

Introduction

(Introductory video): "We quickly forget this glorious love displayed on the cross and begin to believe a lie that we are too sinful or unlovable or too broken or too messed up or completely helpless for God to love someone like us, and we live in despair and we are enslaved to fear. But sinner, do not listen to this lie that says, 'You are not worth dying for,' but rejoice in Christ, for He has revealed Himself as the One who has come to set the captives free. For freedom Christ has set us free, and only in Christ we are free indeed."

Good morning, everyone. How are we doing out there? Are we good? (Clapping) Alright, I like that. That's good. When I asked how everybody was doing in the first service, it did not go that well. We are starting today by sharing a Freedom Story that is in our congregation. We solicited and received many different Freedom Stories. We actually have probably more than we can use, at least to really give them full justice. If you have a Freedom Story, please still send them to us. We are wanting to find ways to highlight those.

Today, I want to introduce you to our first Freedom Story. This is Robert.

Pastor Steve: Robert, just tell us a little bit about yourself.

Robert: Good morning, family. I'm Robert. I've been a member at Houston Northwest Church for about a year and a half now.

Pastor Steve: Alright. So Robert, we're anxious to hear your story. Maybe just tell us a little bit about where did you come from, how did you begin to even hear about God and Jesus and that sort of thing.

Robert: Okay; I was born here in the United States and left when I was very, very young... probably about five years old... and grew up in Nigeria, just off the west coast of Africa. I grew up in a middle-class family. I knew about the Word because in school we had one course called Bible Knowledge, so I knew a little bit about the Bible studies. Also, there was a period in our lives where my father wanted to teach us to read better, so we started reading the Bible in the morning, but I never saw a Christian life modeled in front of me. As a matter of fact, even during that period of time, I distinctly remember a moment when I said, "I believe in God but I don't believe in Jesus."

Pastor Steve: Wow. So you were reading the Bible for education purposes...

Robert: Yes.

Pastor Steve: ... but it wasn't changing your heart.

Robert: No.

Pastor Steve: So, then what happened after that?

Robert: Well, when I came of age, about 18 or 19, my father wanted me to still stay in Nigeria, but all my friends... that peer pressure... They were like, "Hey, you're an American citizen. What are you doing here?"

Pastor Steve: So, you were born in America?

Robert: I was born in America. So my friends were like, "Go to America... what are you doing here?" They said, "Once the plane lands, you just tell them, 'I'm an American citizen' and they'll come take you, put you in a hotel..." (Laughter) "...give you money and tell you what to do with life."

Pastor Steve: And that's the way it works, right?

Robert: Not quite. So I snuck into my father's room, stole my passport, got on a plane... I was on my way to the United States because I really did believe that, but a friend of mine who was visiting from the United States said, "Uhh-uh, no; it doesn't quite work that way. Come and stay with us for a while." So that's how I came to America.

Pastor Steve: So when you got to the United States, did you become a Christian at that moment or did you have a time where you were away from God?

Robert: Oh no. I didn't become a Christian. You see the kind of son I was; I snuck into my father's room... so I knew nothing about the Scriptures; I was just coming here to make my fortune. I was all about just making a fortune and showing them, showing the whole world, that I would be successful. So, I made a lot of bad choices, and I met a friend that really led me down a very dark path... or I chose to go down a very dark path. I got involved in drugs... crack cocaine... made immoral choices and we started doing drugs. But the person that I was doing the drugs with at this point in time was somebody who had been in the church and had walked away, but he really knew a lot about the Word. We started looking into the Word. So first we had our prior conversations, but they were nothing like what later on took place. Towards the end of my association with him, all we would talk about was the Word. But once you to look in the Word, the Word starts to get into you. Once the Word started getting into me, I started pulling away from him. It became a little antagonistic because he wanted us to continue down that path, but the Word was taking ahold of my heart and taking ahold of me, and I wanted to go down another path.

Pastor Steve: Wow. So just to make sure I understood. Are you saying that the person that you were doing drugs with was unintentionally leading you closer to Christ?

