person by giving.

- We meet Barnabas for the first time in Acts 4 (under the name "Joseph").
- Joseph was a Levite, but he wasn't allowed to serve as an assistant to the priests, because he had been born in Cyprus, making him a Hellenist (an Israelite born overseas).

- We'd expect Joseph to be kind of sour about this, but he's a balcony guy.
- He becomes a part of the New Testament community, and when he sees a need, he responds.
- Joseph is the first recorded donor in this new community.
- He sold some property he had and put the money at the apostles' feet.
- There is an encouragement that comes when somebody gives.
- When you start giving, you never know what's going to happen, because you're putting yourself in the flow of a reality that's much bigger than you.
- Joseph freely gives, and his spirit is infectious.
- The disciples rename Joseph "Barnabas" (which means "son of encouragement").
- Barnabas encourages the community, the community encourages him, and it spirals upward like that.

Barnabas was a balcony person by showing grace.

- After all of this, Barnabas disappears.
- The next time we see him is in Acts 9, alongside a man named Saul.
- After Saul's conversion experience, he went to Jerusalem.
- He tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him.
- The disciples decided to send Barnabas to Saul to better understand the situation.
- Balcony people give you this wonderful gift: they believe you can change with God's help.
- Balcony people do not let who you were yesterday limit who you might be today—or who you might become tomorrow.
- Barnabas was willing to take a risk on Saul, and he eventually commended him to the other disciples.
- If Saul had not had Barnabas, his acceptance into the Jesus community would have never happened.
- This one balcony person gave him the wonderful gift of starting over, and "then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace."
- After all of this, Barnabas disappears until another critical moment in the history of the church.

- In Acts 11, the disciples are unsure as to what to think about Gentiles coming to the Lord (the Jesus movement has taken root in Antioch, a city outside of Israel).
- This is a hinge point in world history; up until this point, the good news about Jesus had spread essentially among Jewish people.
- Religious communities are not always great about change, so everything hinges on who Jerusalem is going to send to check this out.
- They send Barnabas, and "when he arrived and saw evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts."

Barnabas was a balcony person by serving.

- Antioch is where the Bible first says that God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.
- It wasn't long before Barnabas realized he was going to need somebody to help him deal with this new opportunity.
- As he reflects on his needs, he remembers Saul.
- Saul soon became Paul (changing the Jewish version of name to a Gentile version).
- Paul would become the great missionary to the Gentiles and the rest of the world, and all of this happened because of Barnabas.
- Balcony people can see things in others that no one else can see.
- As Paul and Barnabas begin to do ministry together, Barnabas's name is listed first.
- In the ancient world, the order of names tells you who's in charge, who's the boss, who carries the prestige of the mission.
- By Acts 14 the order of names switches, and Paul is listed first.
- From a human standpoint, this is terrible, because it seems Barnabas has done a bad job of career management.
- Barnabas could have been jealous over Paul's status; instead, he rejoiced in it.
- His joy was in recognizing and developing greatness in somebody else, because he's a balcony person.
- Jesus had said that in God's kingdom the last really are first, and the people who are the servants of all are really greatest.
- Barnabas is a kingdom kind of guy.

Barnabas was a balcony person by developing others.

- Paul and Barnabas would often travel with other folks to develop their ministries.
- One of the young men they reached out to was named John Mark (or Mark, the one who wrote one of the Gospels).
- Mark travels with them for a time, but Luke soon writes about how John Mark deserted them.
- Paul wants to move along without Mark, but Barnabas wants to give him a second chance; they part ways over the matter.
- It's interesting that the Bible doesn't say that one was wrong or the other was right.
- Sometimes it is up to us to decide, and that's part of what God wants for us, because then we grow.
- But notice what Paul writes to Timothy in what was perhaps the last letter he ever wrote: "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is helpful in my ministry."
- Old Barnabas saw something in Mark that turned out to be right all along.
- The life of John Mark is one more tribute to the power of a balcony person.
- What if Barnabas had given up on Mark?

We need to be balcony people for each other.

- We need to be balcony people for each other.
- This idea is all over the New Testament.
- *Hebrews 3:13 and 10:25*
- Do you ever think about what you want folks to say at your funeral?
 - *Illustration: Ortberg imagines Barnabas's funeral, with Paul, Mark, and others sharing how their balcony person—Barnabas—had made all the different in their lives.*

Conclusion

- That's a kingdom funeral of a man who never tried to be great, but just tried to call out greatness in others.
- The spread of the gospel from this one little ethnic group where it had been housed for so many centuries to the whole world—and the collective writings of Paul and Mark that comprise about half the writings of the New Testament—all happened because one man stood in the balcony and said: Keep going; you can do it.

- In the kingdom, that's what greatness looks like.

Sermon Transcript

Introduction

One of my lesser flaws is that I hate going to the gas station and filling up the tank of my car. I will ride that gauge as low as I can get it. My wife's car has a little button that will tell you how many miles you can go before you will run out of gas. I will ride that down until the car has about three blocks left before I take it home and switch cars with somebody else.

We have a propane gas barbecue grill, and I hate taking that propane tank in. There's a little gauge strip that changes colors, and I'll let it get down to bone dry before I get that tank refilled. One time last year, our home group was going to bring food to a homeless shelter. I thought, *I want to put all the meat on our Weber grill at once, and that way I won't have to use that much propane out of the tank.* I covered every square inch of that grill, but I didn't realize how much juice drips down from that much meat on the coals—and how much fire that generates. Our backyard was completely blanketed in smoke. The paint was completely blistered inside that Weber grill, but at least I didn't have to fill up the tank again. That was my primary goal.

The people who fill—or deplete—our tanks

Cars and grills aren't the only things that have fuel tanks. People have them, too. Everybody you know has a fuel tank, and it's in their inner being, in their spirit. But you can read their gauge. Look them in the eye: some are alive and their eyes have fire in them; some are just glazed over. Look at their shoulders: some people are walking with shoulders squared and straight; some are all hunched over. Look at their gait: some people are marching and have energy; some people are just kind of trudging along.

You have a fuel tank, and there are some people who fill your tank. There are some people who breathe life into you. They remind you of how good God is. They call you to live up to the best you can be. When you're with them, you find your anxiety going down, and your hope and sense of trust and faith just go up.

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the early church fathers in the fourth century, and he painted a beautiful picture of this way of living. This is what he writes: "At horse races, the spectators intent on victory shout to their favorites in the contest. From the balcony they incite the rider to keener effort, urging the horses on while leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hand instead of a whip." With that picture in mind, he says: "I seem to be doing the same thing myself. Most valued friend and brother, while you are competing admirably in a divine race, straining constantly for the prize of the heavenly calling, I exhort, urge, and encourage you vigorously."

Gregory is basically saying, "I'm up in the stands. I'm watching my friend run the race, and I'm cheering him on. This is your life. This is your race. God is with you, so don't stop. Keep running the race." Some people do that for you. They're what you would call your balcony people. When you're with them, they fill your tank.

