



Prayer (Part 4) – The Nations

Afshin Ziafat – January 24, 2016

Good morning! How's everybody doing? My name is Afshin Ziafat. It's a real name, I promise. It's a good Texan name. How many of you by chance remember me from back in the day when I used to preach every once in a while? Okay, some of you do. Good. I am the pastor of Providence Church in Frisco, Texas, a church The Village planted 10 years ago. I used to have a speaking ministry, so I would come into The Village every once in a while and fill in for Matt from time to time.

Five years ago, the Lord called my wife and me to jump into the body of Providence Church and called me to pastor that church. I haven't seen you in five years, so it's really good to be back. Let me just say the Lord is doing amazing things through Providence in Frisco, and I just thank you for your prayers for us. I just love the fact that my friendship with Matt, Michael, and Josh and so many of your staff, and then getting to preach here over the years really did prepare me for being called to lead that church. It's neat to be back after all these years to preach to you.

When Matt asked me to come and he gave me the heart for today, I had to jump on it. So I rearranged the preaching schedule at Providence. By the way, thank you, Fort Worth Campus, because your man Anthony Moore is preaching for me in Frisco so I could be here. I had to jump on this, because the message I'm bringing today is one I'm very passionate about and one that I feel is very timely in our day.

Today is all about God's heart for reaching the nations and, if you're a follower of Christ, what your role is in that mission. Before we talk about the nations, I want to start back home. I want to start in your heart. Honestly, I believe the foundation and the fuel that pushes us out and compels us to mission is a proper understanding of the gospel of grace. We have to start with the gospel.

That's why we've been reading through Ephesians, chapter 2. That's where I'm going to be today if you want to grab your Bible and turn to Ephesians 2. I have basically three points we're going to walk through: *remember*, *love*, and *go*. Let me explain what I mean there. We as a people must

remember the gospel. Again, it is a proper understanding of the gospel that is going to drive us to the nations.

Then if you have a proper understanding of the gospel, it would cause you to love others, especially those who don't deserve your love. If you really do love folks, you're going to step out of your comfort zone and maybe even risk to go and give them the greatest news they'll ever hear: the gospel. So let's start right here in Ephesians 2. When we say *gospel*, we mean the good news of Jesus Christ. In order to find out how good the good news is you have to really understand how bad the bad news was. In other words, apart from Christ, what was our situation? That's where Paul starts in Ephesians 2, verse 1.

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

He first says, "Okay, you need to remember that you were dead in your sin and trespasses." That's huge. The Bible teaches from the very beginning God came to Adam and Eve and said, "If you eat from this tree, you will die." The Bible says the wages of sin is death. The Scripture says in Romans that from that time, sin and death has spread like an epidemic to all mankind. Every one of us in this room, all mankind... We're born physically alive but spiritually flatlined. We don't even have a pulse. We're dead.

Why is that important? Because it doesn't say you're sick in your sin. A sick person can do something for himself, can go see a doctor, can go get medicine. A dead person can do nothing for himself. A dead person can't bring himself to life. Someone from the outside must resurrect him, and that's what's being driven home. Do you remember that you were dead?

There's no way you would have salvation except for the fact that the Holy Spirit quickened your heart and opened your eyes to understand the beauty of the gospel and respond in faith. It's owing to grace. It's not because you were so smart and you figured it out. The Bible says the things of God are only spiritually discerned, and we must be given the mind of Christ.

One of the things I always think of... I get to partner with a ministry and go into the Middle East every once in a while because I'm Iranian (that's where the name comes) and I speak Farsi. Iranian men and women who have come to faith in Christ and feel called to the ministry are sent to this neighboring country, and I'm one of the teachers who goes every once in a while to teach them how to preach and do evangelism, and they go back into Iran and plant underground churches.

Let me tell you when we know they've really gotten the gospel. Some of them (and you can't fault them for this) are coming to this training, but they're thinking, "Maybe this is the first step to me being able to get to the West and maybe even get to America." That's where everyone wants to get. When we know they've gotten the gospel is when they do this, and I've heard them say this: "Man, I can't go to America. I can't know what I know and not go back to my people in Iran."

They feel the weight of the stewardship of being given the knowledge of the gospel, and they say, "I can't go to America and get comfortable." Do we feel that weight in America? That it's by God's grace that you even know the truth and that you've been quickened to come to life and receive him. It goes on to say we were basically enslaved to our flesh, to carrying out the passions of our flesh. Get this. Even if you *did* have a spiritual pulse, you didn't have the faculty within you to ever respond to God.

