

Introduction

This is a little bittersweet for me. For those of you who don't know, I actually was Jay's youth pastor... just a couple of years ago... (Laughter) ...so it's a bittersweet moment for me, but I'm grateful for the things that they have done and the way that they have served this church. I'm grateful for them. I look forward to hearing great things about what the Lord does with them in the days ahead. Just so you know, people are asking... What we'll do is we'll have a reception next week, and then we'll come before the church and we'll give you our plan as we move forward in searching for a new children's pastor.

Today is a different sort of day. For those of you who are maybe new to our church, you're checking our church out, or you're visiting... most Sundays I would stand up here and I would open up the Bible, and I would spend about 30 minutes walking through one passage of Scripture, explaining what that passage of Scripture has to do with our lives here today in the 21st century. That is not what we're going to do today. Twice a year I stand before the congregation, and we have a time to talk about our plan to move forward as a church, to do what God has called us to do in the city. Oftentimes we'll celebrate things that God has done. Other times we'll talk about the direction that we are headed. We call those Vision Sundays. This is not some sort of vision where I go up on a mountain and get some kind of picture that comes into my brain. This is vision where we are praying; we are asking the Lord to give us clarity. The pastors and the elders of the church are doing that, in conversation with many leaders of ministries across the church, and we do that to share with you so that you'll know where our church is headed. So that is what is going to happen today, and I look forward to it. I just want to pray right now, and I want to ask God to just be clear with us and let me speak clearly and ask you to hear clearly. Then we'll move forward into that. So would you join me in prayer?

"Lord, we want to hear from You today. This church does not belong to me. It is Your church, so Lord we willingly hand it to You. Father, we pray that You would guide us; show us who we are to be and what we are to do, so that we might bring glory to Your Name... not for our name, but for Your Name, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen."

Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, are verses that have been on my heart a lot lately. I'm going to read them to you. They talk about an idea that is unique to the Christian faith. They talk about grace. If you have a Bible with you, feel free to open it up right now to Ephesians chapter 2 and read these two verses with me. But if not, you can simply listen and hear these words. They may be familiar to you; they may not. They read: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

"Grace"... Grace is unlike any other concept that is out there in the world. Basically, every religion, every organization, every institution operates on the principle of justice... Justice... meaning, "We are supposed to get what we deserve." But the Christian faith is entirely different than any other organization because it has a message that is unique. And that is the message of grace which is, "Thank God we **don't** get what we deserve." You see, the Gospel... the Good News of Jesus Christ... is that we have been graced. We deserve punishment, we deserve death, we deserve hell, but we don't get it because God has satisfied His supernatural divine justice through the offering up of the body of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice. And through His Incarnation, His Crucifixion, and His Resurrection, we now have opportunity to have a relationship with Him. That is the Good News of Jesus, and that is the method by which we receive grace. Grace is unlike anything else. It is not karma; it is by its own. Marilynne Robinson said in her book, *The Givenness of Things*, "Grace is a word without synonyms, a concept without paraphrase."

I've been thinking a lot about God's grace lately. As I stand before you today, I want you to know that I believe, in 2016, just like any other year, our job is to embody God's grace in the city. I've been thinking about what it means for our city, in its time to, have its thing... "What does it need?" And I believe that the answer simply is "To experience God's grace." We need to be the emissary, the embodiment, the proclaimer, the messenger of God's grace, in this time and in this place... to be consumed with the fact that God loves every Houstonian and wants them to know His Name.

Houston is currently a really cool place to live. If you don't know that, all these magazines are doing write-ups on us and talking about the fact that it's got this or... This week I saw that we are the Top Ten food city in the nation. This is very important to me. (Laughter) There are all kinds of stuff out there about that. Our city is growing. Even though the oil industry is in a downturn, the latest numbers we have were two thousand people a week were moving to Houston. I don't know what those numbers are currently, but the city continues to grow. On top of that, Rice University has pointed out the fact that we are the most ethnically diverse city in the United States. We are a city that is rapidly growing and rapidly changing. Houston does not look today what it looked like even twenty or thirty years ago. The city is changing.