Then you have other people in your life, who—when you're not looking—stick a hose in your tank, take a deep breath, and start siphoning the fuel out. They drain you of life. They are basement people, because they bring you down. These are the people who are joy challenged, dream squashing, and fault finding—slow leaks in the hot air balloon of your life. We're called to love them, but we've got to guard our hearts. Each of us can be basement people for other folks; there's a basement person inside all of us. But that's not God's plan for human life.

Encouragement, correctly understood, is the language of the New Testament. The word "to encourage" is used more than a hundred times in the New Testament. One of the great characters in the Bible—perhaps the patron saint of balcony people—is the guy we're going to look at today. His name is Barnabas, and we find him mostly in the Book of Acts. We're going to look at him and dream about what you and I can be.

Barnabas was a balcony person by giving.

We meet Barnabas for the first time in Acts 4. Here's how his story starts: "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus whom the apostles called Barnabas, sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." Now, Joseph was a Levite. Levites were a tribe of Israel, and in this day they served as assistants to the priests—as doorkeepers in the temple or musicians or something else. But Joseph could not do that. He was from Cyprus, which meant he hadn't been born in Israel. He was a Hellenist—a name given to Israelites born overseas. They were regarded as foreigners. They did not speak Aramaic, and they were considered to have picked up Gentile ways. There was a lot of hostility between native-born Israelites and the Hellenists. Because of the tension, Joseph wasn't allowed to serve in the temple like his people the Levites normally were allowed.

We'd expect Joseph to be kind of sour about this, but he's a balcony guy, and he becomes a part of this new community. He sees a need, and he says: I've got some property; I could sell some of my stuff to help people out.

Joseph is the first recorded donor in this new community. When the text says he put the money at the apostles' feet, he was saying: You'll know what to do with it best. No strings attached—you don't have to build a building with my name on it. Just use it to bless people.

There is an encouragement that comes when somebody gives. So many of you here know the joy of giving. Some of you have not just given; you have given sacrificially. You put yourself in touch with a spiritual power when you do that—it puts you in touch with deeper realities of the kingdom than money. People who give, even though they have less

money, worry less about their money than people who never give, whom you would think would worry less.

When you start giving, you never know what's going to happen. You're putting yourself in the flow of a reality that's much bigger than you. Joseph does this. It's not just that he gave; it's the spirit he did it in. It's infectious. Some of you know that spirit, and some of you could. The disciples say to each other: Joe is just not an adequate name for this guy, so we're going to give him a new name. We're going to call him Barnabas—"son of encouragement," balcony boy. Every time he hears his name, then, he thinks, *Yeah, that's who I am; that's who I want to be.*

Barnabas encourages the community, the community encourages him, and it spirals upward like that. That's how encouragement works. That's how giving works.

Barnabas was a balcony person by showing grace.

After all of this, Barnabas disappears. The next time we see him is in Acts 9, alongside a man named Saul who had been terrorizing Jesus' followers. He had been breathing out murderous threats and finding men and women to take as prisoners, and then he met Jesus. He repented and trusted Jesus. He now believes, but he has a problem. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. They could not believe he was really a disciple. He had murdered their friend Stephen, and he had threatened, persecuted, imprisoned, and killed their husbands, wives, brothers, and sisters. How do they know this is for real—that he's not faking it just to get inside and damage them even more? Nobody's going to touch him with a ten-foot pole. No one's that dumb. This is the guy that's been dragging them off to prison! So the disciples say, "I'm not going to touch him!" But then they get an idea: Let's get Barney to try it. Barney will like anybody!

So they sent Barnabas to check out Saul. Balcony people give you this wonderful gift: they believe you can change with God's help. They do not let who you were yesterday limit who you might be today—or who you might become tomorrow. This is a fabulous gift. Barnabas was willing to take a risk on Paul. He became his friend and got to know him. He was inclined to see the best and to call it out. He went to his brothers and sisters and said: Look at the change in his life. Look at what happened between him and God. Look at how he's devoting his life to the gospel. Take it from me: this man can be trusted!

Because Barnabas said Saul could be trusted, the disciples embraced Saul. Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

What would have happened to Saul if he had not had Barnabas? His acceptance into the Jesus community is because of one balcony person who gave him this wonderful gift of starting over. You can do that for somebody.

At the end of that story, there's this wonderful little summary: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and

encouraged by the Holy Spirit." That's what God does. They also "grew in numbers." People said: I want to be a part of that community, living in the fear of the Lord.

After all of this, Barnabas disappears until another critical moment in the history of the church. Acts 11 says: "Some from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

You must see the drama at this moment. This is a hinge point in world history. Up until this point, the good news about Jesus had spread essentially among Jewish people. But this is where some daring soul says: You know, if it was good for Israel, maybe it would be good for the Gentiles. Maybe it would be good for the whole world. Let's try this new experiment. Let's tell the Gentiles.

They do, and, amazingly, these Gentiles—who don't know Torah and don't know Israel—respond and begin to enter into this new Jesus community. The first major city outside Israel where the Jesus movement begins to take root is Antioch. It's a little north of Israel and Syria. Word soon gets back to Jerusalem: In Antioch this Jesus movement is spreading, but it's kind of going Gentile, and we're not sure about that. If we let the Gentiles in, this is going to change everything!

Religious communities are not always great about change. So, in a sense, everything hinges on who Jerusalem is going to send to check this out. And who do they send? They send Barnabas: "When he arrived and saw evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."

Barnabas was a balcony person by serving.

Antioch is where the Bible first says that God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, because he's a God of open doors and spiritual opportunity. It wasn't long before Barnabas realized he was going to need somebody to help him deal with this new opportunity—somebody who knew the Scriptures, could speak to the Gentiles, possessed great courage and energy, and had a formidable mind and quick tongue. As he reflects on his needs, he remembers the brilliant convert named Saul from some time ago. This was ironic, because no one had been more Jewish than Saul. No one had more zeal for Torah than Saul. But Barnabas says: I think there's something in him that could be developed here.

Saul soon became Paul. The reason for that name change was simple: Saul was the Jewish version of his name, and Paul was the Greek or Gentile version. He would become the great missionary to the Gentiles and the rest of the world. Paul would change the world, but it only happened because of Barnabas—because balcony people can see things in others that no one else can see.

Paul and Barnabas do ministry together, and an interesting thing happens. In the ancient world, it's very significant to look at the order of people's names, because that order tells

you who's in charge, who's the boss, who carries the prestige of the mission. We see in Acts what we would expect: "For a whole year Barnabas and Paul taught great numbers of people," because Barnabas was the leader. "They sent their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Paul," it says in Acts 11. Look at Acts 13: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work that I have called them." But something happens in this process. Paul's gifts begin to flourish, his maturity begins to blossom, and in Acts 14 it says, "At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogues." Did you catch what happened there? The names have been switched. Now Paul is the one leading.

