

If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab them. If you don't have a Bible with you, there should be a hardback black one somewhere around you. You can use that. We'll use 2 Corinthians 5 as kind of a bizarre jumping off point, and then we'll look at several other texts. I want to try to frame just a little bit for you what occurred on Friday, and what our response as believers in Christ should be. As believers in Christ, we don't disassociate ourselves from the brokenness of the world, but we actually enter into it. Since I first heard of the shootings, my wife and I have just tried to keep in step and try to enter into what has to be the most horrific thing I've seen in all of my 38 years of life.

For us, probably because of where we are in life, it really is kind of gut-wrenching and nauseating. Part of that for me honestly (maybe this is selfish and dumb) is I have a 7-year-old who lives in my house. I have a 7-year-old son. I have presents under the tree for him right now. How do you even process that? How do you even do that? How do you drop your kid off at school, thinking you're going back to get him in a few hours, and then it just be over? There have been a lot of tears in my house. I want to be real honest and give you permission to be honest. There has been a little frustration. I find myself swinging between sadness and rage. I find myself, even as a pastor, trying to land on what I know is true.

I know God is holy, and I know he's good, and I know he was also there, and he could have stopped it, and he chose not to. God is perfectly able to intervene, and for whatever reason, he did not intervene. God was not absent. He didn't not see that one coming. All these things are true about our God, and yet somehow, you and I are stuck in this tension of knowing he's good and holy and has no part of evil, yet simultaneously knew what was going to happen, saw it happen, was present while it happened, and could have stopped it. Where I've found myself even as I've wrestled with the Lord is having to come back and land on that solid ground of my own ignorance. Isn't that a strange place to find comfort?

Literally the only thing that has comforted me since I started watching this thing unfold is, "Okay, I don't know, and you do. That's all I have. I'm an idiot. I have to trust you." That's all I really have, is this knowledge in my heart that God is good and this understanding that I am limited in scope. Even if you're not a believer, and you're here today, and you are, in a very real way, skeptical of God, skeptical of religion, the one thing we're all agreeing on right now is there is evil in the world, and we don't quite understand it. That becomes common ground for all of us on weeks like this.

Maybe before there were arguments about it. "Is there evil? Is there such thing as evil? Is there truth?" All of a sudden, we're all together going, "No, no, there's evil. There is tangible darkness in our world." Here's how I want to spend my time with you today. I want to create some framework for Friday, and then I want us to talk about where our hope actually is, because you have already begun to hear rhetoric of hope. I want to talk about where our hope is and where it most definitely is not. To frame up the events of Friday, here's what we know. You and I, as believers in Christ, understand the world we're living in is broken. The Bible is unapologetically honest about the brokenness of the world.

When sin was introduced into the creative order, it fractured everything, not just you and me, but everything. Systems, personalities, minds, genetic makeups, everything fractured when sin entered into God's shalom, God's peace, God's rhythm. When we see things like Friday and like a thousand other events all over the world, we just get our turn to stare at it. Kind of what happened Friday happens all over the world in other places with a real regularity. We've just, in a lot of common grace, been spared from some of the horrific natures of the fallen world. We live in a broken world.

In that broken world, you and I as believers in Christ are to be lights in the dark places. We enter into the sorrows of people. We mourn with those who mourn, and we plead on their behalf for the strength and mercy of God in this time. I do not know and do not believe that on earth I will ever be able to make sense of this. I don't think that 10 years from now, I'll be like, "Here's the good that came from that." I just don't see that that day is coming for me. Maybe we'll have different levels of faith here. I don't know that I need it to. I've been given a gift of faith that just says, "I'm going to trust you. I'm going to trust that you know what you're doing and that somehow, as you've played out that you are good, holy, not in any part in anything evil, and yet, simultaneously didn't stop this from happening."

I'm just going to camp out there and close my mouth and raise my hand. That's where I'm going to live and dwell. Maybe you haven't been given that much faith. Maybe you're here today to wrestle through that. Hopefully, by the end of today, the Lord would grant you that. I want to spend some time praying, because I can't get my head around how you would even begin to mourn this. What we do know is the Bible says God is near to the brokenhearted and that God, in moments like this, will offer peace that passes all understanding. As the daddy of a 7-year-old, I would need a type of peace that goes well beyond my understanding and comprehension.