You had a bent. We all do. Apart from Christ, our sin nature is bending us away from God. We all like sheep have gone astray. We've all turned to our own way. Jesus came to set us free, yes, but free from what? Not free so that you can go do whatever you want. Actually, he came to set you free *from* doing whatever you want. That's what we were enslaved to, but Jesus came to set us free to do what *he* wants, and that's where real life is found.

This is the one that's the grimmest. You have to get this. At the end of verse 3: "...[you] **were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.**" That doesn't mean we're wrathful people. It means children destined for the wrath of God. That's what the Bible says. Because we turned our own way... You are not born in a neutral stance with God. We all are born in sin as his enemies, in rebellion, and we flesh that out throughout our lives.

Christ didn't come into a neutral world. He came into a world where we were all in rebellion, and we were all condemned. In John 3 it says that Jesus did not come to condemn the world because the world was already condemned. Then it says at the end of John 3, "Whoever believes in Jesus has

everlasting life, and whoever does not believe in him does not have everlasting life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

Everybody in this world is in two camps. Either the wrath of God still remains on you or, because of God's grace, you have responded to his work through Jesus paying for your sins and have been removed from the wrath of God. Every one of us is born an enemy. Do we remember that? It changes the way you look at other people.

I'll never forget. I preached at a missions conference to a group of pastors right after Osama bin Laden had been assassinated. I said this, and I think you could hear a pin drop. I said, "Men, if the apostle Paul were with us today and he heard about Osama's shooting, he wouldn't have run down to the White House to high-five and hoot and holler and celebrate. He would have fallen on his face and said, 'Thank you, Jesus, that when I was Osama bin Laden you had mercy on me.'"

Do you know his story? He was on his way to Damascus to hunt down Christians. He was a terrorist, and God had mercy on him. I'm not condoning terrorism. I'm not condoning Al Qaeda or Osama or ISIS, but I am saying that when I remember I was an enemy of God before God had mercy on me, I forfeit the right to celebrate anyone's death apart from knowing Jesus. I can't do it. I was an enemy. Do you remember what you were before Christ? It goes on to say you were separated from him without hope.

Now look at verse 4 for the good news. Two words that are the two greatest words in this chapter. Verse 4: "**But God...**" If you don't have "but God," we are doomed. We're without hope. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love, even when we were dead in our sin and trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ." Verse 8: "By grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourself; it is a gift of God and not of works, lest any man should boast."

Here's the good news. You deserve wrath forever, but God has given a gift in his Son Jesus, and the Bible in Romans says he's our propitiation, which literally means a sacrifice that bears the wrath of God and thereby turns the wrath of God into the favor of God for anyone who puts their faith in Christ. When you believe in Jesus, truly believe in him, put your faith in him, his righteousness covers you, and you move from being an enemy of God to being a child of God. That is the gospel.

If you truly have been impacted by the gospel, it will compel you. It'll change the way you look at others. But we are a forgetful people, and we take our eyes off of the cross. In Philippians 2, Paul

says, "Count others more significant than yourself. Put the interests of others before your own." He knows none of us in our own flesh would ever do that. Put others before myself? No way. We all look out for number one: me.

He knows you'll never do that, so guess what he does? He points them to the cross. "Have this mind in you, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was equal with God didn't consider equality a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself and came in the form of a bondservant and became obedient to God all the way to the point of the death of the cross."

In other words, you will never put others before your own and not think about just yourself and your comfort and your safety and your own life, so put your eyes on the cross and remember what Jesus did for you. Though he is infinitely more significant than any one of us, he counted us more significant through the act of laying his life down for us. When you do remember that, you'll put others first.

I travel and speak some. My favorite airline is Southwest Airlines, the Peanuts flight. I don't know if you know this, but to my knowledge, Southwest Airlines is the only airline that doesn't give you a specific seat. You get a boarding group. It's A1-30, then 31-60 boards, then B1-30, then B-minus, then C-plus and C-minus. That's the way it works. The A-plus crew gets on first, and what do we do? If you're in the A-plus group, you're looking out for yourself.