Robert: That is accurate.

Pastor Steve: That's pretty amazing. (Laughter and clapping) So, the Word of God... you were talking about it... when you read it, it starts to get into your heart.

Robert: Yes.

Pastor Steve: So then how did God deliver you? How did He bring you out of that?

Robert: Well, the choices... I had lost my job, lost the apartment I was in because of the choices that I had been making, but I was still in the Word and I had to go into a motel room. What I would do in this motel is I would take the funds that I had on myself and I would pay the motel room in advance. Because of my addiction, I couldn't have any cash on me. My friend and I, the relationship now became antagonistic. It became strained because he wanted me to stay in that world. One night he comes... it was quite late at night, and he comes and he knocks on the door and says, "Hey; let's go do drugs." I was like, "I don't even have any money to do drugs, but I paid my motel room in advance." He was like, "Go get the money from the motel room manager. It's your money; you're entitled to it." So I did. After that binge....

Pastor Steve: So you guys took the last little bit of money you had, and you blew it all on drugs.

Robert: Yes. I blew it and I'm in a motel and I didn't know what to do, so I got down on my knees and I prayed. I think what best describes the story for me is Psalms 18; it describes the very poor place I was. Psalms 18:6: David says, and I basically said the same thing: *"In my distress..."* at that time, *"...I called to the Lord. I cried to my God for help. From His temple He heard my voice; my cry came before Him, into*

His ears. The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountain shook; they trembled because He was angry."

Pastor Steve: Wow. And did God hear you?

Robert: He sure did. In verse 16 is exactly what took place: *"He reached down from on high and took hold of me; He drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes who were too strong for me."*

Pastor Steve: Wow; amen. (Clapping) So God delivered you in that moment. What changed?

Robert: Well, immediately I got down on my knees; I just cried out to the Lord and I prayed. The next day I got a phone call. The person who I used to do drugs with, died the next day. He had an aneurysm in his brain and he just dropped dead. Then I started to understand more clearly how special I was to God and the Scriptures that I had been reading at that point in time. I heard preaching for the first time. I'd never heard somebody just preach. It was like I knew about the Word, but I had never heard preaching take place and I heard a cassette tape where a preacher was preaching. Before, it was just like I knew the notes on a piano... you know how you hear a key... and then when I heard preaching it was like a whole symphony. I've never been the same ever since.

Pastor Steve: Mmmm. Praise God. Praise God. So Robert, if you could just tell people out here... Here's the big thing, the thing that I hope that you would know that I learned. What would you say?

Robert: That the Word of God is true... that the Word of God is true. This story that you hear that I'm talking about, it's not a story about me; it's a story of how I came to believe in The Story. My name is Kufre Robert Udolt, and this is my Freedom Story.

Pastor Steve: Amen; alright! (Clapping)

Well, we can go home now. (Laughter) I don't know about you but... we quote verses all the time like Romans 5:8: *"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* I want you to think about the fact that God used Robert's drug buddy to lead him to discuss and examine the Word of God. God will do whatever He has to do to get your attention. We say that, right? But we think, "Well, can God do that?" Oh, yeah. He can do whatever He wants to do. If He has to get you, He will find you. So we're going to look at Galatians chapter 2. I have a two-hour sermon to preach and only about 20 minutes to do it, so I'm going to talk really fast if you'll listen fast. (Laughter) I want to invite you to open up to Galatians 2, and we're going to see how this freedom that Robert experienced, you can experience as well, and what it does... how it changes a church. Right? Because whenever people begin to know and experience this freedom, it completely changes them. A God that will pursue you, a God that will chase after you... if there is a God that will chase after you and a God that will pursue you, how will He change then a group of people who begin to feel that way? Right? How will He change an entire church? How will a group of people begin to know, "Man, this is real." So let's read Galatians chapter 2 together, and let's just jump in and see what God wants to do in us.