The good news is God says he gives it. What I want to do is I want to spend some time praying today, and then I want to start talking about hope and where hope is rightly placed, and where it can be wrongly placed if we're not careful. The way my preference to do this is just kind of group up with who you're with. If you're not a believer, and you just joined us today, this shouldn't freak you out too much. You came to church. You should have expected at some level we would pray. We're going to group up and pray. If that's

not where you are, then feel free to just take a moment of silence or to just pray by yourself or just to awkwardly stare at me. All of those things are options for you.

I want us to begin to pray for moms and dads, 40 of them, grandparents, brothers, and sisters. Yesterday morning, I played at the park with my son, and I didn't have to explain to my 9-year-old what happened to her brother. I didn't have to walk my parents through the tragedy of losing a grandchild. I don't have to wonder what to do with presents. I don't have to do any of that. I get to throw the ball with our new puppy and play with my kids. There are a lot of people having to talk to older daughters, having to talk to younger sons, having to pastor spouses, having to help parents, having to...

That's their reality. It's not a movie. It happened. Where we come in here with a bit of distance from it, they're right in the middle of it. We're going to beseech the throne room of God to minister to them deeply together. I want us to start by simply praying for the parents and the siblings of those who lost a brother, sister, son, or daughter in the shootings in Friday. You can group up. You can pray by yourself. You can just take a moment of silence. Let's pray now together just as a community of faith for these mamas and daddies and brothers and sisters.

I want us now to pray for healing, emotional, spiritual, mental healing of those who survived. There is a type of wound that's not physical that kind of has a tendency to linger deep in the human soul. There were a lot of little boys and little girls who saw things we try to protect our kids from seeing on television, except they saw it live and in person. I just want to pray that the Holy Spirit would just do some real healing in their little hearts and would kind of take images and clean hearts and minds and then to do work in those little souls, lest this become such a weight that it crushes them.

My son is scared of the dark at 7 for no reason other than he's scared of the dark. The type of fear and issues that'll lead to for many of these young men and women is significant. I want to pray for them. I want to pray that God would heal souls, that he would give them the gift of forgetfulness. Would you pray with me for these young boys and girls?

The last way I want us to pray this morning just as we conclude this time of prayer and start to talk about hope is really the prayer of the early church and a prayer that has been echoing through our faith for several millennia now, and that's the prayer of "Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus." You see, you and I live in what the theologians have called "the already but not yet," the narrow place we live between the reality that Christ has come, he has lived, he has died, and he has resurrected. We're now in the space where the Word of God is going global, rescuing, redeeming, and saving, and it ends at the consummation of all things, at the return of Jesus Christ. At that return, all that was purchased by Christ in his life, death, and resurrection will be consummated.

What you see in the return of Christ is the death of death, the death of tears, the death of sorrow, the death of depression, the death of mental illness, all that rages and wars against the human condition once and for all absolved in the coming of Jesus Christ. I want us to cry out like brothers and sister have for millennia now for the return of Christ, for Maranatha, for, "Come, Lord Jesus. End this madness." Surely if you're a believer, at some level you've felt the angst of the brokenness of the world. That's why we entered into sorrow. It reminds us this isn't right. This isn't what it's supposed to be. Join me in just praying for the return of Christ, for him to make all things new for his tarrying to wait, and for him to come and redeem all that is lost. Let's pray with one another.

Father, we hardly have the ability to comprehend these things. God, most of our hearts are fluctuating between sadness and despair and rage and anger. God, increase our faith where there are doubts today, where we're wrestling with you. We thank you that we're covered by your grace and it's okay to wonder. We pray you would meet us in these moments and the weeks to come as we process that you would meet us, that you would remind us of goodness and grace, that you would remind us of the billions of things that haven't gone wrong as you have held back tyrannies, you have held off thousands of tragedies like this. God, we thank you. We pray you would make us more and more aware of who you are and what you're like, and where confidence has been shaken that you would restore it. Help us where we're needy and we're fragile. Help us, Father. It's through your beautiful name, amen.

After Columbine, the big question was, "How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?" Do you remember? The question was, "How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?" Let me just rewind and say this. I am not in any way in the next 35 minutes making any political statements whatsoever. If you hear something that sounds political to you, that's on your ears, not on my mouth. Are we good? I'm not making a political statement. I'm not advocating Next Steps. I'm not doing any of that. I want to point out some things, and then I want to push us to really our only real shot here, our only real hope.