No one ever says, "Man, you know what? I'm A1, but I want to go to the very back of the plane and sit by the bathroom." No one does that. We all sit where we do. We start filling in, first of all, the very front of the plane on the aisle, because I want to put my stuff here and make sure I have plenty of room and make sure I'm the first one off the plane.

That will go until maybe you get halfway down the plane. Then it's kind of too far, so then the windows will start to get filled, but never the middle seat. Men, that's kind of like the middle urinal. You always leave a space. Sorry, ladies. I mean, come on. Are you with me on that? You have to leave that space. No one takes the middle seat. You put your stuff in the middle seat, and you hope no one ever sits there. We're all looking out for ourselves when we're picking our seats.

By the time C-minus comes on, they're looking at a plane full of available middle seats. The way you get an A-plus ticket is you have to do something. You have to earn it. You have to either pay a little

extra or you have to for sure get on early and get your boarding pass, but if you skate into the airport late and go to the kiosk, you're destined for C-minus.

One time I was boarding Southwest Airlines on the C-minus crew and I came on and, again, available middle seats. There was a father and son in front of me, and the father had the audacity to ask the lady in the first row aisle, "Ma'am, do you mind sitting in the second row and let me sit here with my son?" She just went, "Uh!" Everyone in the first three rows was appalled, like, "How dare you, Mr. C-minus? Coming in late, and now you're telling us to move?" They didn't say all that, but their faces said all that. This person just moved on. He asked someone down the way.

I thought that was so interesting. This is the way my mind works. What if the circumstances by which that lady got her A-plus ticket were totally different? What if she had missed her previous flight, and she went and begged the powers that be at Southwest Airlines to let her on the next flight, and they said, "Sorry, ma'am, we're totally booked up. In fact, we're booked up for the rest of the day." Let's say she's in tears and begging them, "Please let me on. Please let me on."

Let's just say (I'm not saying this could happen, but just go with me) that somebody overhearing her comes over and says, "You know what? She can have my ticket." Let's say *that's* how she got that ticket. Now enter father and son. "Excuse me, ma'am. Do you mind sitting in the second row and letting me sit here with my son?" I'd be willing to bet that she'd pop off that seat and say, "It's yours." Why? Because she's on the plane. "I don't even deserve to be on the plane. I would have taken sitting with the luggage if I could have."

When your mind slips to forgetting the gospel of grace and thinking that somehow you have earned God's favor, then you think about yourself and entitlement sets in, but when you lift your eyes and put it on the cross, entitlement goes out the door, and you'll put others first. We have to remember the gospel. Remember who you were before Christ.

If you do, then you're going to truly love. I think that's what you get in the rest of it, verses 11-22. Basically, verses 11-22 is the fruit of the gospel infiltrating the hearts of men and women. Here's the fruit. Not only does Christ through his death and resurrection... When you put your faith in him, not only are you reconciled to God, but what should blow our minds is then God takes two people who normally would be hostile to each other, and in Christ he reconciles them.

This text is earth-shattering. Jew and Gentile? They were completely hostile to each other. It says

that Christ through his death has brought down the dividing wall of hostility. Friends, in the temple in Jerusalem, there actually was... First of all, there was the veil that separated the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, from all the people of God, and only the high priest could go once a year behind that veil to offer sacrifices.

Then there was a dividing wall that separated where the Jews could come and where the Gentiles could come. On that wall there was an inscription that said, "If any Gentile passes by here, they have only themselves to blame for their death." The Scripture is saying that when Jesus said, "It is finished," not only through his death did the veil get torn in two, and now we who are sinful, because of Christ's perfect blood paying for our sins, can have access into the presence of God...

Not only that, but that dividing wall of hostility comes down, because Jew and Gentile understand that it's only by God's grace that they have access to the Father. When they are reminded of that, they will let go of their hostility. It's amazing. "You were formally strangers and aliens, but now you are fellow citizens," he writes. Then it's almost like he stops himself. "No, it's more than that. You're members of the household of God." In other words, "You're family members."

Then he goes, "No, it's actually more than that. You together are actually making up the temple of God." Not only are Jew and Gentile, though they hated each other and were at war with each other... Not only are they reconciled, but they're made fellow citizens. They're made family members. In fact, they're bricks laying on top of each other, making up the temple of God, dependent on one another, intertwined. This is amazing.