From a human standpoint, this is terrible. It seems Barnabas has done a bad job of career management. He has not positioned himself properly. The mission's been a big success; he should have been making sure he was getting credit for it.

Barnabas could have been jealous. He could have longed for Paul's status. Instead, he rejoiced in it. His joy was in recognizing and developing greatness in somebody else. Paul's ministry went on to be far more visible than his own, and nobody rejoiced more than Barnabas did. He's just a balcony person.

Jesus had said it was going to be that way. There is a kingdom and it is real, and the reality in this kingdom is that the last really are first, and the people who are the servants of all are really greatest. That's where greatness is, and ultimately, that's where joy is. It's not in clawing your way to the top of recognition and fame and money and so on. This is the deepest reality in the kingdom. In Barnabas, this is true. Barnabas is a kingdom kind of guy. He's a balcony guy, and because of this, the world experiences the kingdom in the present.

Barnabas was a balcony person by developing others.

Another wonderful, redemptive thing happens through Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas would often travel with other folks to develop their ministries. It's part of who Barnabas was. Balcony people have this gift. One of the young men they reached out to was named John Mark (or Mark). We see a brief glimpse of him in the Gospel of Mark (which, most likely, he wrote). There's a story of a young man who, just before Jesus is crucified, gets afraid, runs away, and deserts Jesus, leaving his cloak behind. That's probably Mark.

When Mark comes back to faith, he travels with Paul and Barnabas to help them for a while. However, Luke writes, "Paul and his companions"—notice Barnabas doesn't even get his name in here anymore—"sailed to Perga where John left them to return to Jerusalem." John Mark deserts them. We don't know why. In Acts 15, Paul says to Barnabas: Let's go on another trip to strengthen the churches.

Now, notice this: "Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them. But Paul did not think it was wise because he had deserted them.... They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." I imagine Barnabas saying: Hey pal, you remember in Jerusalem when nobody would touch you with a ten-foot pole because you had done awful things? Who was it that gave you a second chance? Now you're going to tell me that you're not going to give a second chance to John Mark?

It's interesting that the Bible doesn't say that one was wrong or the other was right. Often in the Scriptures, that kind of judgment will be made. The Bible doesn't say that the Holy Spirit led one way or the other. Sometimes it is up to us to decide, and that's part of what God wants for us, because then we grow. But notice what Paul writes to Timothy in what was perhaps the last letter he ever wrote: "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is helpful in my ministry." Old Barnabas saw something in Mark that turned out to be right all along.

The life of John Mark is one more tribute to the power of a balcony person. Mark was to write one of the Gospels. Most scholars think that the Gospel of Mark was the first one written, and that both Matthew and Luke used it as they were writing their Gospels. What if Barnabas had given up on Mark? But balcony people stand with you when you fall.

We need to be balcony people for each other.

We need to be balcony people for each other. This idea is all over the New Testament: Hebrews 3:13 says, "Encourage one another daily, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." When we're not encouraged, sin starts to look good. Paul says, "Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as, in fact, you are doing." The writer of Hebrews says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the day approaching."

This is not a human power deal, because the main person who wants to be in your balcony, cheering you on, is Jesus. If you've never done it before, just confess your sin and ask him, and he'll do that for you. He'll run the race with you. He'll be your friend and Savior and leader and cheer you on. That's what makes a life a balcony life.

Do you ever think about what you want folks to say at your funeral? I think about what Barnabas's funeral must have been like. A man gets up to speak, and it's the apostle Paul. Everybody nudges each other, because it's Paul. He's famous. He says: I persecuted the church. I put followers of Jesus to death and in prison. Nobody trusted me. No one would touch me. But then Barnabas came along, put his arm around me, and he said, "I'll vouch for him." I stand before you today because of Barnabas.

Then John Mark gets up. He's an old man by now, and people nudge each other. He wrote the gospel. He's famous. He says: The truth about me is, I was a quitter. I had run away from Jesus and ministry, but Barnabas wouldn't give up on me. He saw something in me—I don't know why or what—and he took me under his wings and said, "I'll vouch for him." I'm here today because of a man named Barnabas.

Then a Greek guy from Antioch gets up. He says: I was pagan. I was so lost it wasn't funny. Then I heard about Jesus and I wanted in, but I didn't know Torah. I could never be Jewish. I didn't fit. But then Barnabas came along, and he said that Jesus came for a guy like me. He

put his arm around me and said, "I'll vouch for him." I'm here today because of this man, Barnabas.

Then an old widow stands up. Nobody nudges anybody else, because she's not famous. She says: I lost everything when my husband died. I had no income. I had young children. I didn't know if I'd make it. And then Barnabas came along, and he quietly sold his own property so that I could have something to live on, so that I could feed my children. I'm here today because of Barnabas.

Conclusion

That's a kingdom funeral. That's the funeral of a man who never tried to be great, but just tried to call out greatness in others. The spread of the gospel from this one little ethnic group where it had been housed for so many centuries to the whole world—and the collective writings of Paul and Mark that comprise about half the writings of the New Testament—all happened because one man stood in the balcony and said: Keep going; you can do it. In the kingdom, that's what greatness looks like. It's something God does to you when you're looking the other way.

For Your Reflection

Personal growth:

How has this sermon fed your own soul? _____

Skill growth:

What did this sermon teach you about how to preach?

Exegesis and exposition:

Highlight the paragraphs in this sermon that helped you better understand Scripture. How does the sermon model ways you could provide helpful biblical exposition for your hearers?

Theological Ideas:

What biblical principles in this sermon would you like to develop in a sermon? How would you adapt these ideas to reflect your own understanding of Scripture, the Christian life, and the unique message that God is putting on your heart?

Outline:

How would you improve on this outline by changing the wording, or by adding or subtracting points? _____

Application:

What is the main application of this sermon? What is the main application of the message you sense God wants you to bring to your hearers?

Illustrations:

Which illustrations in this sermon would relate well with your hearers? Which cannot be used with your hearers, but they suggest illustrations that could work with your hearers?

Credit:

Do you plan to use the content of this sermon to a degree that obligates you to give credit? If so, when and how will you do it? _____



THE 10 FINANCIAL COMMANDMENTS

By John Ortberg

Text: Various verses from Proverbs

Topic: Money and Generosity

Big Idea: How are we doing when it comes to living with financial wisdom? Let these 10 biblical principles serve as a guide.

Sermon Outline:

Introduction

- Jesus said more about money than any other topic except for the kingdom of God. The Bible has thousands of verses about financial issues.
- How are people in our day and culture doing when it comes to living with financial wisdom from God's perspective? I'd suggest not terribly well.
- For the next few moments, we're going to speed through the 10 financial commandments and ask if we're all willing to live financially wise lives in light of the Bible.