The question that keeps getting asked is, "How do we stop these kinds of things from happening?" We've been asking that question for a long, long time. If we could get out of our time and look at history as a whole, we've been asking this question for a few thousand years. The means and efficiency of massacre have changed, but massacre has always been a part of the human condition. We are hopelessly broken, and we are prone to violence. Already, the rhetoric has begun. Already, people are standing up and saying, "Our hope is this, and we should look at this, and maybe we should unpack this." I want to clearly say that government and institutions have their place, but they will never be able to legislate what is necessary to see things like this cease.

I want you to hear me say this. This is going to happen again. It's going to happen again. There's nothing our government can do to stop it. Nothing. They've been trying. They're not going to be able to stop it because (hear me say this) man cannot solve what is wrong with man. Even the Greeks knew this. If you're Greek, I'm not being offensive. I was speaking historically. Let me unpack this. In Greek mythology, there was a God named Prometheus. Don't think of that alien movie. That's not what I'm talking about. Prometheus was, in Greek mythology, the god who gave man fire, technology, the ability to see, navigate, and help himself.

The only problem, according to Zeus, was that man, when he tried to solve his problems, because he lacked the wisdom of the gods, in solving his problems, he would create more problems for himself. Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to a mountain and causing a buzzard to come eat out his liver every day. This was the Greeks' way of saying man can't solve man's problems. In fact, for all of the evidence of our progress, our progress has only brought about greater complications. We cannot solve what is wrong with us. Let me give you just one quick example for time's sake.

I am a giant fan of medical advancement personally. I've spent a lot of time in the MRI. I love that machine. I've even named her, the one I have to get in. I love medical advancement, but here's the reality of the world you and I live in. Hundreds of thousands of little boys and girls are going to die this year from something as simple as diarrhea, something you and I can go to the gas station right now and spend a dollar on to solve for us. Although there has been medical advancement, there has been no advancement in the condition of the selfish heart, the greedy heart, and the heart who would rather get money than save lives.

All over developing countries, little boys and little girls are going to die from something you and I can buy at the gas station. Medical advancement has been a beautiful thing, but it has not solved the problem of greed in the human heart. Although in some ways there are technological advancements, there are things we can marvel at, those advancements have done nothing to really work on what is our greatest issue, and that's the issue of our hearts. This idea is complicated by a couple of things. Let me try to unpack those quickly.

What I have found in my 15 years of ministry, 10 of which have been here as pastor of this church, is a lot of people who claim to be Christians have no idea what it actually means to be a Christian. People who are not Christians also have no idea what it means to be a Christian. If you take people who say that are Christians but have no idea what it means to be Christian, and then you take a bunch of people who are around people who say they are Christians but don't understand what it means to be a Christian, and you put all of those in a shaker, and you pour it out on the Bible Belt, you get a bit of a train wreck. Right? What I want us to do is I want us to get back to... Our talk today, our greatest hope, which is not governments and

institutions, it's not limiting access to this or to that (although some of that might be wise in all arenas), really our greatest hope is what God and God alone has promised to us in the coming Messiah and what we celebrate in Advent.

Here's why. It and it alone solves the problem with mankind which is not external to mankind but internal to mankind, namely, his heart. Let's look at this in 2 Corinthians 5. I'm going to read simply verse 17, and then we'll bounce off and read some other texts. **"Therefore, if anyone is..."** What? What are those two words? **"...in Christ..."** Now, we said last week that any time you see those two words together, "in Christ," you need to circle it, highlight it, star it, draw a line out to the margin, write, "wow," but we needed to pay close attention to this idea of being in Christ. If you remember last week's text in Romans 8:1, there was no condemnation for those who are in Christ. This week, it's that if anyone be in Christ, he's a new creation; the old has passed away, and the new has come.

Once again, this idea of being in Christ has to do with our union with Christ, and really Christ covering our shortcomings and our weaknesses. Maybe this'll help. This is the illustration I used last week. No one in this room can fly. If we took you up on the top of the building, and we all went out in the parking lot just to watch you, what you would do is fall. Not fly...fall. You're not going to poof out and up. You're going to jump maybe two feet up, then you're going to come see the rest of us down in the parking lot, except it will be rougher on you than it will be on us. You do not possess the ability to fly, but if we take your nonflying, aviationally-challenged self, and we put you in a 747, now you can fly 600 miles an hour at 40,000 feet around the world.