But along with those changes brings a lot of challenges and, frankly, a lot of brokenness. Houston also is one of the world leaders in the human sex trade. Houston is one of those cities that, as increased ethnic diversity comes to our city, it is also a city that is more and more divided by socioeconomic status and by ethnicity. Because of the fact that neighborhoods and people groups tend to cluster together, consequently, divisions and misunderstandings arise, and more and more people find themselves at odds with other people that are in their own city. There's increased division; there's increased brokenness, increased anger. We see a rise of lost-ness in our city. Most of the people that are coming to Houston are not believers. They come, being part of other faiths or no faith. The most recent number that I've heard is about 80% of our city is not actively worshipping Jesus Christ. There are a lot of people in our city that need to know Him. And as that brokenness increases and as the division increases, we have these little ghettos that pop up that are centered around certain people groups or certain ideas and, basically, fear increases. We become more suspicious of one another. That is precisely what the enemy wants: division and fear.

What is it then that will actually change our city? Stephen Klineberg, who runs the Kinder Institute at Rice University, has declared that the way that the city moves forward is through engagement of the poor, through seeing education increase in those neighborhoods that most need that, and talking about reaching the broken places. I think that he's right, but I actually believe that it's something more than that. I happen to believe that no government program, and I happen to believe that no societal push will ever actually bring healing to the brokenness of our city. I'm a pastor because I believe that the most powerful force at our disposal to change the city of Houston is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. I want us, as a church, to double down on the proclamation of that Gospel in 2016, believing that God's grace is still powerful enough to change lives, and when lives are changed, cities can be changed too.

There are three basic responses that people have whenever cities begin to change. Number one, they leave. Our part of the city, years ago, was outside the loop; consequently, it was a safe place to go. CyFair school district has grown 63% in the last decade; Tomball has grown 53%. Why does that happen? ...Because people are trying to get away from certain issues, so they move to an area that they believe to be apart from those sorts of things. There will be a time, I don't know when, but there will be a time when people will consider leaving this part of town. There's another possible response, which is simply to ignore it. People will say, "You know, I'm of an age where I'm going to be dead and gone before that's ever a problem. It's not my issue." Other people say, "Well, you know, I work in a job where I'll probably be transferred eventually... probably sooner as opposed to later. I don't need to worry about that. I can just

put my head in the sand and not really engage. I can ignore it." I don't think that either of those are the models that we see in Scripture. We don't see a running away from issues, and we don't see an ignoring of issues. We see, instead, an engagement and redemption of issues, based on the Gospel and the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

So today I want to ask us to consider what it would look like for us to actually engage our city... in the time and in the place where God would call us to do so. The embodiment of God's grace is the antidote to the issues rising up in our city. Local churches, not just Houston Northwest, but all local churches rising up with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, openly engaging their city, ready to do their part, will actually begin to change this great problem.

I've been praying and dreaming a lot about this. I've been wondering, "What does that look like for our city, in this time? How are we able to embody God's grace?" I'll be real honest with you. There's a lot of cynicism out there around things like Vision Statements and that kind of stuff. I don't think that they're magic, but I've been thinking, "How can we really crystalize and clarify what it is that we're going to do as a church?" As part of that, I've written down a Vision Statement that I believe we're going to organize around. This is not something that we're going to do just today. This is something that we're going to move forward with. Why?

There's a guy named Bob Beall; he's an executive coach. He has this model that he talks about, about organizations. He says that whenever you go into any organization, there's basically a pattern of change that takes place. He says, "In year one, there's a time of orientation." In other words, you show up and you figure out the lay of the land. You're just getting to know people around you, understand the culture. Year two: Experimentation. You try stuff out. You go, "Does this work? Does that work?" Year three: Evaluation. You go, "That did work... that failed miserably." You adjust and you change. In year four, he says, is Acceleration. Next Sunday, I will have been at Houston Northwest for three years. I believe I have basically followed along that track that I just discussed. Year one was basically a lot of orientation... finding out more about this church, figuring out who's related to who... that kind of stuff. Year two for me was a lot of experimentation. We tried this and we tried that. In year three, we have done a lot of evaluation. We're entering year four, starting next Sunday. It's time to hit the accelerator. It's time to move forward and to say, "We will embrace the call that God has given us." Consequently, I believe that we have to crystalize very clearly what it is that we are to do and then to move forward in that with a passion and intentionality that will actually see God begin to do things that we have only begun to dream about, here in this church in this time.