When the world sees that, that's when they see Jesus. Jesus prayed in John 17 for the church, "That they would be one, just as you and I, Father, are one, so that the world will know that you sent me." When the world sees two people who normally ought to hate each other actually come and do life together, they see Jesus. If you get the gospel, you will know you're called to love even those who don't deserve your love.

I grew up a Muslim and became a Christian. My dad disowned me for being a Christian. Then my relationship with my dad was restored. He still wasn't happy that I was a Christian, but we started talking again. So we were kind of reconciled, but he was still not happy I was a Christian. We were at dinner once. This was many years ago. It's me and my Muslim father and my Muslim little brother who's 12 years younger than me. This was a long time ago when he was in high school.

My little brother had been jumped by a bunch of guys and gotten beaten up. My little brother just kind of announces at dinner to my dad and me that he and his buddies have already planned to retaliate with the ringleader and beat him up. We're like, "Whoa, you just announced that." So I look at my brother and I go, "Bro, let me just talk to your heart real quick. I'm not saying this would happen, but here are two options. Which would you rather have? One, you go beat him up and you maim him and get away with it. Two, you go forgive him." He just looked up at me.

I said, "Stay with me. You forgive him, and it totally transforms his life, and he would become the guy that at your beck and call he'd be there for you anytime to serve you for the rest of your life. I'm not saying that's going to happen. I just want to know which would you rather have?" My brother goes, "No, no, no. I know where you're going with that. No way. I'm not going to do that for someone who has hurt me."

My dad starts to tell me how in Islam it's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and he tells a story of a man who had two sons. One of his sons was murdered, and the other son went to him and said, "Can I get revenge?" and the man said, "Yeah, you can strike him one time. Allah will let you strike him one time." He strikes him with a deadly blow.

He's telling me this, and my heart is racing now, because I've been praying to invite my dad to something for many years. Finally, I look at my dad and say, "Dad, you know Mel Gibson just came out with a movie about Jesus?" He's like, "Yeah, I know. I heard." I go, "Do you want to go see that with me?" He goes, "Sure, why not?" He looks at my brother. "Do you want to go?" He's like, "Sure, why not?"

The next thing you know, I am in the car with my Muslim father and Muslim little brother driving to see *The Passion*. I'd seen it the week before. He says, "Okay, so what do I need to know?" I'm like, "Okay, phew." In 15 minutes to the movie theater I got him from the garden of Eden to the garden of Gethsemane as fast as I could. I go, "The story will pick up there, and you'll get the rest of it."

Now imagine the end of that movie when I'm sitting between my Muslim father and Muslim little brother after talking about forgiveness and revenge. Jesus stands up at the end of the movie and says, "You have heard it said 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemies,' but I say to you love your enemy and bless those who persecute you." I'm sitting between them and I'm just like, "Yes! That's the message, man."

That's the message that changes lives. That's the message the world desperately needs to hear. When you didn't deserve it, God forgave you. God loved you. While you were yet sinners, Christ died on the cross. Does your heart move with this love? Jesus goes on to say, "If you only love people who love you, what more do you do than the tax collector?"

Jesus is saying, "Look, if you're going to only love people who deserve your love, pat yourself on the back, because you've just come up to the level of the rest of the world." That's all you've done. You aren't doing anything uniquely Christian until you start loving people who don't deserve your love. Otherwise, every other religion says the other thing. "Love people who love you."

You're not exemplifying the gospel until you start forgiving someone who has hurt you. Not condoning but moving in love and forgiveness. *That's* the gospel. The Bible says if we've received that kind of love, then we are called and compelled to go with that kind of love out to others. This ought to be happening.

If you really have been gripped by the gospel, you will be moved to love people who don't deserve your love, and you're going to show that by becoming uncomfortable, getting out of your comfort zone, stepping out, risking to go to the nations, to people who are cut off, and bring the message of the gospel to them. Look at this in Ephesians 3. I love this. Ephesians 3 is where Paul starts talking about the mystery that the Gentiles are included in the people of God and that he has been commissioned to preach to them. Ephesians 3:6:

"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

Here's what he's saying there. The mystery is that the Gentiles, all nations, have access now to the people of God. When he uses the word *manifold*, that word means multifaceted, like a diamond that has many faces, and when the light shines on the diamond it sparkles. What's happening here is when the gospel is going out to the nations, the church, being a people made up of every tribe,

tongue, and nation coming together and becoming one, is going to sparkle God's glory to the rulers in the heavenlies. This is God's plan.