1. Thou shalt remember who the owner is.

- In Psalm 24:1 the psalmist says, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Who is the owner? We get confused about this.
 - *Illustration: A guy at our church, who has been involved in philanthropy in the Bay area for a long time, said that where we live is the lowest giving area per capita in the world. We have a lot to learn from the generous people of South Dakota.*

2. Thou shalt embrace thy work.

- How often do we get down on our knees and thank God for the opportunity to work, to labor, to contribute, and to earn? It's not part of our culture.
- Proverbs 22:29 says, "Do you see someone skilled in their work? They will serve before kings."

3. Thou shalt not fall into debt.

- Proverbs 22:7 says, "The poor are always ruled by the rich, so don't borrow and put yourself under their power."
 - *Illustration: With an 18 percent interest rate (and it can go up to 25 percent now) and a minimum payment of about \$150 a month, how long will it take that guy to pay off a credit card debt of \$7,500 if he does the minimum each month?*
- Debt will squeeze the freedom and peace out of people like nothing else in the world.

- The Bible is basically saying, "Don't create an economy where people could put their ability to support themselves in jeopardy through debt." It will kill you.
- A personal word here—if you are in trouble with debt, make a decision that it stops today. Pray; ask for God's help, and get on a plan to reverse it. If you need wise Christian counsel, we would love to help you.

4. Thou shalt teach thy children about money.

- Psalm 34 says, "Come, my child, and listen closely. I will teach you obedience to the Lord." Here's the reality: We all learn about money from our parents.
 - *Illustration: I thought it was working until one day I had a Band-Aid on my arm, and my daughter, who at that time was about six, asked, "Why?"*
- Parents, you model financial life for your kids. You can model credit card abuse, chronic debt, neglect of tithing, or you can model simplicity and generosity.

5. Thou shalt have a plan.

- Paul writes about this to the church at Corinth: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up" (1 Cor. 16:2).
 - *Illustration: To get ready for this message, I asked a number of people who are just wise in this area about financial wisdom.*
- The plan I talk about periodically (although I didn't originate it) is the 10-10-80 plan. If you don't have a plan, I highly recommend this one.

6. Thou shalt declare, "Enough!"

- Proverbs 30:15 says, "The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry." The chronic desire for more will suck joy and gratitude out of you.
 - *Illustration: When I was a kid, my aunt had a little place up on Turtle Lake, Wisconsin, where we would go swimming. And leeches would attach themselves to us.*
- If we as a church community were to seriously declare, "Enough," that would be a huge deal. At some point, a follower of Jesus will say, "Enough."

7. Thou shalt find an alternative way to keep score.

- How often do you walk up to somebody and say, "How much money do you make?" Let's try it right now. Turn to the person next to you and ask them how much money they make each year. No, don't actually do that.

- The Book of James says the church is to be an alternative culture. Find another way to keep score, not money.

8. Thou shalt look around.

- Proverbs 19:17 says, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD." I think Jesus had thought a lot about that statement from the Bible when he said, "Whatever you did for ... the least of these you did for me."
 - *Illustration; Last week we took a change offering after the service. All told, at all the campuses we got \$6,339.80 in loose change.*

9. Thou shalt seek wise counsel.

- In The Message Bible Proverbs 11:14 says, "Without good direction, people lose their way. The more wise counsel you follow, the better your chances."
- The way Nancy and I have handled our money has been so much more God-honoring than it would have been if we had done it in isolation.

10. Thou shalt look forward to thy final audit.

- In Luke 12:48 Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."
- I've sat with a lot of people at their deathbeds. I've never heard anybody wish they had made more money. I've never sat with somebody at their deathbed and heard them say, "I'm so glad for the size of my portfolio."

Sermon Transcript

A mom was trying to teach her two kids about Jesus and the Easter story. When she reached the part about Pilate and what he did with Jesus, her six-year-old son, Noah, got mad and asked, "Mom, do you think Pilate did the right thing?"

His mom said, "No. I think God used Jesus' death on the cross, but Pilate should have stood up for Jesus." Noah said, "I agree. I would have grabbed Jesus and run with him to the plane and jumped in and taken off quick." His eight-year-old brother, Ryan, said, "Noah, there were no planes back in Bible days." Noah said, "But Mom said he was a Pilate. *Duh*. Weren't you listening?" That's one of the greatest questions about the Bible and spiritual wisdom of all time. How often must God want to say, "*Duh*. Weren't you listening?"

This is true in many areas of our lives: the way we talk, the way we treat other people, the way we forget humility, and the way we deal with anger. But nowhere is it more true than when it comes to our financial lives and learning to say, "Enough." Last week Nancy mentioned that Jesus said more about money than any other topic except for the kingdom of God. Out of 30 parables, 19 are set in an economic context, almost two-thirds of them. The lost coin, the parable of the talents, the parable of the rich fool, and many more. The Bible has thousands of verses about financial issues.

How are people in our day and culture doing when it comes to living with financial wisdom from God's perspective? I'd suggest not terribly well. I remember when I came to Menlo, a long time ago, somebody saying, "I know preachers don't like to talk much about money." That struck me as odd. At our former church, the senior pastor was a guy named Bill Hybels. Bill was thoroughly Dutch, and wasted resources (especially in the church) were offensive to him.

On the platform at Willow, we would use duct tape to mark where folks were supposed to stand at various points during the service. Bill would argue with the facilities team about whether or not we were reusing the duct tape long enough, making sure every penny went as far as it could go at that church. He loved to talk about the Bible and money, and he was brilliant at it. He loved it. I remember one time he did a sermon called, *The Financial 10 Commandments*. I've never forgotten that. I'm going to change several of the commandments, but I want to use that structure for this message and talk together about the 10 commandments for wise financial living.

Many of you could talk about wise financial management better than I ever could, but I have been involved in church life and ministry long enough to know that even people who are brilliant at accumulating money may not handle it in a way that would honor God by the end of their lives. For the next few moments, we're going to speed through the 10 financial commandments and ask if we're all willing to live financially wise lives in light of the Bible.

1. Thou shalt remember who the owner is.

In Psalm 24:1 the psalmist says, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Who is the owner? We get confused about this. Some time ago I read something in a theological journal called *Reader's Digest*. A traveler between flights at an airport went to a lounge and bought a small package of cookies. She sat down and began reading a newspaper. Gradually, she became aware of a rustling noise from behind her paper. She was flabbergasted to see a neatly-dressed man helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she leaned over and took a cookie herself.

A minute or two passed, and then came more rustling. He was helping himself to another one of her cookies, so she grabbed another one. This went on until they were down to the last cookie, which the man broke in two. He pushed half across to her, ate the other half, and left. She was still fuming about this sometime later. When her flight was announced, she opened her handbag to get her ticket. To her shock and embarrassment, there she found her pack of unopened cookies. Not only had he not been eating her cookies, she had been eating his cookies! See, how I deal with these cookies depends a lot on whose cookies I think they are.