I've written down a statement, not because I think that these words are magic but because I believe that, as we get focused, we will begin to move forward in the direction that God has for us. So this is what I've written: "We will, as a church, move forward..." (you're going to see this a lot in the coming years) "...making Houston more like heaven by helping Houstonians become more like Jesus." Making Houston more like heaven sounds a lot like the Lord's Prayer, right? "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We want Houston, the city, to look more like heaven. That doesn't happen just because we pray. It doesn't happen just because we worship, but it happens because we make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, and those people make other disciples and those people make other disciples... As Houstonians become more and more like Jesus, the city itself is changed. So we want Houston to become more like heaven, as we make Houstonians look more like Jesus.

In order to do that, we need to understand then what our primary DNA is. DNA is that biological thing that determines who you are. If you have a certain type of DNA, your eyes will be a certain color. DNA always

leads to certain results. I have been really grappling with this over the last three years: "What is my DNA as a pastor that makes my heart beat quickly for the Gospel?" I believe that DNA will actually be embedded into this church. Over the last three years, as I've been praying through that and preaching about that and teaching about that, I've begun to also clarify that. I want to share that with you today so that you'll know that we will work toward that, based on the following ministry DNA of our church. I've written those down into four words. They are:

Kingdom — Disciple — Society — Church

They kind of feed into one another. The Kingdom of God, Discipling, then Society and then the Church. I want to talk about how those all operate and how they work together in our church as we begin to move forward.

1. The Gospel of the Kingdom

The Gospel is the Good News. The Good News that God has not abandoned us to our sinfulness, to our alienation from Him but instead that God has chosen to give us grace, to offer us grace, through the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel, that Good News... that is the message of God. That Gospel gives us entry into the Kingdom. Whenever we hear the Gospel and we receive the Gospel, we get to enter into the Kingdom. The Gospel is the message and the Kingdom is the reality. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom all the time, declaring that we can participate in God's redemptive work right here and right now. Matthew 6:10: *"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* Matthew 6:33: *"But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."* The Kingdom of God, then, is this. It begins when we accept our relationship with God. We hear the Good News, the Gospel, what God has done in Jesus Christ. We respond to that, but then we begin to participate in the reality that God has for us, right here and right now. God wants Houston to look more like heaven tomorrow than it does today. How does that happen? Through the Church of Jesus Christ. The more people that hear and receive the Gospel, the more people that can respond to that and then operate in and live out the Kingdom of God, here in our city. So we're going to begin by proclaiming the Gospel and embodying the Kingdom.

2. Disciples

But then we're going to move, secondly, into the making of disciples. This is something we talk about a lot. You see, our part of Houston grows, as I've already talked about, sometimes because people are looking to get away from particular issues, so they come up to this part of the city. But the truth of the matter is that the people in our part of the city have their own issues and brokenness that they're dealing with too. You're probably dealing with some of it. Struggling marriages... broken homes... economic struggles... grief... addiction... You see, those are the things that are happening, right here and right now, in our part of the city. And the list could go on and on. Even though we may have suburban houses with neatly manicured yards, we still have heart issues. We tend to act as if we don't need the Gospel, but we are the people that need the Gospel desperately. You see, the way that our city will be changed then is not just that we preach but also that we train people to walk in the way of Jesus. You see, disciples of Jesus Christ... disciples are people who believe the Gospel and are actively working to become more like Jesus in all aspects of life. In other words, they know the Scripture, they pray, they participate in the life of the church, they follow the Spirit, etcetera. And the more that we help people, the more that we will see our city changed. So we proclaim the Gospel and the Kingdom and then we make disciples of that. That's another part of our DNA.