So, Paul is the one writing this. This is what he says. He's heard the Gospel, God has changed him and saved him, so what happens? Chapter 2: *"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though*

privately before those who seemed influential) the Gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain." So what is he saying there? Let me just explain real quick. He had been preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, but then he wanted to make sure that what he was preaching and what the Apostles were preaching was the same because he had received his revelation directly from Jesus. He wanted to make sure that they were preaching the right Gospel. That seems odd, but he was like, "I heard this straight from the mouth of Jesus Christ. I want to make sure that they are preaching the same thing." So, verse 3: "But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God chose no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the Gospel to the circumcised (for He who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"

Let's pray. "Heavenly Father, your Word is truth. It is the Word that comes directly from your mouth, Lord. You spoke through this tool to save Robert. You have saved countless others, and Lord today we pray that You save and change us. Rescue our hearts. Deliver us. And Lord we pray this in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen."

1. Unity of Doctrine. (v. 4)

God pursues and God rescues. You see, the centerpiece that we have been discussing is the Gospel of grace. You can do nothing to earn God's favor. You are never good enough to get God's favor, yet He gives it anyway. God pours out that grace on you and what happens? It changes you. So once you are changed, the Gospel of grace becomes the stack pole around which everything else is built. It becomes the capstone of the arch. You take out the stack pole... you take out the capstone... the entire bonfire and the entire arch collapses. It is at the very center of the Church and Paul knew this. He knew that if the Apostles were preaching a gospel different than what he was preaching, then there was a completely different reality out in Jerusalem. That is why he went there in the first place. He wanted to "...make sure the Gospel that I am preaching... is this also the same Gospel that's being preached to the Jews." In other words, is it Gospel which is "...grace by faith alone... not by works, lest no man should boast." Is it God saving only through grace? He got there and he found out the answer was "Yes."

Why does that matter? Well, I want us to understand immediately. First of all, the reason that it matters is because Paul knew that the Gospel brings into the Church a unity of doctrine. Look at verse 4. It says in verse 4, "Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we

have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—... "We talked about these guys last week. These are the Judaizers. They show up and they say this: "Look. It's great that you have this Gospel that you are proclaiming, that you're saved by grace through faith alone, but here's the deal. You have to do these religious activities in order to be in right standing before God." Paul was pushing back against that saying, "No. That's not the way that it works. The way that it works is you're saved only by grace. That's it. It doesn't matter how religious I am. God does the saving. That is it. End of story. Period." Now, if that Gospel is at the center of a church, it will unite us in doctrine. Let me explain.

I know some of you here in this room are like, "How does that unite? I mean, there are 30,000.... This is true, by the way... there are 30,000 different Christian denominations in the world. You're going, "You're telling me this brings unity? This does not sound like unity." Right? I bet if we started here and worked our way all the way across the room, if we all started saying the individual things that we believe that the Scripture teaches, there would also be a pretty wide diversity of opinion among us. So you think, "How does it bring unity in doctrine?" Well, let me tell you. If you go to our Discover Class here in a couple of weeks, you will hear me say the same phrase. It's attributed to Saint Augustine. This is what the phrase is: "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity." What does that mean? It means there are some things that are nonnegotiable at our church, and you have to believe them. If you don't believe them, you can come here... we're glad that you're here... but you do not want to be a member because you will be miserable. Closed-hand issue for us: The Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you think that you are saved by any other power, you cannot be a member of our church. Now some people are like, "Well that's judgmental and intolerant." Yes, it is; you're right. Because only the Gospel is the thing that is saving, and you are not a Christian if you believe in any other gospel. I didn't say that. Paul said it. He went and he talked to Peter, James, and John. They said the same thing. It's recorded here in Scripture. That is a nonnegotiable. Right? It unifies us in doctrine. Now, there are nonessentials that we can discuss. There are all kinds of differing opinions about all sorts of things. You know, "post-trib-pre-trib"... we can talk about all that. You know, some people are "young earth"... some people "old earth." Listen. We can debate all those kinds of things, but the Gospel is at the center; it is not negotiable, and it unites us in doctrine. The problem is that people, like the Judaizers, keep trying to layer things on top of it. Right?