A guy at our church, who has been involved in both business and philanthropy in the Bay area for a long time, said that where we live is the lowest giving area per capita in the world. I did a little research on that this last week. The Census Bureau of the U.S. evaluated 280 metropolitan areas. Guess where the San Francisco Bay area ranked on per capita income out of 280 metro areas.

Number one. The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics ranked 365 regions on charitable giving. Now since we're number one in making money, you would expect we would be number one in giving money. Does anybody want to guess where we ranked out of 365 regions in charitable giving? We were ranked at 310. I'll give you one more.

A massive study that was connected with The Roper Center and Harvard found that families in South Dakota give 75 percent more of their household income than families in San Francisco. Ask the average person in the San Francisco Bay area, "Do we have anything to learn from people in South Dakota?" They'd probably say no. But as a matter of fact, we do: how to be generous. I know this strikes at the core for a lot of us. Aren't we in the Bay area the enlightened, benevolent fixers of the world? We like to think we are, but it turns out we have a little problem.

The biblical writers spoke about this a long time ago. In Deuteronomy, God says to the people of Israel, "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth Remember the Lord your God, for he is the one." We live in a place where we all think, *I can get by on my power and the strength of my hands, my creativity, my brains.*

2. Thou shalt embrace thy work.

This is from *The Message* version of Colossians 3:22-24:

And don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best.
Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that
you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep
in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ.
The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible.
Being a follower of Jesus, [a Christian] doesn't cover up bad work.

Does anybody here ever complain about work? My sister was in Haiti a couple of weeks ago. As a lot of you know, the unemployment level in Haiti is about 80 percent. She talked about not just the physical devastation, not just what it does to the economy, poverty, and hunger, but the absolute crippling of the human spirit when people have nothing to do but sit, day after day.

How often do we get down on our knees and thank God for the opportunity to work, to labor, to contribute, and to earn? It's not part of our culture. Have you ever noticed there is no restaurant called "TGIM—Thank God It's Monday"? We don't do that. One of the great contributions the Bible made to the ancient world was the idea that all human labor is an honor that carries great dignity.

Proverbs 22:29 says, "Do you see someone skilled in their work? They will serve before kings." If we're followers of Jesus, the Bible says, "Remember, when you work, whether you get a paycheck or not, whatever it is you're doing, you ought to do it with a great attitude and diligence and a great work ethic." Followers of Jesus ought to be great workers working with a great attitude. It honors God, and it's fundamental to financial wisdom.

3. Thou shalt not fall into debt.

Proverbs 22:7 says, "The poor are always ruled by the rich, so don't borrow and put yourself under their power." We live in a day when people are devastated by debt. I remember when Bill talked about debt. A guy came up to him after the service and said he had gotten a little overboard on his credit card. He had a \$7,500 debt, and he said, "That's going to stop today. I'm going to find out the minimum monthly payment and start paying it off until it's gone."

Do a little math here for a moment. With an 18 percent interest rate (and it can go up to 25 percent now) and a minimum payment of about \$150 a month, how long will it take that guy to pay off a credit card debt of \$7,500 if he does the minimum each month? And how much money will it end up costing?

If you try to pay off a debt of \$7,500 with 18 percent interest at a minimum payment of \$150, it will take you a little over 30 years to pay it off. On a debt of \$7,500, you will end up paying \$23,000.

Debt will squeeze the freedom and peace out of people like nothing else in the world. This is the Bay area. This is Silicon Valley. You are the smartest money people in the world. But debt gets a hold of really bright people sometimes. The Bible has a lot to say about it. Outside of whatever mortgage would be prudent and whatever business loans might be wise, the general wisdom of the Bible is that debt ought to come with a warning from the Surgeon General's office: "This may be hazardous to your financial, emotional, and spiritual health."

In Deuteronomy 24:6 Moses says, "Do not take a pair of millstones—not even the upper one—as security for a debt, because that would be taking a person's livelihood as security." Now some of you have never taken a millstone as collateral, and you're feeling great about obeying the Bible here. The idea is, if somebody has to grind grain for a living and they give up their millstone to borrow money, they have lost their capacity to earn their income.

The Bible is basically saying, "Don't create an economy where people could put their ability to support themselves in jeopardy through debt." It will kill you. A personal word here—if you are in trouble with debt, make a decision that it stops today. Pray; ask for God's help, and get on a plan to reverse it. If you need wise Christian counsel, we would love to help you. Call our church office. We have small groups that focus on financial wisdom. We'd love to help with that so our whole congregation can live financial lives that honor God.

4. Thou shalt teach thy children about money.

Psalms 34 says, "Come, my child, and listen closely. I will teach you obedience to the Lord." Here's the reality: We all learn about money from our parents. It would be fascinating if we had

time to ask everyone, What did you learn? To be impulsive? To be worried? To be generous? To hoard? To flaunt? When our kids were little, we put them on the envelope system. When we gave them an allowance, they would put it in envelopes labeled "Give," "Save," "Gifts," "Spend," and so on.

I thought it was working until one day I had a Band-Aid on my arm, and my daughter, who at that time was about six, asked, "Why?" I explained I had gotten a medical exam that day to get life insurance. She asked, "What's that?" I explained, "Well, Daddy loves you so much and loves the family so much, so if anything were to happen to Daddy (which of course it won't, but if it would), it would provide for \$250,000." Her eyes got really wide. She has a tender heart, and I knew she'd be worried. She looked up at me and said, "A piece?" I thought, *I'm not sure the right lesson is getting communicated.*

We live in an area that will try to tempt parents who give their children too little time and energy to compensate for it by giving them too much money. But the greatest financial gift we can give our children is not money. It is the love of the right kind of work. It is that inner confidence I know a lot of you have. *Whatever life throws at me, I will have the capacity to handle life's challenges.* It is a generous spirit.

That will be killed if we give our kids way too much money. Parents, you model financial life for your kids. You can model credit card abuse, chronic debt, neglect of tithing, neglect of giving, and recreational shopping, or you can model wisdom, simplicity, humility, and generosity. We'll all model one or the other.

5. Thou shalt have a plan.

Paul writes about this to the church at Corinth: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up" (1 Cor. 16:2). To get ready for this message, I asked a number of people who are just wise in this area about financial wisdom. One man told me his first memory of money came from when he was three years old. It was in the middle of the Great Depression. His parents told him they would give him a weekly allowance and he would receive one penny for each year of his life.

So when he was three years old, he would receive three cents a week. They would have him take one penny with him to church to give to God, one penny to put into savings, and then he would have one penny to just throw around with reckless abandon. As funny as it sounds, that kind of stuck, and today he is one of the wisest and most generous people I know. It started when he was three years old. It started with a plan. It is better to have a plan first and money second than the other way around.

The plan I talk about periodically (although I didn't originate it) is the 10-10-80 plan. If you don't have a plan, I highly recommend this one. It's simple: take the first 10 percent of whatever God sends your way right off the top and give it to God's work. The first year Nancy and I were married, I was going to school on a fellowship that came out of the generosity of a family from within this church. I didn't know that for many years.