You see, where you are limited outside of the plane, inside the plane, you are not limited. Where you are limited outside of Christ in your sinfulness, in your weakness, in your depression, in your despair, in Christ, you aren't weak in that way. As we saw last week, in Christ, we are forgiven fully, freely, and forever. This week, he's saying in Christ, the old is gone, the new has come. Really, the best picture, kind of a picture for our minds on what this looks like comes from a passage in Ezekiel. I'll just read it to you. Ezekiel 11:19 says this. **"And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh."**

What happens when those of us who are outside of Christ come into Christ is, the Bible says, that what God does in Jesus Christ is he removes the heart of stone, and he replaces it with a heart of flesh so that in our being, before Christ, there is a cap on what we're able to feel, how we're able to move, how we're able to interact with the world around us, what our understanding of God is, what we believe he is like. All of it has kind of this picture of being stony. Things don't grow well in stony ground. You and I have hearts of stone. What does he do? He moves the heart of stone, and he replaces it with a heart of flesh.

Now the heart of stone is removed. The heart of flesh is put in its place. Let me kind of unpack that a little bit. A heart of flesh is far more tender than a heart of stone in multiple ways. Let me just give you a couple real quick.

1. *A heart of flesh is going to be awakened to its conscience, whereas the heart of stone probably isn't.*

When I was 18, before I became a believer, I did what 18-year-olds do. Are you tracking with me? I did what 18-year-old young guys did. There was not a lot of question. On Friday night, we're going to a party. That's what we're doing. At that party, we're going to drink whatever we stole from your pantries or whatever else we could get our hands on. We'll do other things. We're going to try to hunt and conquer young women with daddy issues.

No one thought that was wrong or awful. In fact, it was kind of bragging about how far you were able to take it, who you were able to hook up with, how wasted you got. These were badges of honor in that environment. Although at times I thought maybe they were... I would feel guilt that led me to shame that then rolled up in me pursuing those things all the more to quiet down that shame. I never thought, "This is wrong. I shouldn't be doing this." We just lied to our parents. That's what we did. We just drank. That's what we did. We just hunted the opposite sex. That's what we did. We got in fights. We threw hands. We vandalized. That's what you do when you're a group of unregenerate, punk, 17 and 18-year-olds.

Then, God saved me. All of a sudden, I just got this nagging things. "Quit that. You can't do that. Don't do that." Just all of a sudden, I have kind of new eyes. I'm feeling things I hadn't felt before. Not shame as a crushing kind of thing, but more kind of conviction that was a life-giving kind of thing. Does that make sense to you? I felt it was wrong, and there was something sweet about it, almost like I knew someone loved me and was trying to save me from wounding myself and others. That heart that was indifferent in that scene just weeks before, all of a sudden grew nauseous at that scene. That's because God had taken a heart of stone from my chest, and he had put in it a heart of flesh. Not only is the heart of flesh tender toward its conscience, but...

2. *The heart of flesh is also tender toward the suffering and sorrow of others, because it understands that all men and women are under the reign and rule of a broken, sinful world.* As believers in Christ, we run into the hurts, hardness, and sorrow of others. We don't run from; we run into. I don't know if you've picked up on this, but historically, if we just look at Christian history... Just drive around. Has it occurred to you yet? Baptist hospital, Presbyterian hospital, Presbyterian hospital, Baptist hospital, a Baptist hospital in a Presbyterian hospital next to a Catholic clinic. Right?

The people of God have been compelled to enter into the sorrow and brokenness of this world even in unsafe places, because God has removed from them a heart that is all about them and has given them a

heart of flesh that feels what God feels and seals into them a divine empathy that has them run toward the widow and orphan in their distress, that has them run toward the alien and stranger, that has them run toward those who are sick and dying. Over and over again, for thousands of years, God's covenant people have entered into the fray when no one else would.

They entered the fray during the black plague. They entered the fray during the AIDS epidemic as it broke out in the 80s. I don't know if you were alive back then, but you could get AIDS by a toilet seat. You could get AIDS by shaking somebody's hands. It was just sheer terror. Before they understood it, everybody likes to point to one moron who made a statement that was foolish. By in large, the Christian community ran into those dying of AIDS and nursed, loved, and walked with them until the end.

I have a good friend. I did a fundraiser with him this past week. He runs Free City International. He just felt compelled in his heart to work with refugees from the Middle East who have been settled in Dallas, Texas. He went. He and his wife had just been married a few months. They went down there to pray over the area and then stopped to get some tacos. They're sitting out on this patio having tacos, he and his wife of just a few months, and a guy sits next to my friend, pulls out a revolver, just sticks it in his ribcage, and then tells his wife, "Give me your purse."