I grew up Southern Baptist, and I was like "Shiite" Baptist which is "all-the-way" Baptist. You know, "Hell is hot and you're probably going..." That whole kind of deal. Right? (Laughter) We joked at our church that we were confused as kids because we lived in this constant tension, "God loves you and He's probably going to send you to hell..." It was a weird kind of thing. Some of you will get that later at lunch; it's okay. Listen. This is funny. Some of you don't know this. I'm going to blow some of your minds right now. This is a Southern Baptist Church. Some of you are like "(gasping)... You tricked me." Right? Here's the thing. We joke and we tell people, "We're Southern Baptist; we're just not angry about it. Okay?" (Laughter) Here's the thing. Listen. At our church that I grew up in, Southern Baptists have a proud history of adding to the Gospel. I mean, we did it my whole life. It was like... cards, dancing, alcohol... "Can you preach from any Bible other than the King James? Is the hymnal inspired by the Word of God?" All these kinds of different things that we debated, and do you know what was funny? It was that I realized that people all around town... do you know what they knew our church by? They knew our church based on what we were against and not what we were for. Do you know what we are for? We're for the Gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ. We're for the cross and that the cross was enough and that there is nothing else that needs to be done to bring us into righteous and complete and full relationship with God. That's what we're for. The problem is that when you start with what you're against, you're known as a bunch of fussy, buttoned up, pickling-in-your-own-sour-juices Christians. (Laughter) Who wants to do that? Nobody. I don't want to be known by what we are against. I want to be known by what we're for, and we're for the grace of Christ.

Now listen. The Judaizers came in and they said, "You can't be that free. That's too free." Now we don't even know why they thought that. Some of you might feel that way about our church. "Man, they just seem like they're way too happy." We have convinced ourselves, in many churches, that you have to go through hell to get heaven. Listen to me. That is nowhere in this Book. (Holding up the Bible.) Do you know what this Book says? "Hell has been killed through the cross of Jesus Christ. It has been defeated." (Clapping) You don't have to go through hell to get heaven because Jesus already went through hell to bring you into heaven. Now some of you are sitting out there probably going, "Wait a minute; I thought this whole thing was about Jesus. You mean people in Christian churches, they argue about all this?" I'm sorry to say that we have. But do you know what? We're not going to do that anymore because the Gospel will be our centerpiece, and it will be thing that we will be known for: The Gospel of grace. When we start with the things that we are against, that leads to legalism. Now there is a difference. There is obedience and I'll talk about that in a moment, but before we get there, we have to realize that we have to start with what we're for. And what we're for is grace, and grace comes only from God and only from the cross. It leads to incredible freedom. You can be free because you can't earn your salvation... God gave it to you. The day that you finally start to realize, "I never did walk alone; God delivered me in the middle of whatever I was in. God was walking with me. He brought me to freedom. He did it all." The day that you finally get that and you go, "I'll never be good enough..." finally you just say, "Ohh...I can ENJOY being a Christian." Some of you have made being a Christian miserable your whole life. You're bitter about being a Christian because you don't understand grace... because you don't understand that God has done it all.

I don't know if you've ever read any books by Steve Brown, but he has a great quote. Listen to this: "You ought to live your life..." (He's talking to Christians) "You ought to live your life with such freedom and joy that uptight Christians question your salvation." (Laughter) I love that. "Is this guy really saved? I mean, he is way too happy." Now I know... some of you are sitting out there right now going, "Oh my gosh... he's talking about freedom again." You know, it's going to be mass chaos pretty soon. People are going to go, "Well, I don't even need to go to church, because it's complete freedom... and I can be completely immoral and do whatever I want to. I don't have to tell the truth anymore..." I mean, all this kind of stuff. "Dogs and cats living together... mass hysteria... because there is no boundary." That's what you're thinking. But listen... Legalism is when we start with what we're against. Obedience is when we start with what we're for, and then we live our life as a reaction to that. You see, that's obedience. That makes you happy. Do you want to know what freedom really is? Freedom is not following a set of rules. Freedom is walking in the life that God created you to walk in. That is freedom. And once I begin to walk in that... that is completely and totally fun. You go, "Man, I love the life that I have." So when we talk about worship and kindness and faithfulness and temperance and wisdom and loving our neighbors as ourself... we do those things not because they are rules for us to live by but because they are responses to the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. That's where we start.