I was going to school on that fellowship. Nancy was working as a maid. We had nothing, but we took 10 percent of that little nothing, and that left us with 90 percent. Off the top, we said, "We're going to give to God." There was something about establishing that practice from the beginning of our marriage that centered it for us. We never deviated from it.

Then we said, "We'll put 10 percent in savings." The Bible has a lot to say about this. Proverbs 21:20 says, "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has." That's the wisdom of the Bible about finances. I talked to another guy recently who is about 60 years old, and he was literally in tears over this one practice. Somehow he got to this point in his life but he never developed the practice of regularly saving, and he feels so foolish and so ashamed. If you're not there yet, just take a first step. If you have to start with less than 10 percent to build your way up there, then do that.

That leaves 80 percent left. For most of us, that 80 percent is way more than we need. Ask God to lead you in how we handle all of it. Don't think, *10 percent goes to God and then 80 percent is all mine*. Instead, think, *I want God to lead me in all of it*.

6. Thou shalt declare, "Enough!"

Proverbs 30:15 says, "The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry." The chronic desire for more will suck joy and gratitude out of you. It is so destructive. The Bible compares this to a leech. When I was a kid, my aunt had a little place up on Turtle Lake, Wisconsin, where we would go swimming. And leeches would attach themselves to us. We used to call them bloodsuckers. The little kids were scared when that would happen. My grandmother would have to beat them off with a towel.

You people are from California. You've probably never seen a leech before. I want you to know what a leech looks like, so I'm going to hold one up. That's a leech right there. He's now attaching himself to my body. A leech will attach himself to you and suck all the life and the blood out of you.

Now we're going to pass this leech around through the whole congregation. You don't want to do that? Okay. Never mind. The Bible uses the image of this leech. It will suck all the joy, gratitude, and contentment out of you.

Some of you are wondering where we got a leech. There's a place called Leeches U.S.A., and they have an 800 number. You have to get them through a doctor. We have an elder who serves as a doctor. They came into his office and he said, "My office is filled mostly with lawyers, so they'll feel right at home." He said he thought this would create a *leechable* moment.

We live in a culture that is built on this. It's built on, "More, more, more." We talk about lifestyles: "What's your lifestyle? What's your rate of consumption? How many clothes, how much money, home size."

But most people never ask what would be enough. We live in *leechville*. So as we seek to live the Jesus way, every moment aware of God's presence, and as we surrender to God's will, what if

we did something countercultural? What if today was Enough Day? What if this weekend was Enough Weekend?

What if you were to say, "As of today, I am declaring, 'I now have enough.' I will not seek to raise my standard of consumption. I will not try to keep up with the Joneses anymore. I will declare the Joneses the winners. I will congratulate them. Where I'm living right now, this level of consumption is enough. From now on, if God brings more revenue my way, if God raises my income, I will seek to increase my giving and not my acquiring."

If we as a church community were to seriously declare, "Enough," and say, "We're going to cap our lifestyles where they are," that would be a huge deal. This is a deal between you and God. There's not a formula around it. At some point, a follower of Jesus will say, "Enough."

7. Thou shalt find an alternative way to keep score.

How often do you walk up to somebody and say, "How much money do you make?" Let's try it right now. Turn to the person next to you and ask them how much money they make each year. No, don't actually do that. That would not be a good idea. We tell people all kinds of stuff about ourselves. We talk about our bodies, our health, personal problems, marriage issues, but hardly ever our salaries. Why?

Of course we'd say, "It's personal." Why is it personal? Because we live in a day when the main reality of our culture is economic. Money is not just a neutral medium of exchange. Money, in our day, is our primary expression of value. We attach it to types of work, and by extension, to the value of the people who do the work, so it becomes a declaration of value. That's why it's so personal.

If you make more than me, you might not think much of me. If I make less than you, I might be tempted to envy you or compare myself to you. This gets really deep into how we define ourselves and feel about ourselves. James says the church is to be an alternative culture. Find another way to keep score, not money. James says, "My brothers [and sisters], don't show favoritism.... Has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him? But you have insulted the poor."

8. Thou shalt look around.

Proverbs 19:17 says, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD." I think Jesus had thought a lot about that statement from the Bible when he said, "Whatever you did for ... the least of these you did for me." Last week we took a change offering after the service. All told, at all the campuses we got \$6,339.80 in loose change. We filled up one machine at Safeway, and we had to fill up another one. One guy saw what was going on and asked, "Why is all that money going in there?" He heard it was going to go to under-resourced people and he contributed three bucks right on the spot.

A woman named Pamela took posters about Compassion Weekend to all kinds of area businesses over the last week or two, and dozens of them (almost every single business), when asked, "Would it be okay if we put this poster up?" even though we're at a church, said yes. One place

actually asked her, "Do I have to be a member of your church to help, or can anybody serve?" What's the correct answer to that question? "Only Presbyterians are allowed to serve." No, anybody can! The Bible has so much to say about God's heart for the poor.

9. Thou shalt seek wise counsel.

In The Message Bible Proverbs 11:14 says, "Without good direction, people lose their way. The more wise counsel you follow, the better your chances." The reality is I'm much more likely to do dumb things if I'm doing them all by myself. Seek financial wisdom. I have one really good friend who knows every detail of my financial life, and I'm so glad. What I spend, what I give, what I make. The way Nancy and I have handled our money has been so much more God-honoring than it would have been if we had done it in isolation. You have to know somebody really well to do that. Don't go up to a stranger and start talking at that level of detail, but seek wise counsel.

10. Thou shalt look forward to thy final audit.

In Luke 12:48 Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Here's the most important piece of financial wisdom you're ever going to hear, and it's not from folks you see on TV or read about in books. It is this: You are going to die. Let's all say that together out loud. "I am going to die." That's a cheerful little thought, isn't it?

I've sat with a lot of people at their deathbeds. I've never heard anybody wish they had made more money. I've never sat with somebody at their deathbed and heard them say, "I'm so glad for the size of my portfolio." In that moment, what matters is really clear. It's loving God. It's asking Jesus to be forgiver, healer, and leader—including of my stuff. It's loving the people around me and using whatever comes into my life to bless them. You don't have to wait until you're on your deathbed to figure that out. You can do it now.

For Your Reflection

Personal growth:

How has this sermon fed your own soul? _____

Skill growth:

What did this sermon teach you about how to preach?

Exegesis and exposition:

Highlight the paragraphs in this sermon that helped you better understand Scripture. How does the sermon model ways you could provide helpful biblical exposition for your hearers?

Theological Ideas:

What biblical principles in this sermon would you like to develop in a sermon? How would you adapt these ideas to reflect your own understanding of Scripture, the Christian life, and the unique message that God is putting on your heart?

Outline:

How would you improve on this outline by changing the wording, or by adding or subtracting points? _____

Application:

What is the main application of this sermon? What is the main application of the message you sense God wants you to bring to your hearers?