If I knew this couple, you would chuckle, because she looked right at the armed guy and was like, "No. Shoot him." She didn't say to shoot him, but she was like, "This is a new purse. I'm not giving you this purse." My friend was like, "Hey, man, that's a pistol. Give him your purse." This is a dangerous spot. I've seen interaction and dialogue in certain venues where people go, "He should have been shot! What a fool for going into a place as dangerous as that with his wife!" What would compel a man and what would compel a woman to go into a place as dark as Vickery? A heart of flesh. A heart that has been sealed with divine empathy.

3. *A heart of flesh is ferocious in giving more of what it has already been given in Jesus Christ.* You see, if Jesus Christ is an inexhaustible well, then his believers in Christ are always walking in this strange kind of holy discontentment, wanting more and more of what we're actually already enjoying. Gone is the indifference toward divine things. We have a tenderness of conscience, a tenderness toward sorrow and suffering, and a ferocious desire of more of what we already possess, not in a sinful, discontented way, but rather in a holy, righteous discontentment, the one that mirrors David when he cries out for more and more and more of the Lord.

The one that mirrors the apostle Paul when it says, "Oh, that I might know Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law." That same heart that says, "I want more. There is more, and I want it, and I'm hungry for it." That's the new heart you and I have been given. On top

of that new heart (all we're talking about here is salvation), God put something in that heart to make it pump life into our veins. In 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, the Bible says this. **"And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."**

So the Triune God of the universe (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) sends the Son, seals us with the Holy Spirit, new hearts being pumped now be the Holy Spirit of God inside of us, sending a new kind of blood through our veins, creating a type of vitality that ensures that our conscience stays soft, that ensures that when all said and done, we are engaging those who walk in sorrow and strife, and that we are hungry for more and more and more of God. With every pump of the Holy Spirit on that new heart, we cry out for more of who he is. We despise the darkness all the more. We cling to the light all the more ferociously.

On top of even this, he wants to get to the minds. Not only are we given new hearts and have been sealed with the Holy Spirit that pumps that heart, but then in Luke 24:45, it says this of Jesus: **"Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."** You have to follow me. Remember, don't lose context. What's our great hope in the world? We have new hearts that are sealed with the Holy Spirit, and now with that new blood pulsing through our veins, the mind is awakened to the truths of the Word of God.

You have to listen to me, verse collectors. You have to hear me here, church kids. I've been trying to press on this since I got here. You can know the Bible and not know the God of the Bible. You can Facebook stalk God. You can find out what he has done and where he has been and who he is hanging out with and not know him at all. In John 6, Jesus looks at the Pharisees and says, "You study the Scriptures in vain, because you think that in them you have life, yet you refuse to come to me to whom those Scriptures testify." Jesus is saying, "The Scriptures are talking about me, so if you say you love the Scriptures but you don't want anything to do with me, you don't understand the Scriptures."

What happens when we have new hearts and the Holy Spirit is sealed inside of us is the mind is awakened to the Word of God, and the Bible starts reading us. At that moment, divine surgery begins to take place. All of a sudden, conviction begins to be fueled by the truth of the Word of God, and slowly but surely, our lives begin to line up with how God created us to interact, how God created us to engage, how God created us to walk in this fallen world, and we as people of God and as the people of God, corporately begin to push back what's dark in the world. This is your only hope, my only hope, our only hope.

Before I flush that out in light of Friday morning at 9:30, let me give you a quick word of warning that's also in the Scriptures. There are multiple warnings in the New Testament about how our hearts can grow hard. As this heart is beating, sealed with the Holy Spirit, eyes illuminated to the truth of God's Word as we read the Bible going, "That's me, and that's God interacting with guys like me." As we're fueled that way, there

can be acts of defiance, acts of obedience that begin to create a crust around our hearts. Where there was a lot of life early on, where there was a lot of blood flowing through our system, when we were in much greater spiritual health than maybe we'd consider ourselves now... The Bible is very clear that you can harden your heart.

In fact, in Hebrews 3, The Bible tells us, "Don't harden your heart. If you hear his voice, respond." That means be obedient to what you know. Don't let your heart get crusty. Don't go back to what you were. Don't do it. Here's what's so scary about this idea of drifting away from what created in us such life. You never know when you're drifting. How many of you have been to the beach, like the real one? Okay. If you've been to the beach, and you've actually gotten in the water, here's what you experienced. You left your towel and all your stuff there, and then you swam in the water, and then 5 or 10 or 15 minutes later, you looked back toward the shore, and you didn't recognize your stuff.