2. Unity of Class. (v. 10)

So, I want us to understand first that we start with the Gospel, and it will bring unity into our church in doctrine because we'll all start at the same place. "I was saved by grace through faith." So Paul says, "Is this what you guys believe?" And they say "Yeah, it is." It will bring unity of doctrine. Do you know what other kind of unity it brings? It brings a unity of class. Let me explain. Look at verse 10: "*Only they...*" (that's Peter, James, and John) "*...they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.*" Now why does the poor matter? ...Because there was a strain of people who pushed the poor out of churches and synagogues. Why would they do that? They would do that because they believed that if you were poor then God was punishing you because you didn't have enough money, and so therefore you weren't really

received by God and you needed to be out. But the Christian faith was different. They said this: "If everyone is saved by grace..." That means that if I have a lot of money, that's been given to me by grace; if I have no money, that's been given to me by grace. Everything that I have has been given to me by grace; therefore, I must receive every person, regardless of how much money they have." So therefore, if you go back and you read the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 15:11: *"Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land.'" God cares about the poor. Isaiah 10:1-2: "Whoa to those who decree iniquitous decrees and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil and that they may make the fatherless their prey!" In other words, God says, "You will not oppress people who don't have a voice and who are in need in your community..." because God says, "I love them; I care for them." "The spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus said, "because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor." Luke 14:13: "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind..." From the very beginning, God has always cared about the poor. Why? You go talk to someone who is in financial need; you will find someone who is leaning on God. What's funny is that some of us who have more than enough financial provision, we begin to think that we have something good inside of us, so we don't need to lean on God for provision. Wrong. It's not true but we start to trick ourselves, and we begin to believe that actually is the case. This is why last year Houston Northwest gave about \$50,000 in assistance to people through our Benevolence Ministry, to help feed families and to help give clothing and assistance to families. Why would we do that? Because we believe that God, in Jesus Christ, loves and cares about the poor. Now, before you think that this is only a social ministry, listen to this. Matthew 5:3: Jesus says this, in the very first beatitude... the very first one; listen: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."* Blessed are the poor in spirit. The poor in spirit are those who know that everything that they have, spiritually speaking, has come from God because we are spiritually bankrupt; we have nothing. I can bring nothing to God. God blesses me just because He can bless me. He just does it and once I realize that my salvation was just given as a free gift of God... Do you know what I begin to realize? My education, my position in life, my job, my skills... all of those things were also given to me graciously by the hand of God... all of it. Once you realize that you are poor in spirit and that every single thing that you have has been given to you by God, do you know what you stop doing? You stop judging people who have less than you and looking down on them. Too long have people that have too much look down on those who have too little and believe that they are somehow morally or spiritually superior to those who have too little, and the Gospel says, "Uhhh-uhh... That ain't the way it works." The Gospel instead says this: "Welcome the poor."*

Whenever I was a young man, I was a youth pastor. I was 24 years old. We were going to take our youth workers on a retreat and had some really affluent youth workers, and I had some youth workers who came from much more simple backgrounds, and they didn't have near as much. I started describing this to one of those affluent youth workers, one of those church members, and he said to me, "Wait a minute, Steve. Are you trying to tell me that you want us to be friends with these guys, because we are never going to be friends with those people." You know, I was 24, and that guy was about 45... I was young and dumb and I didn't say what I should have said, but I'm going to say it right now: "If you refuse to be friends with the poor, then you don't understand grace. And if you refuse to be friends with the poor, you don't need to be here because this church will be a friend to the poor, and this church will always welcome in people because we understand that those who have less are no better than those who have more. They are simply receiving and understanding dependency and God's grace in a different way." That's it.