3. Society

Another thing that we will do... we will engage society. I'm not going to go into a whole lot of detail about this right now. Back just a couple of months ago, I preached a six-part sermon series entitled "Work As Worship." If you want to know what I think about how our church ought to engage society, then you should go hop on our website and listen to those messages because we talk about the fact that each and every one of us is part of a different domain of society. Society is divided into eight different domains, from arts and leisure to agriculture, business, etcetera. Every one of us finds our place in society and then is God's ambassador. 2 Corinthians 5:20 says that you are ambassadors of the message of reconciliation. You are an ambassador. What do ambassadors do? Well, they live where the king puts them, and then they give the king's message. That's what ambassadors do. Guess what? You are an ambassador for King Jesus. You are living where the King has put you, and then you are to share the message of reconciliation wherever that is. You don't get to choose the words you say... you are saying the words of the King.... of Jesus. So you are in that place for this time, and it is a choice of a sovereign God who has put you there. We are the voice of Jesus, in this time and in this place.

4. Church

Finally, we build the Church. You see, the more that we do these things, the more that we proclaim the Gospel and the Kingdom, the more that we make disciples and the more that we engage society, the more that we strengthen the Church. The Church is a sign of the Kingdom. I'm going to talk more about this here in just a second, but let me show you just a little bit about how this fits together. You're going to begin to go, "Oh, that's how those words kind of tie into our own current context." So you look up here and you'll see I just talked about: Kingdom, Disciple, Society, Church:

Kingdom — Disciple — Society — Church

Gospel — Grow — Go

"Gospel" is the proclaiming of the Gospel of the Kingdom. "Grow"... We talk about that... that's growing and making disciples. And then "Go." That's us going and engaging. As we proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom... as we Grow, as we make disciples... and then as we Go and we engage Society, this church is strengthened. We have this vision that we've talked about, and then this has been the process, the DNA, that we've talked about.

The thing that has really been exciting me then is actually crystalizing these things into core practices for our church. So I've been sharing these with our church staff, but today I'm excited because I'm going to tell you that I've finally committed these to paper. I've said, "This is what I believe that we are supposed to do as a church in order to actually see these things happen, in our day and in our time. I want to share with you today five core practices that are not only going to be core practices for 2016. These are going to be core practices for Houston Northwest, moving forward:

1. Kingdom collaboration.

I'm ashamed to tell you that a decade ago the most important thing to me was filling a room. That was how I thought. "How can I get more people to come into a building and hear what I have to say." That was the driver in my heart. I've repented of that, but that's what it was ten years ago. Now I understand that the driver of the New Testament and of Scripture is the Kingdom of God. How does that move forward? A city of four million people will never be reached just because we've got things rocking here on Sunday

morning. It's just not going to happen. How is an entire city reached? ...Because a city... a city of churches... cooperate together for the Gospel of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. So today, I stand up here and I tell you this. I don't know why, but God has seen fit to accelerate Kingdom connections in my life and in our church over the last three years. I'd only been here about a year, and I was asked to serve on the Houston Church Planting board. I don't know why. They shouldn't trust me that quick, but God supernaturally allowed for that. I've been asked to be on the YMCA board. I don't know why; I guess because we're next door... but I've got some influence and impact there in that part of the city. I have more relationships with more pastors in Houston in three years than I had in fifteen years of ministry in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Why? I don't know why except to say that God has finally said, "Your heart has changed to the point of Kingdom collaboration, so now I'm going to bless that." This is what I'm going to stand up and tell you today. I'm making it a core practice that we will, as a church, attempt to convene a collaboration of churches around, seeing the Gospel move. It will probably start here in this part of our city, but we are going to work to see that happen because we believe that the city needs to be encountered and changed by the Gospel, and it won't happen just because of our church. It will happen because of churches working together. So we are going to be, as much as the Lord will allow us to be, a Kingdom collaborator. We're going to lead out in that area in our city.

2. Gospel-proclaiming ministries.

I've already talked about what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is: The Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus which allows us to know that we have been forgiven of sin and have a relationship with the Father. So, not only are we going to be a church that collaborates for the Kingdom with other churches, but if people come into our church or they participate in one of our ministries, we are going to make certain that there is a pathway by which people can hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sure, there may be certain events that we do in certain areas that start out as just fun events, but we're going to make certain that we have built a process by which people will be invited to hear and respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I think we do a pretty good job of this right now, but I am asking and directing our staff to move into that place so that way we can make certain that any person that we come into contact with, through the ministry of our church, hears and knows the Word of Jesus Christ.