Illustrations:

Which illustrations in this sermon would relate well with your hearers? Which cannot be used with your hearers, but they suggest illustrations that could work with your hearers?

Credit:

Do you plan to use the content of this sermon to a degree that obligates you to give credit? If so, when and how will you do it? _____



ARTICLE:

PREACHING TO LONGING HEARTS

By John Ortberg

Posted: March 26, 2012

Topic: Considering Hearers

Big Idea: What should we think of human desires?

Skills Article:

Editor's Note:

The subject of human desires—and how our preaching should take them into account—is complicated. Surely our preaching addresses at the deepest levels the full spectrum of human longings, yet at the same time preachers wonder just how intentional to be in speaking to the yearnings of the soul. To navigate this issue, we talked to a preacher who has written often on the subject of spiritual formation and the human heart: John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California.

Interview:

PreachingToday.com: When are human longings legitimate?

John Ortberg: If you think about human desires as they existed originally at creation, before they got messed up in the Fall, they are an important part of our humanity. We were made to have longings, and God loves to fulfill human desires. [Psalm 103:5](#) says God "satisfies your desires with good things." Desires are actually one of the primary indicators of God's will for a creature. Fish want to swim; birds want to fly. God makes creatures to do certain things, and then he places within them the desire to do that. We have desires for food and for water. Because sinful desires can lead us badly astray, we Christians can sometimes mistrust them and not recognize the importance of desire and what a good thing desire is. The only way to have sustainable spiritual life is not to quench desire; rather, it is to retrain our desires so that we come to desire what God wants us to desire.

There is an interesting connection between the words *emotion* and *motion*. Emotions are what set us in motion. If we didn't have the capacity for emotion and desire, we would never do anything. So we have to recognize that desire is very good. It is central to understanding God's will for our lives. But then we must also understand that sin has messed up every desire we have.

For instance, even when I'm preaching, I have a bundle of mixed desires. I want to declare God's Word, and then I also want people to think that I'm doing really well, so that I can feel good about myself. There is this mixture of ego along with the desire to serve God. We all will wrestle with mixed desires as long as we live.

And so preachers should speak to and appeal to godly longings, the desires that will move people to be the people God wants them to be. We need to teach them what it means to die. The call of Jesus to die to self, to take up your cross in self-denial, is critical, and it's one that we rarely hear from our culture. So we have to teach on that. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a solitary grain." But then we have to explain to people that the self we die to is always a lesser, sinful self, so that a greater, nobler self can come to life.

So death to self is not death to all desire.

Ortberg: That's right. I remember a talk by Lynne Hybels that she titled "I Died to Myself, and Myself Almost Died." The teaching of death to self had gotten confused in her background. Instead of understanding that our death to self is actually the door to the liberation of the self who God wants us to be, dying to self became an end in itself.

It seems that one danger of trying to speak to people's legitimate longings is unintentionally to begin to say what people want to hear.

Ortberg: We need to come out of denial and say, *We all do that*. It doesn't mean that's all we do, or that it's our conscious intent, but we all have a concern for what people think of us. For some of us that may be because of our need for approval, or there's a concern for control and leadership over an organization. In both cases the starting point for addressing the problem is to say, *I have that disease*.

Then I need to ask, *How do I arrange my life so that my life with God, my identity in God, is rich enough that I don't need the congregation's approval or compliance anymore*. We need to have a life with God that is so rich and full that we have something better than what catering to itching ears can obtain.

Although I want to be aware of what people long for, I don't want to appeal mainly to what people long for. I want to appeal to people becoming who God made them to be—moving them in the direction of love, joy, peace, patience—and asking: *What would move people in that direction?*

There was a distinction that Ignatius made that's always been helpful for me to think about. He had a great crisis when he was ill over whether he should go back to be a soldier and win glory through battle, or serve God. He said when he would picture either of those two scenarios, in the moment both would provide him with a little burst of joy. But as he continued to reflect on it, the joy of serving God would remain while the joy that he felt at becoming a soldier who won glory on the battlefield would fade.

So I think that sense of moving in the direction of the fruit of the Spirit, moving in the direction of obedience to God, produces a joy or a meaning that lasts in a way that the gratification of other desires does not.

Why speak to legitimate longings?

Ortberg: There is no way to speak that does not evoke longings. Psychologists who study this kind of thing say that all words and thoughts have an emotional charge. So there is no such thing as preaching that is just neutral information that carries no emotional weight. So it's much better to be aware of that and upfront about it than to think that sometimes we address longings and sometimes not. We always are, because the people we address are whole beings.

What I don't want to do is try to manipulate longings or make false promises about longings being satisfied in ways that they will not be.

What does Jesus teach us about speaking to human longings?

Ortberg: Go through the Sermon on the Mount. I once thought that the point of the Beatitudes is to tell us what we're supposed to be: a peacemaker, or somebody who mourns, and so on. But now I see them more as announcements of the good news of life in the kingdom, especially for people who thought they were shut out. Jesus looks at the misfits and says, "Blessed are you who are meek." He's announcing to people who feel like they're on the margins that a life of blessedness in the kingdom is available. It's no wonder that people responded to him the way they did.

Or he says, "Be anxious for nothing." I think about my life and how much anxiety I have. I get worried about money, about my church, about staff problems, about my kids. What would it look like not to be anxious?

Or think about sexuality and how it can produce in us guilt, desire, turbulence. Then think about what Jesus said about not looking with wrongful lust. What would it be like if I looked at every woman that wasn't my wife like she was my sister or my daughter?

So if you go through the Sermon on the Mount and imagine yourself in various scenarios as a real person hearing those words, you realize how deeply Jesus spoke to human longings.

Later in Matthew Jesus said, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." You think about the people listening to Jesus—the tremendous burdens that most were carrying in their lives—and you can imagine how inviting those words of Jesus were as they spoke to their deep human longings.

I remember Richard Foster telling a story about a father who was really frustrated with his son in the grocery store. Nothing would calm the son down, so the father finally just started to sing this song to his son: "I love you. I'm glad you're my son, and I'm glad I get to be your dad." He sang it all the way out to the car, and he put the kid in the car seat, and then his son stretched his arms out and said, "Sing it to me again, Daddy; sing it to me again." Well, to tell that story to a congregation and then to say there is a God who loves to sing that song to you, to be your Father, to say, "You are precious in my sight, and I love you"—that speaks to a longing deep inside the human heart. When you're preaching, you can feel a kind of melting around that, and that's because the heart was made to be loved by God.

How can speaking to people's longings contribute to or distract from spiritual formation?

Ortberg: I'm fascinated by psychology, communication, and spiritual formation, and there can be some cross purposes there. You can listen to communicators who are really effective; they're great at playing on longings and producing emotional responses in people. That can make a talk popular and a communicator really popular. But it can actually damage the hearers' spiritual formation because they become dependent on a story or a pointed experience during a sermon to

have deep emotions around God. Then when they're absent from that, they find themselves not feeling much toward God.