The Son of God had dinner with the uneducated and the broke masses because He understood their needs. Cultural elitism may have had some benefits in some other institutions, but it is not the Church of

the New Testament, and it will not take place here. This was a problem in the Church in Jerusalem. Look. Certain religions have their castes, economics has its classes, but there is now no distinction in Christ Jesus; all are welcome and loved at the table of God.

3. Unity of Race. (v. 12)

But then he goes on. He gets to verse 12. He says, "Wait; it's not just about the poor." If you look at verse 11, he says, "*When Cephas...*" (that's Greek for Rock, that's Peter) "*...when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face...*" Paul and Peter got in a fight. I mean, you talk about theological grudge match...Right? It's the two heavy hitters... Boom; they're arguing. "*...I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.*" What's he saying? He was eating with the Gentiles, and then the Jews came in... the Jews who believed that you had to be circumcised and do the certain religious activities, and he stopped eating with the Gentiles. It was a subtle form of racism in the early Church. It wasn't like, "Oh, those Gentiles are bad." It was just, "I'm just going to stop visiting with them and stop talking to them. I'm not going to hang out with them anymore." And Paul comes and he calls him out on it, in front of everybody. And he says, "If grace is real, then it doesn't matter what color you are. Grace is for everyone." And do you know what Peter did? He said, "You're right." He apologized and he corrected his behavior. Now why does that matter in the Church? Because the Church is not only about a unity of doctrine and a unity of economic class, but the Church is also about unity of race.

I have shared with you guys that Houston is going through all kinds of racial changes right now. Rice University's Kinder Institute has been studying the demographics of Houston for 37 years running, and they've been doing some interesting discoveries about this. This is what they now say... are you ready for this? They say, "The future of race in America will be worked out first in Houston." Wow. The future of race in America will be first worked out in Houston. Why? ...Because it's now the most diverse city in the United States. I don't know if I've shared this with you guys... did you know that in the next 20 years they project that 3.5 million people will move to Houston, Texas? And you thought traffic was bad now, right? (Laughter) Sorry guys. And guess what? The majority of those people that are moving here are not white. Our city is only going to become more and more and more diverse. Now, you answer me this question: "If our city is on the front edge of racial diversity in the United States, and the future of it is going to be worked out here, what institution within this city should be on the front edge of working out racial harmony?" It ought to be the Church of Jesus Christ because we have the Gospel and we understand that. Right? So we need to be on the front edge of that. Now this is the thing. I know some of you right now you're going, "Come on... Preach it. I want to hear that." But this is the thing that's funny. It's that we love to talk about it in here, but then when we have to work it out, that's when stuff gets awkward. Right?

I've shared with you guys that I was raised in a community that was almost totally white. Our racial motto basically in our world was, "Just kind of keep to your own kind." It was not that we were really angry at people that were a different color than us; we just didn't really talk to them. Everybody did their own thing and stayed to themselves. I don't think that there's going to be segregation in heaven. I think we're going to all be together. Right? So, if that's the way it's going to be in heaven, then I think the Church ought to be on the front edge of incarnating that today. So that means that there's going to be a lot of awkwardness as we figure this out. Do you know why we don't work this out now? Because we're afraid; we don't know what to do.