3. The "One Anothers" of Body Life.

1 Corinthians 12:27 says this: *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* You are the Body of Christ and individually members of it. Scripture teaches that we are connected to one another in the Church. If you're here right now and you are a part of this church... if you've committed to be part of this church... you are connected. You see, the word "membership" that we talk about today... it wasn't actually originated by Netflix, having a membership. Right? "Membership" is a biblical term. It is the idea that you are a member, which is a part of the Body of Christ. It's a medical term. ...Because if you are dismembered, you've lost an arm or a leg. If you have decided to become a member of the Body, you have been connected. We're going to talk about practicing Body Life. We're going to talk about Body Life as a church because this is what we know: The Church is strengthened when the cells of the church are strengthened. You see, bodies become stronger when cells become stronger. Our church, we have some cells... those are called Life Groups. We are going to intentionally work this year, in 2016, to make those groups designed in such a way so that we don't simply study God's Word. Please hear me. I want us to study God's Word. But we're not **only** going to study God's Word. We are going to practice the "One Anothers" of Scripture in those groups. We're going to love one another; we're going to pray for one another; we're going to serve one another. Some of our groups already do this very naturally. Others need guidance in that. We are going to work so that each of our groups begins to do that because we believe

that this church will become stronger as we learn to practice the “One Anothers” of Body Life. This leads then to number four:

4. Multiplication of Disciples, Groups, Leaders, and Churches

In those groups, as we learn to love one another, we recognize that the old way that we defined victory... a win... was basically through adding to our numbers. The old way to define a win was growing as large as we could in our groups in our church. That is no longer the definition of success, starting today. The new definition of success is not just having a lot of people come. It is aiming toward multiplication: Multiplication of disciples, groups, leaders, and churches. This is the truth: We will never be able to impact our city on the scale that is needed to do so, if we only focus on adding to our own numbers. We have to not only talk about it, but we also have to structure to a place where we can begin to see multiplication of disciples take place. I’ve been learning a lot from the global church over the last few years. The place where God is doing the most work right now, through the multiplication of disciples, is not in the United States of America. In fact, it is in places all over the world, but we are not seeing the movement of disciple-making here in our country that they are seeing in all kinds of other places. We need to be, first of all, humble enough to say, “We don’t know what to do,” and then secondly, humble enough to learn from the people who do, and then finally humble enough to put it into practice. We’re going to work to do that. That’s not going to be easy; we’re going to mess up a lot. We’re going to fail a lot, but it is what God has called us to do. “Go into all the world and make disciples.” Making disciples is the idea of multiplying, and it is going to become a core practice of our church. I’m going to ask you, if you have not already committed to do so, to be trained to learn how to make disciples. We are going to have more and more training opportunities to do this. Saturday, January 23rd, we’re going to bring back a guy that has come a couple of times for us, Caleb Southerland. He’s going to do a disciple-making workshop. If you’ve never been to that, you need to come that morning. If you’ve already been and you’ve already heard how to do that, you can come back that afternoon. He’s going to go into a second piece that is deeper and more intentional in that we are going to continue to move down this road until we have as many people in our church who are ready to say “Yes” to that, trained in disciple-making because we want to see God begin to do something supernatural and move here in our part of the city, in our time.

5. Global and local domain engagement.

Again, I just kind of talked about this in societal engagement, but the idea is this: We are not simply going to focus on the spiritual proclamation of the Gospel, but we’re then going to focus on how those of us who have been affected by the Gospel of Jesus Christ can go into our various work places, our neighborhoods, our families, and we’re going to apply the Gospel in our own lives. So that may mean in your office or in your field, you are thinking and dreaming of how that can be embodied in our day and in our time.

Starting today and moving forward, not just in 2016 but from here on out, these are the five core practices that we are going to talk about as a church:

1. Kingdom collaboration.
2. Gospel-proclaiming ministry.
3. The “One Anothers” of Body life.
4. Multiplication of disciples, groups, leaders, and churches.
5. Global and local domain engagement.