I say to you that the gospel is a sending gospel. If you understand what Christ has done for you, you will be compelled to go out and get uncomfortable, as I said, and cross divides of race, ethnicity, nationality, and even hatred to go out with this gospel. God comes to Abraham in Genesis 12, and he says, "Abraham, leave your father and leave your country." I get that, by the way. I had to let go of my dad to follow Christ.

"Leave your father, and I'm going to make you a great nation, and as many as the stars are, so will your descendants be." This is the greatest promise he makes to Abraham: "It's not going to be just about you and Israel. Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. You're going to be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth." That's Jesus, the ultimate descendant. Through him, his salvation is going to extend to all Gentiles.

Jesus comes in John 10, and he looks at the Jews of his day and says, "I am the Good Shepherd you've been longing for. I am the Good Shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep," and they're all nodding their heads. Then he says, "But I have sheep that are not of this fold, and I must draw them also so that there will be one flock and one shepherd. It's not just for you and your tribe. It's meant to go through you to reach *all* tribes."

In Acts 10, Peter is sitting on a rooftop, and he has a vision with this sheet coming down with all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean, and he hears the voice of the Lord saying, "Peter, take, kill, and eat." Being a good Jew, he says, "No, I will not touch what is common and unclean." God says to him, "Don't call what I have made common and unclean." We all need to hear that. Everyone created is created in the image of God. Every man and woman is created in the image of God.

Right then, there's a rap at the door. There's a reason for this vision. A Gentile man named Cornelius has had a vision of his own to call on Peter. Peter comes, and you talk about racial divide. A Jewish man walking into a Gentile man's home. That was a no-no. He preaches the gospel. They receive Christ and are baptized. Peter goes back to Jerusalem, and the good Christians at the base camp actually rebuke Peter for what he did. "How dare you, Peter, preach the gospel to the Gentiles?" Peter says, "If they receive the Holy Spirit in the same manner we did, who am I to stand in God's way?"

One of my favorite passages in Acts says, "The church fell silent, and they glorified God, because they understood that the gospel was not just for the Jew but for the Gentile." The mission started, and it spread all the way from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, to the ends of the earth to us today. We're the beneficiaries of this sending gospel. Do you know what the end of it is? Revelation 5. One day, from every tribe, tongue, and nation, there will be a throng gathered around the throne of God, declaring with one voice, "Salvation belongs to our God." That's where it's going.

As Christians, how are we to be on mission? We have to first look backward at the gospel and remember who we were, remember where we came from. Then you have to look forward to where this is all headed, and that's every tribe and tongue and nation surrounding the throne of God, declaring his praises. Then you have to look here and say, "Okay, then why am I here? Not just for me. I'm here for that mission, that every tribe, tongue, and nation will hear this good news that has transformed my life."

I'm telling you, guys, when you step out of your comfort zone and go to people who don't look like you, don't talk like you, don't eat the same stuff as you... When you cross divides of race or ethnicity or nationality or even divides of hatred, you are living out the gospel. The greatest divide isn't a racial one; the greatest divide is holy God and sinful man, yet our Savior stepped out of his comfort zone and crossed that divide into our broken world and died for us. If you get that gospel, it'll drive you out to cross divides to take this gospel.

Acts 1:8 says we're to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Let me tell you something I know I don't have to remind you in 2016. Guys, the ends of the earth have invaded our Jerusalem. Have you looked around? I heard a stat that every day 400 people are immigrating into the DFW area, 70 percent of them foreign born.

You don't have to get a plane ticket to go to the ends of the earth. For most of us, it's across the street. The gospel is saying to you, "Go. Knock on that door." "Are you new here? When did you move to America? Can I help you assimilate? Can I help you with buying groceries? Maybe you've never done that here. Setting up a bank account? Can I invite you over for dinner? What can I pray for you for?" That's what the gospel calls you to do.

I wonder if we've forgotten why we're even here, if we've lost our perspective. A couple of things have happened recently, one locally and one nationally, that have really brought this to the forefront for me. The local one, our good friends up the road in Farmersville, Texas... Some of the

good people of Farmersville, Texas, were up in arms because the Islamic Association of Collin County was building a Muslim cemetery there near Lake Lavon.