Spiritual formation involves the reformation of my desires. I need to be freed from desires that lead me away from God, and increasingly motivated by desires that lead me towards God and towards the life God wants me to live.

What that means for the communicator is, I have to submit my natural tendency to speak to human longings under the greater purpose of having Christ formed in people. Sometimes that means I may come to a story, and instead of telling it in a way that would evoke emotion in the moment, I need to teach that in a way that explains to people how to arrange their lives so their desires get reordered. The 12 Steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program are about the reordering of desire: becoming freed from desires that enslave me so I can be moved by healthier desires. I need to teach people how to do that, rather than teaching always in such a way that they become interminably dependent on emotional experiences.

Because I'm a "feeler," as a preacher I can get addicted to trying to create an emotional response in hearers. I can be tempted to gauge the effectiveness of a sermon by the level of attentiveness and emotional engagement—silence in the room, sniffing, people getting ready to cry—rather than the longer-term, harder-to-gauge question, *Is Christ becoming more important to my hearers?*

What can help us keep in tune with people's longings?

Ortberg: When preparing the message, I need to make sure I'm thinking about real people. When I'm putting a message together, often I will try to think about specific people who will hear the message, such as the guy I know who has adopted 60 foster children. Or the guy in his late twenties who for the first time in his life gave his heart to a woman, and the woman has just broken up with him. Or the guy who launched his own company but just went out of business. If I'm thinking of actual people, I'll become aware of how this message will fall on these ears.

What do the essential themes of the gospel teach us about speaking to longings?

Ortberg: In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis has a wonderful scene in which one of the characters, a ghostlike man, has a lizard on his shoulder, and an angel comes and says, "You may enter into life, but I'm going to have to kill that lizard." The lizard represents lust, which is an example of one kind of longing. The guy goes through this excruciating internal struggle as the lizard is whispering: Don't let him kill me. If you let him kill me, you'll die. If you let him kill me, life won't be worth living.

So he agonizes over the question *Will I die to this distorted longing or not?*

Finally, out of desperation, of disgust with himself, and of longing, he says: Go ahead, just go ahead, kill it.

The angel does, the ghostlike figure falls to the ground, and so does the lizard. It looks like there's nothing but death. But then the ghostlike man is revived and becomes substantial, and the lizard not only comes back to life, but is transformed into a fabulous stallion. The man climbs on the stallion, and they enter into life.

The bottom line of the story is that nothing—no desire—can enter into the life of heaven as it exists right now. But no desire, if it is fully submitted to God and broken through the process of repentance, will not be reborn as something so magnificent and noble that we cannot now even imagine it.



ARTICLE:

BIBLICAL PREACHING IS ABOUT LIFE CHANGE, NOT SERMON STYLE

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Topic: Preaching Skill

Big Idea: What should we think of human desires?

Skills Article:

What is Biblical Preaching?

The core value of preaching that changes lives is it's biblical. You and I don't change lives; God changes lives. For 2,000 years, God has used the power of this Word to convict stubborn hearts of sin, to move cold spirits to repentance, and to lift faltering lives to hope.

My goal is not to get people all the way through the Bible. My goal is to get the Bible all the way through people.

The question that causes a fair amount of controversy is what makes preaching biblical.

It's not about form.

Often people think what makes preaching biblical is a particular style or structure. Where I grew up, people talked about three categories for preaching: topical, which was often regarded as not very biblical, textual, where the main point comes from a Scripture verse, which was considered more biblical, and expository, which is difficult to get a clear definition of. Expository is a word that gets thrown around a lot. Some people think of it as verse-by-verse preaching, or where points and sub-points are from one text in Scripture.

There are a number of problems with thinking one particular style or structure of preaching is the only kind that's biblical.

One problem is Jesus didn't do that kind of expository preaching. Mostly he told stories and the implications for listeners' lives. The apostles didn't do that kind of expository preaching. In the New Testament you don't see any sermon that goes verse by verse through an Old Testament text. I'm not saying that kind of preaching is a bad thing. It's important that people become biblically literate. But what makes preaching biblical is not its structure. To be biblical does not mean the preacher follows a particular form that, after all, human beings created.

It's about relevance, application, and enablement.

William D. Thompson, author of "Preaching Biblically," writes: "Biblical preaching is when listeners are enabled to see how their world, like the biblical world, is addressed by the Word of God." It is important not to be superficial when it comes to what makes preaching biblical. How many Bible verses a sermon has does not determine whether or not it's biblical. You can have a hundred verses in a sermon and misinterpret every one of them. It is not the structure. Biblical preaching occurs when people listen, are enabled to hear that God is addressing them as God addressed the world of the Scriptures, and are enabled to respond.

Far too many sermons have lots of information about the Bible but are not really biblical preaching because they do not call and enable people to respond to the Word. There is lots of information *about* the Bible--exegetical, historical or theological--with maybe a few applications tacked on the end.

It's about working the soap of the Word deeply through the stained fibers of hearers' hearts.

What happens when the Word addresses people? In Ephesians 5:25-26, Paul has a wonderful metaphor. He says, "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word."

The church is to be made holy by being cleansed with the washing of the water of the Word. Why do you wash something? Because it's dirty. What happens when you wash something? Soap and water move through the fibers and lift out impurities from the fabric.

When we and our congregations come before God, our hearts are like that. They are cluttered with false beliefs, attitudes, misguided intentions, wrong perceptions.

I could tell you what a few of mine are. I'm walking down the street. Somebody wants money. I find myself looking away from him because I don't even want to be reminded of that need, and I don't want to feel guilty by not giving him something. Or I'm at a convenience store in a line of people, and the person behind the counter doesn't speak English well, and my reflexive thoughts are, *I'm in a hurry. Why can't they get somebody that speaks English well around here?* Or another time I'm in church standing next to somebody who's important and the thoughts that run through my mind are, *This is an important person. I wonder what I might be able to say to make a connection because he or she is important.*

Those are just a few thoughts in my mind that are dirty. They equip me for bad works. They make bad feelings and behaviors almost inevitable. Imagine having a mind cleansed of all that. Imagine when you're with somebody, your first thought is to pray for them and bless them. Imagine that if you're challenged, your first thought is to look to God for strength.

That's what it would be like to have a mind washed by the Word, and that's your goal for the people to whom you speak. That's the goal of biblical preaching. The goal is not to get vast amounts of exegetical information into people.

My goal is not to get people all the way through the Bible. My goal is to get the Bible all the way through people.

Biblical preaching answers three questions: What must hearers know, feel, do?

To do that I ask three questions. What do I want people to know? What do I want people to feel? What do I want people to do? I think about these questions for every message I do because if I don't address the mind and heart and will--if I can't answer those questions--then I need not deliver this message because it's not going to wash their minds in the Word.

Your goal is to wash the minds of your people in the Word so that Christ is formed in them.
That's biblical preaching.

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