As we do this, we believe if we do those things, that will move us toward making Houston more like heaven by helping Houstonians become more like Jesus.

If you're like me, you're like, "Man, that's really great... thanks. I mean... it's good. I'm glad that we have some reasons for what we're going to do in 2016... but could you get a little more practical? What are we going to do with all that great info?" I'm glad that you asked. This is what we're going to do. In 2016, the first thing that we're going to do, starting next Sunday, is we're going to begin by clearly proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in "Heaven Matters." That's what is going to start next Sunday. It's going to be a sermon series for four weeks. We're going to talk about heaven. People that I talk to all the time have questions about what really happens after you die. We're going to delve directly into that and see what Scripture says. This is a great opportunity for you, if you have a friend that you want to bring to church you can bring... but it's also a great opportunity to do the very thing that we just talked about... Multiply... take the things that you hear, that you learn, and go and have conversations with people about this in your workplace, in your family. They don't have to come hear me. There's no magic in my words. They trust you; they know you. You have a relationship with them. We're going to work to give as much information and teaching out there as we can because we know there's a lot of confusion. We're going to use this hashtag... #HNWHeavenMatters... It's an opportunity that you can post it, and we'll try and respond to your questions through blog posts or videos and maybe work them into our sermon. They are opportunities for you to hear the Gospel and then to either have a friend here or to go and to share that where you're at and begin to disciple that individual. We're going to conclude that series on Superbowl Sunday, February 7th. We're going to call that "Going-to-Heaven" Sunday. Now be careful... I know some of you are like, "Are we going to heaven on that Sunday?" No... that is not what we're doing. We're calling it "Going-To-Heaven" Sunday because on that day our prayer is that anyone who comes to Christ between now and February 7th we will see baptized on that day, Lord willing. (Clapping) We're going to go that way, and we believe that if we are faithful in what we are supposed to do, people will indeed be baptized on that morning. And let's be honest... that will be way more significant than whatever the score is of a football game that afternoon. Whatever happens... because Luke 15 tells us that whenever people come to know the Lord, that the angels in heaven rejoice. There's going to be a party in heaven whenever people come to know Him. So that is one thing that we're going to do.

We're going to renew the #WeLoveHou emphasis, but we're going to do it a little different this time with a Kingdom goal. I don't want to go into all the details right now; I don't have time to do that. Last year we did this: 40 days of service leading up to Easter to love our city. It was weird how much it resonated with people. I started having pastors from the city call me and say, "Tell me about this "#WeLoveHou" thing that you guys are doing." I was like, "Well, you know, we're loving our neighbors and using it as an opportunity to have a spiritual conversation." I've had people ask, "Can we do that with you?" I had a church from Denver call me... "Hey, we heard about '#WeLoveHou'..." I'm like, "Yah, I don't know how to turn that into '#WeLoveDen'... but okay, yah. Whatever..." (Laughter) They were calling and asking about that. They were like, "Can we copy that?" "Of course you can copy that." So, the more that we thought about it and prayed about it... we think about that, but then we think about Kingdom collaboration. You know what we've said? "We need to do this again this year, but we need to invite as many churches in the city as we can to join us in this." We're going to give them all of our artwork. I'm going to tell them what I'm going to be teaching. They can teach that or not; I don't care. I'm going to say, "We're going to try and serve these domains of our city, on these days and as many churches as we can get in our city to do that, coordinated together with the same message of service that leads to a proclamation of the Gospel. We want to do that together for the 40 days leading up to Easter. We're going to cast that vision.

Here's the great thing... I don't know what they're going to say... (Laughter) It might be us and one other church. Maybe it will be us and 200 churches. I don't know. But do you know what? We're going to do what God has told us to do, and we're going to be faithful in that. We're going to kick that off on February 10th with a Night Of Prayer And Worship. It's going to be right here in this room. I believe that God will do powerful and great things through that, if we come before Him and we pray and we fast and say, "Lord, we want to do this." I want to ask you... I know a lot of you guys are not able to come to our stuff on Wednesday nights; you're not able to come because you have a commute that does not get you back to this side of town until way after our start time. I'm asking you today to put that day on your calendar, Wednesday, February 10th at 6:45 p.m. Come here and join us as we pray and we begin to fast, asking God to bring together a supernatural move of His Spirit and a great Kingdom cooperation of churches here in our city, to love Houston together, so that the Gospel might be proclaimed.