You started to kind of panic a little bit. Maybe somebody ganked your stuff while you were out swimming. Maybe your friends just left you. Then you look, and about 400 yards that way, you see your buddy, so then you have to go straight in and cut over, or you have to fight against the current. Unbeknownst to you, while you were playing in the water, you were drifting farther and farther away from where you came into the water. You see, when you drift, you don't know you're drifting. That's what makes it so scary. In each person in this room, there is indwelling sin. In each person in this room, there still is a propensity to wander, to drift, and we don't know it.

Wouldn't it be all of our testimonies that we've woken up and become, all of a sudden, aware of a situation or a part of our hearts or a way we're thinking or interacting with people that is surprising to us? Wouldn't it be all of our testimonies, mine included, that I never made a cognitive decision to treat this person this way, but I'm just kind of doing it. There was never a cognitive decision. "You know what? I'm not going to worry about those people. They can deal with it on their own." I never made that cognitive decision. I just woke up and was behaving that way. Do you know what that is? That's drift. I have allowed my heart to grow crusty, and it was unbeknownst to me.

Over and over and over again in my 20 years of seriously trying to pursue the Lord, I have woken up, and completely unbeknownst to me, found myself in places that are very dangerous to my soul. God, in his infinite grace toward us, gave us a solution for our blind spots. Let me read for you that solution. In Hebrews 3:13, after a long text in which the writer of the letter to the churches at Hebrews says, "Don't let your heart grow hardened. Don't drift. It has happened before. You saw Israel do it. Israel got to the other side of the Red Sea after God flexed miracle muscles like we hadn't seen. It starts to miss Egypt." God flexes and delivers them from slavery. They get to the other side, and they start pouting, wishing they were back in slavery.

You and I both know if we were God, we would just light everyone. There would just be a billion torches down there if you and I were God. God is patient with them but doesn't let them enter into his rest. The author of Hebrews says, "Don't be like Israel coming out of Egypt who hardened their hearts toward the Lord and didn't enter into his rest." Because sin is deceitful, because we're prone to drift, here's what we get in Hebrews 3:13. **"But exhort [urge, encourage, compel] one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."** Let me tell you why I love this.

Here's God's grace to you in your blind spots. Are you ready? More eyes. He put more eyes around you. We have to have a real frank conversation, because I don't know that a lot of you are going to like this. If the reality is there is indwelling sin within all of us, if the reality is all of us are not as far along as we think we are, if the reality is all of us are prone to drift and not be able to recognize that we're drifting, then all of us are in desperate need of walking in a humility where we are able to accept other people going, "Hey, you're drifting here a bit, bro," without operating in pride like you're the one guy who doesn't drift. There was a guy who didn't drift: Jesus. You're not him.

Listen, I need this. I'm not trying to be different from you or set myself apart. I need guys in my life to say, "Hey, you're drifting here, Matt. Hey, Matt, slowly but surely, you're kind of getting off target here, man. I don't know what's going on here. How are things at home? How are things with your wife? How are things going with your kids? How are you viewing ministry? How are you handling what appears to be external outward success? How are you walking?" I need that in my life. It's why the covenant community of faith is so unbelievably important and why if you just go to church and don't belong to one, you put yourself in harm's way.

We just finished our covenant-renewal process. In fact, our pastors spent almost all week on the phone calling anyone who renewed their covenant who put a concern or a question on their covenant. We did this in order to shepherd them. We called to just say, "Hey, let me answer that question for them. Let me just try to help you understand. Let me hear from you." We grew in it. I don't think we did the process perfectly, but we grew in it. It was our attempt to shepherd more faithfully the 10,000 people who are here. In a very real way, my heart was glad for the thousands of you who had questions and concerns and felt safe enough to voice them and allow us to make the call.

In fact, I personally called around 15 people this week. It was actually really fun for me, because people were like, "Nuh-uh."

"No, I'm serious. It's Matt. You were asking about... I just wanted to clarify. Let me help you with this."

"I still don't believe it's you."

"Well, I don't know. Come see me between services then, all right?"

I left several of you voicemails. We're calling in an attempt to shepherd. Why? Because we believe this. We believe membership matters, and the covenant community is God's grace on us to spot these blind spots. It's because we take seriously the call of God on our lives that we will be held accountable for how we shepherd you. For the vast majority of our covenant members who renewed, thank you, gracious. I will just lovingly say I was very disappointed in some of you not for your questions and concerns. This is always a place for you to voice your questions and concerns. Some of you bucked the process and sent emails in that I thought were disappointing if not outright shameful.