The very first day that my kids started at school here when we moved to Houston, the first friend that my youngest son made was an African American boy. It's his best friend still, right now, and his name is Zander. And Zander's parents have come over to our house, and I was just like, you know, they're believers and I started talking to them. I said, "Look; I am ignorant about race in America. I know that I am. Will you just teach me?" I think they were like, "You are a crazy white boy..." (Laughter) They're like, "What?" I was just confessing things to them about my ignorance, and I said, "I want to know this." My neighbors are from Vietnam. I started asking them all kinds of nutty questions. I think they don't want to talk to me anymore, I think, because I am just asking all these questions, but this is the point. I think that in the Church we have to be willing to ask the uncomfortable questions if we're going to get past saying that racial harmony is a good thing and begin actually experiencing racial harmony. We have to actually eat dinner with people that look different than us, and we have to ask questions and say, "This is probably a really dumb question, but it's coming from a really good place. Will you please educate me?" Listen. I will probably say some pretty culturally and racially insensitive things... not because I'm trying to. I'm just dumb. You know? We're trying to do that in order to be the people that God has asked us to be. I want to see the curse of racism broken first in our city, not in some university or some school but first in the Church of Jesus Christ. Not because it's a politically correct issue, not because it's cool in the 21st century, but because it is a Gospel issue... because the Gospel of grace is for all people, and that needs to happen right here and it needs to start right now. Now this is the crazy thing. That means that we need to change some of the things in our hearts. Right? Those of us who are white, there's this thing out there in racial dialogue that's called "white privilege." We don't even know what that is. Okay. Some of my friends who are not white are laughing. Do you want to know what "white privilege" is? It means that life goes easier for you in a lot of respects just because you're white, and we don't even know it. We're like, "Well I've had to overcome adversity." We have but there are certain things that you've never had to experience. Do you know what we need to do? We need to recognize that and say, "Hey, you know what? I have. I've had an easier life in a lot of ways, and I hope that you can help me learn about that." Those of us that are in ethnic minorities or racial minorities, do you know what I need you to do? I need to invite you please, do not embrace or buy into the "oppressor versus the oppressed" narrative that is out there. Because the people in this room literally have no desire to be an oppressor. Do you know what they want to do? They want to be your brother and sister in Christ. Abandon the "oppressor versus the oppressed" narrative and embrace the "brother and sister in Christ" narrative. If we will recognize those things, those of us that are white and those of us that are not white will recognize those other things, do you know what we can do? We can start to make progress first in the Church of Jesus Christ ahead of every other institution. That's what I think healing and wholeness begins to look like in the Gospel. It's saying, "There has been a problem, but Jesus' blood can redeem it." That's why, when Paul says, "There is no male nor female, there is no Greek nor barbarian, there is no slave nor free..." that's what he is getting at. He is saying this, "At the foot of the cross, we are all equal." That's a beautiful truth.

4. Unity of Action. (v. 14)

So then he gets down... I feel like I've scared you guys a little bit just now but it's alright. Hang with me. (Clapping) He gets down to the end of it, and this is what he then says. He says in verse 14, "*But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'*" Listen. This is where the unity comes. It's unity of doctrine, right? It's unity of class; it doesn't matter how much money you've made. It's unity of race. We say, "Yeah, we're not going to all look the same in all these ways, but we're going to live as family." But the last one is unity of practice. The word that Paul uses there, he says they were not walking in the way of the Gospel, when he says that they were not "in step"