One pastor got up and said, "Look, if they do that, they're going to build an Islamic center, and if they do that, guess what? Muslims are going to flood to our area." He was saying that that's a bad thing. I'm just thinking, "What are you even doing? Why are you even there? Come on, Muslims. Come to our area so you can hear this great news."

One pastor was so brokenhearted over the way some people were responding...not everyone but some people...that he called me to come and speak at a town hall meeting a few months ago in Farmersville and share my story. I'll share a little bit of that later. The second one is at the national level, the Syrian refugee crisis a few months ago. I know this is a sensitive subject, and I know there's not a clear-cut answer for this.

I was actually called to go to Washington DC and be on a panel on Capitol Hill to give the Christian perspective on how we should respond to the Syrian refugee crisis. Obviously, with my background, they called me to come and share. All these guys were policy makers, and then there was me, pastor of Providence in Frisco. Like, "What am I going to say?" But I came with the Christian perspective.

Here's what I said: I'm an American, and I believe our government's call is to protect us, yeah. I want our government to protect us. I want our government to vet especially people who are coming from places where there is radical Muslim extremism. I do. I think we should thoroughly vet them. We can debate forever on whether or not our government is even able to do that, but I just want you to know if you're thinking, "Yeah, protection comes into my mind," I don't think you're crazy. I think that too.

But here's what I'm saying, and here's what I said then. As a Christian, safety cannot be our primary concern. We have an obligation and also we have a mission. The obligation is clear in Scripture that we are to take care of the sojourner, the foreigner, and especially the orphan and the widow among them. In Matthew 25, Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." They say, "When did we welcome you?" He said, "When you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

When I remember that I was separated from the people of God, as Ephesians 2 says, and God drew me near by his blood, I can't say, "Man, let's close the borders and no one come in, no one who's a Muslim." Some Christian leaders even hinted that maybe some Muslims should be deported. I'm just

telling you I can't go there as a Christian. Not only because of obligation but also (and I'm very passionate about this) because of opportunity.

I'm passionate about it because of my life. There is an opportunity we have. I was born in Houston. I'm an American by birth. When I was 2, my family moved to Iran where my family is from. When I was 6, the Islamic revolution hit that country, and we fled Iran to seek refuge in America. We came back to Houston, escaping that chaos, and we had no idea what we were getting into in America.

A few months after that, the Iran hostage crisis hit, and a group of Americans were held hostage in Iran for over a year. It was not easy to be from Iran and live in America. We had rocks thrown through our window in Houston because people knew we were from Iran. My parents' car's tires were slashed. Older high school kids threatened to beat up my brother and me. We were in the second and third grade.

I share this not to throw a pity party but just to say, "Hey, I get it. I lived it." Living in this country, being from a country where everyone is suspicious and there's even hatred toward that country. I get it, but I'm so thankful that one Christian lady understood this gospel. A tutor at Rummel Creek Elementary School in Houston, Texas, was assigned to me to teach me English. My parents asked her and paid her to meet with me after school and read me books.

This lady loved me, poured herself into me, taught me the English language, and in the second grade she said, "Afshin, I've been reading you all these books. Now I want to hand you the most important book you'll ever get in your life," and she handed me a small New Testament. She said, "You're not going to understand this book today, but promise me you'll read it when you're older." Folks, that's the New Testament I read 10 years later that brought me to faith in Jesus.

Today, I pastor a church that your church planted, and it all goes back not to an amazing preacher like Matt Chandler but to a second-grade tutor who said, "I'm going to love this guy even though my culture is going against." I'm thankful that when she looked at my family she didn't see threat but she saw opportunity. Do we?

We can't applaud missionaries who have the right, proper eternal perspective and risk their lives to go overseas to countries where they're hostile to the gospel... We can't applaud them, "Yeah, you're doing the right thing," and then when the mission field comes to our neighborhood, all of a sudden

we want to board up our houses and say, "No, no, you get out." You can't do that. Have we forgotten why we're here?

In John 17, Jesus says, praying for his disciples, "The world hates them. They don't belong to the world, but I do not pray, Father, that you take them out of the world. I pray that you keep them from the Evil One, that their faith won't be shaken when persecution hits. In fact, I send them into the world, and I pray not just for them but for those who will believe in me through their word." Jesus did not put safety as his primary concern. His life was not his primary concern. It was the mission God called him to.