I thought to myself, "If you will talk to us that way as your pastors, I can't fathom how you talk to your family and how you talk to maybe some food server who is a little bit late with your food." I was very disappointed in some of you. Maybe you don't care. Maybe me being aggressive with you today is a reason why you're not interested in renewing. I've perpetually laid before you that when all is said and done, I'm interested in building the kingdom of God, and I'm interested in rightly stewarding what God has asked me to steward before him.

Although I take no pleasure in anybody going, "This is not the place for us. Let's go find another place," I also never take any of that personally and entrust you completely with the Lord. The renewal process was not about power and was not about getting information so we could track you, anything other than making sure we're being faithful before the Lord to do what we're supposed to do and believing that when all is said and done that what I'm talking about today is serious business.

Now let me go back to Friday and explain once again why new hearts are the hope of the world. When you're given a new heart sealed by the Holy Spirit, mind opened up to the truths of the Scripture, life that starts to slowly conform to God's design for how life should be played out within the community of faith, feeling empathy toward other people who are stuck in darkness, we begin to be a safe haven for anyone struggling. We begin to be a place where grace begins to eradicate rage. We even begin to be a place that is safe for those who are mentally ill.

What happened Friday in large part in sin was due to mental illness. You don't take a 223 to first graders without being mentally ill. How do new hearts sealed by the Holy Spirit with a renewed mind give us hope even concerning the mentally ill? A couple of ways. What happens when the people of God are being the people of God is there becomes a hard, fast, patient, safe place for moms and dads who have mentally ill

children, for the mentally ill themselves to come in and be welcomed into the body and not pushed to the fringes and marginalized like they are in society by in large.

The Christian family invites difficult people in because we are all difficult people before the Lord. We don't marginalize. We're able, when there are signs of trouble, violent signs, we're able to roll out and get help for the person, for the family, and not send the family out on their own to just deal with this kind of difficulty. We become a safe haven for the wayward, a safe haven for the disturbed, a safe haven for those who are struggling. We should catch it early and not late. Even where we catch it late, we minister and we walk. I had a great conversation last night after our service with a young woman who teaches school down in South Texas. It's a Christian school. She works with emotionally disturbed children.

In fact, one of her kids took a pair of scissors to one of her teachers across the hallway just a few months ago. She began to just kind of talk about how they're able to pray in the class, and they're able to just kind of talk through and share the gospel and let the idea of the forgiveness of God and the patience of God and the mercy of God work in their lives, and now she's actually beginning to see some of those emotionally disturbed kids minister to other little emotionally disturbed kids. She's starting to see the fruit of the gospel. Really why she cornered me was really to ask me questions about institutionalization, but as I began to ask about her story, it became apparent that even in this setting, the gospel is working.

The covenant community of faith becomes this safe haven for all sorts of broken people, even people who would be mentally disturbed and mentally ill. The great hope of the world is the gospel of Jesus. Nothing else will be able to legislate it. Nothing else will create safe havens for people who struggle. Nothing will be able to dissect, dissolve, and absorb the wrath and rage in human hearts, and nothing can bring about the peace and healing that will be necessary as this plays out again in the future. You and I push back what's dark in the world, believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, having lives that have been transformed by the gospel, so we live in a way that invites neighbors in, that engages.

It should never be the testimony of a believer in a Christ that the boy next door just seemed like a good kid. We had no idea. He seemed so normal. We're people who engage our neighbors. We're people who have them in our home. We're people who set the table. We're people who offer hope. It's what we do. We push back what's dark in the world. That's why the prophet Isaiah, God speaking through Isaiah about the coming of Jesus Christ, says, "**The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.**" A people wandering in darkness, the dawn was born.

The light of the gospel of Jesus Christ enters into the last 72 hours, and it offers us hope, hope not in taking guns out of people's hands. It's hope not in making this more difficult. It's hope that transformation can actually occur in the human heart, that real life transformation from the inside out can occur when we

gladly submit to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, the forgiver of our sin and lover of our souls. My hope would be that in this season where darkness is easier to see than maybe it normally is that you would find in your heart a gratitude toward the light of Christ and what he has offered to us in his life, death, and resurrection, and you might all the more be encouraged and exhorted to push back what is dark in the world and to live the light of Christ in your workplace, in your communities, in your schools, in your families, and that you might faithfully steward well the gospel message. Let me pray for us.