with the truth of the Gospel. The Greek word there is "orthopodeo". What is that? "Ortho" means straight. You go to the orthodontist, what are they going to do? Make your teeth straight. You hear about theological orthodoxy. What is that? That is theology that is straight. "Orthopodeo..." What is "podeo"? When you go to the podiatrist, what doctor are you at? You're at the foot doctor, right? He says, "Their conduct was not "straight-walking" in grace. They weren't walking straight in grace. Do you know what they were doing? They were saying, "Well, I believe in grace, but then I want to add some stuff to it." Paul also uses a word that Jesus liked to use... the word "hypocrite." Now, we love to throw that word "hypocrite" around. Right? People say it all the time. "I'm not going to church because church is just full of a bunch of hypocrites." What do they mean when they say "hypocrite?" When they use it like that, this is what they're saying: "They say that they're holy, but they're really no better or no different than me. These are people that say they are holy but they're really not. The literal meaning of "hypocrite" is, "You are a play actor; you're holding up your mask pretending to be something you're not." But... that is not the way that Paul is using "hypocrite." How is he using "hypocrite?" He is saying there's another kind of hypocrite; not the person who pretends that they are holy and they're really not. This is the person who says, "Oh yeah, you're saved completely by grace," and then once you get them in, you start adding all this religious requirement on top of them. We are not going to do that. We're going to say, "Once we understand salvation by grace, we're going to walk in that grace; and as we walk in that grace, do you know what's going to happen? It's going to have a ripple effect on every single area of our life. This goes back to obedience instead of legalism. We're going to walk straight in grace, and when we do that then, then we can say crazy things like, 'Hey, you know what? God is not concerned with your religious track record. God is not concerned about your morality and it's past. God is concerned with, have you received the grace of his Son Jesus?' And once you've understood that you cannot be saved by your own merit, that you can never earn it, then are you responding in like kind to that?" Because once you understand that you were under judgement and you deserved to be squashed by God's justice... once that hits you, then you go, "Whoa. I need to live completely differently. I want to now walk right, straight in line with all that grace." Do you think that would change a church? Do you think that would light a church on fire? I want you to imagine a church that begins to fully and completely understand the grace of Jesus Christ, and then they start to walk in it... They walk in it... "Orthopodeo"—right down the middle. We're going to walk right in middle of this grace. We're going to experience the freedom of God. We're not going to put a bunch of religious requirements on top of people. We're going to let the Holy Spirit to start to convict and change lives because we believe that God's Word is enough. We're going to say, "At the cross, we've all been saved, and it's not about doing other religious stuff. It's about letting the cross of Jesus seep into you and, once you get that, walking in that grace and seeing how God would change your life." What do you think that would do to a church? I think it would set it on fire.

So this is where we need to start today. Some of us need to repent. We need to start saying, "Wow; I've been a Judaizer. I've been forcing other people to be religious instead of responding and saying 'yes' to grace." Do you know what others of us need to do? Others of us need to say, "I have never once actually said 'Yes' to the Gospel of grace. Do you know what I've been doing? I've been miserable; I've been bitter. I've been angry because I've been trying to keep rules apart from the grace of God." You need to receive the cross. Jesus died for you so that it's not about rules. Jesus died for you to change your heart and then you would live a life of obedience... not legalism. Other of us today... we need to repent of something else. Maybe we've had racial hatred in our heart. Others of us maybe we've looked down on those who are less fortunate than us. Maybe we've attempted to cause division in doctrine because we've believed that, for whatever reason, grace was not enough. But today is the day where we put all that behind us and we lay it all behind and we say, "Wow. I'm going to start right here at the cross and let everything run out from there."

So today, I challenge our church to allow the cross of Jesus Christ and its grace to bring unity to us: unity in race, unity in class, unity in doctrine, and unity in practice; not uniformity. We will not all look the same. We will not all talk the same, but we will now be united by one heartbeat and that is the one of Jesus Christ. So let's start there and let God set our church on fire for his name and for his glory in our city. Amen and amen.

Let's pray. (Clapping) "Lord Jesus, You alone are supreme. Lord Jesus, You alone save. Lord Jesus, You are the One who gives us everything that we need. God, You saved us through your Son not our activities. God, You are the One who brings unity, not because of some clever program that we can begin but, Lord, because You save us all. God, the day that we can begin to ask the questions that need to be asked, have the conversations that need to be had, Lord... the day that we begin to trust in You and your saving power... Lord, on that day, that's the day. That's the day that You change us. Lord God, please change us. We don't want to be the same. God, we don't want to be like every other church. We want to be a church filled with your Holy Spirit. We want to be a church that is unified that says, 'Yes.' God, we want to know your grace, and we want to let that grace change us. It scares some of us. We hear that and we go, 'Whoa; that feels a little radical; that feels like, if I start walking in that, people are going to be kind of freaking out.' Father, I pray that You would give us the courage to walk right down the middle of the grace. Father, let us be the people that might shock other believers into walking in the middle of that. God, we love You. Amen."