When he was headed to Jerusalem, he said, "I'm going to suffer, die, and rise again," and Peter says, "No, no, this shall never happen to you," and he looks at Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan. You're not mindful of the things of God but the things of man." Peter, same thing. With tears in his eyes, in Acts 20, he tells the Ephesian elders, "I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the Holy Spirit, and I know that affliction and imprisonment wait me there."

Then he says, "But I do not count my life of any value or as precious to myself; only that I fulfill the course of the ministry that God has given me to preach the gospel to the Gentiles." You're saying, "There is something more valuable to me than my comfort and safety, and that's the mission God has given me to be his ambassador, to see his name spread to every nation." Safety for the Christian should not trump everything else.

Let me just be honest. Ninety-nine point nine percent of us are not going to have to lose our lives physically to fulfill this mission, but let me tell you what you *might* have to do: get uncomfortable, go knock on that door, and say, "I'd love to have you into my home for dinner. I'd love to get to know your culture. Can I pray for you?" Yeah, you might have to do that. I'm telling you you're called.

Second Corinthians 5 says everyone who has been reconciled to God in Christ Jesus is given the ministry of reconciliation. *Everyone*. Not just Matt and me and the elders; everyone who has been reconciled. Have you been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ? Raise your hand. If your hand is in the air, guess what? You have that ministry. Some of you, yeah, you're going to be called to go overseas full time, but *all* of you are called to go across the street, especially at a time when people are expecting us to maybe ostracize them because of ISIS, because of all the stuff going on.

When September 11 happened, a prominent evangelist sent an email that was pretty much, "Rah-rah America. Let's go get them. Let's blow these son of a guns out of this earth." I responded back to him. I am very patriotic. If this sounds unpatriotic to you, I'm sorry. I said, "Yeah, I want justice and I want Al Qaeda to be stopped, but please use your platform to tell Christians that they have a unique window right now, when Muslims in America are expecting you to ostracize them and hate them, to love them, and I'm telling you they'll be blown away. I am living example of that."

He picks up the phone and calls me, and I was heartbroken. He says, "Afshin, you need to wrap yourself in the American flag a little bit more." He said, "We're not ready for that message." Friends, I love America, but before I'm an American, I am a Christian. I'm telling you something, men. We'd better be ready for that message, because that's the message that saved our rear ends.

Five years ago when I preached here, I preached a message in the book of Jonah. Let me just close with that, because I think it'll sum it all up. I'm talking to your heart. I could sit here and talk about how to share your faith, how to go overseas, but I want to get at your heart and let the Holy Spirit guide you across the street.

In the book of Jonah, Jonah is called to go to Nineveh and preach the message God gave him. Amos, a contemporary of his, has already prophesied that the Assyrians, of which Nineveh is the capital, will one day conquer his people Israel. On top of that, we know from reliefs that have been uncovered that the Assyrians were gruesome people who would dismember their captives of war. They were the ISIS of the day.

You know what happens. Jonah says, "No way," and he runs. God appoints a fish, U-turns him, brings him back. He goes and preaches in Nineveh. They repent, and God doesn't destroy the city. Jonah is ticked off at God. He says, "I knew you would do this! I knew you were a gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. That's why I ran from this call." The very characteristics of God that saved him, he's now ticked off when it's extended to people he doesn't think should get it.

Salvation belongs to God, and I'm not going to draw the line and say, "No, only this far and no more," because I would be left out. The book ends with God saying to Jonah, "Should my heart not pity these 120,000 people in this great city, made in my image?" Question mark, by the way. End of book. You never get an answer from Jonah.

I think the reason is because the question goes to every one of us today who call ourselves Christians. In light of the gospel, in light of eternity, should our hearts not pity and beat with compassion for those who are separated and are enemies of God, just as we once were? How we respond to that I think is of critical importance. Let's bow our heads and pray.

Father, we love you. We thank you, God, for your Word. We thank you for Ephesians 2. We thank you for the message of the gospel that has saved us. I pray if there is anyone here who does not truly know you and have a saving relationship with you that they would come to a place of understanding that your call isn't for us to get better or fix ourselves up but to merely turn to you in faith and receive your gift.

Jesus, for all of us here who do know you, God, I'm thankful for a second-grade tutor who went against the culture and loved someone who culture was ostracizing. I pray that we would live out the gospel and cross that stream. Holy Spirit, may we not just be hearers of this word but doers of it. In Christ's name we pray, amen.