Father, I thank you for these men and women, again an opportunity just to come sit under your Word and (my hope is) be read by it, not to hear ideas, but hear truths that kind of rock us to our core. God, again we lay the men and women in Newtown, Connecticut at your feet. We just ask that even now as some of them are worshipping in churches, and some of them don't know what to do in this season, God, that you would just fall fresh on them, that, Holy Spirit, you would minister deeply in a situation and a scenario most of us can't fathom.

I pray that in the coming weeks and months as people process that, God, you might help us land solidly on your goodness and grace, and that you might embolden our gospel witness in the days, months, and years to come, God, that you might use our lives well to push back all that is dark and wrong in the world. We thank you that you have promised to come again, and in that second coming, end this once and for all, to end tears, end death, end rage, end all of this. We hold fast until that day in great expectation, praying, worshipping, and walking faithfully until you make all things new. It's through your beautiful name I pray, amen.

There is really only one way in which I think it would be appropriate to end our time together. That's in celebrating this great light, celebrating this great hope. There are men and women currently passing around the elements. We want to partake in the Lord's Supper. Let me kind of just frame the Lord's Supper like this. If you're a believer in Christ with a new heart, please enjoy this meal with us, all right. You are brothers and sisters. We're going to be hanging out for a long, long, long time, so let's celebrate the goodness and mercy of Christ among us.

Here's what I would ask though. If you're not a believer in Christ, you're just with us today for one reason or another, I am and the elders are unbelievably glad you're here, but we would ask that you would abstain. There is nothing magical about the bread. It's not going to forgive your sins. It's not going to give you right standing before God. We bought it at a store. There's nothing it's going to do for you spiritually. Now, if you want to partake in the elements as your first public confession that Christ has made your heart new, then let's celebrate together.

If you're not a believer, would you abstain as just a way to respect us? We've tried hard to create an environment that respects you, so if you would just let that pass, I promise you you won't be judged for that. Nobody's going to look down on you in any way, but just let us celebrate the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. We're praying that one day you would freely partake in this supper. We're not going to take it all together as one. In fact, when your heart is at a place where you feel free to enjoy what Christ has done for you on the cross, I would encourage you to do that. I also want to offer this up to you.

For some of you today, you've come in, and you can resonate real well with what I was talking about when I started to talk about really kind of a crust forming over our hearts, and where we were at one time really awake to the Holy Spirit in us, really awake to our conscience, really tender toward it, it has grown hard. We're not feeling angst over our sin anymore. We don't feel that vitality of our relationship with Christ. We aren't entering into the sorrow and loss of others. We're self-protecting. We're disconnecting. We don't have a hunger to see God in his Scriptures. There has been a real crust formed over our hearts.

Here momentarily, I'm going to pray for us. When I pray, there is going to be a group of men and women who come up here and stand. If you need to be prayed for today, if you just need to confess, "My heart is growing hard. I have some crust on my heart right now. I need God's help in breaking that up." Be honest. God already knows. He's not shocked. He knows what he purchased. How about for once you take a shot at not pretending. I've never understood why you'd rather pretend to be godly than actually be. The offer is for you to actually be, not pretend. I'm no fool.

I know some of you look like a really happily married couple right now, because you think that's what you're supposed to look like in church, but I know at your house, it's strife, loneliness, despair, and you want out. Stop it. Be honest. I know some of you are really battling with depression. Be honest. Quit pretending that you're not. I know for others of you this tragedy has really created a lot of doubt in you. Okay. Praise God. Deal with the doubt now. Don't bury it. Don't try to move on from it. Deal with it. Walk in it. Be honest about it. I want to give you that opportunity, to just lay your crusty heart before the Lord and ask him to break all of that out and let the Holy Spirit begin to once again pump vitality through the veins of your spiritual body. Let me pray for us, and then we'll enter into a time of worship and response.

Father, thank you for these men and women again. Bring vitality where it once was. I pray like my brother David that you would restore to us the joy of our salvation. For the men and women here in this room, God, that you would do a work that only you can do, that where there are hearts of stone, that you would grant hearts of flesh. Maybe those men and women need to come up also today and grab a hand and ask for what to do next. For those of us where a crust has begun to form around the softness of our hearts that we would sense the danger in that and we would run and seek help. We need you, Father. Help us. It's through your beautiful name I pray, amen.

Love you guys.

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