Next... We're going to create a domain-engagement team in the eight domains of society. I need leaders in every domain in our church to step forward and say, "I will help lead the conversation in my domain. I will help talk to bankers or engineers or attorneys or physicians or nurses or educators... whatever your profession is. You would say, "I will agree to help lead that conversation." What we're going to do is we're going to have a luncheon on February 21st right after the service, and we're going to ask you to come to that luncheon. Pastor Dwight is going to lead that. He has been serving at this church for twenty years, focused on all kinds of different things. He has agreed to take on the idea of domain engagement and help lead our church in engaging the workplace in the different domains of society. We need people who will say "Yes" to help lead that conversation. We're going to have that luncheon, and if you feel the Lord tugging at you to say, "I know that I'm supposed to help speak to the people in my chosen profession with the Gospel," we want to invite you to come and be a part of that luncheon. We're going to convene that luncheon, and we're going to brainstorm and come up with ideas, and we're going to move forward.

On top of that, we're also going to begin transitioning our global trips. Our church takes global trips every year. We go and we share the Gospel and do great work with different churches. But we are going to now begin to expand our work. We're not simply going to do work that is church-focused, where we are sharing the Gospel, but we are also going to move into a phase where we will look for ways to connect the professions of the people of Houston Northwest with the professions of people in other nations. Let me explain what I mean. There's a church that I'm familiar with that have a lot of special-Ed teachers, and they took their special-Ed teachers and went to Viet Nam. That is a "closed" country, and they took those teachers there. Those teachers met with special-Ed teachers in Viet Nam, and they shared ideas and best practices. They began to just go back and forth and find ways to serve the special-needs children of Viet Nam together. Over that relationship.. which, by the way, developed over multiple trips over multiple years... many of those teachers have come to faith in Jesus Christ. You see, there is a way to carry the Gospel that sometimes is different into places that are considered "closed." We are going to begin trying to move in that direction. That doesn't mean we're going start in "closed" countries. We're going to move to places where God is already taking us, and we're going to look for ways to match up our professions, our domains, with the domains and the professions of those people. We're excited about that, and we look forward to that.

We're going to be moving forward and intentionally training disciple-makers, domain-engagers, worshippers, and Gospel-proclaimers so that our church can move forward in the 21st century.

One last thing. Sometimes God just kind of gets on you and starts telling you that you need to say something. I'm just going to be real honest with you. Sometimes you're a pastor and you're disobedient

and you say, "Mmm mmm.... I'm not saying that." I've been reticent to say something. This is the Word of the Lord: *"Have I not commanded you to be very strong and courageous?"* So today, I'm going to share something with you that I don't understand from an earthly perspective how it could happen. I believe that the Lord has put it on my heart and told me to stand before the congregation today and share it. Last week I stood right here, and we burned a \$3,650,000 promissory note. We saw our church take a big step forward in the retirement of our debt. It was an exciting time to be here. I loved seeing that happen. Our church still has \$3,000,000 of debt remaining. In fact, to be more precise, we still have \$3,009,130 of debt remaining. I have felt very clearly the Lord leading me to say this today... that I want us, in 2016, to pray and ask the Lord to give us \$3,009,130 extra dollars above our budget so that we can see our debt finally accounted for this year. Why? I said this last week and I'll say it again. It's not so that we can get out of debt. It's so that we can do what God has next for Houston Northwest. We know that currently we have financial constraints, and we know that we have some things that we are not able to do because we are addressing that. Many of you have been extremely generous, and I thank you for that. I praise you for that. Thank you for your obedience and your faithfulness to that. But I'm going to ask that in this year we, first of all, commit to pray and say, "Lord, bring supernaturally those resources to our church." This note is a little different than the other note that we had. It's not a traditional note with a fixed interest rate. It's called a "swap" note. The long-story-short is that it's not beneficial for us to pay it off early without having to pay a lot of extra interest, so we have to escrow that money, get it, and then time it right to pay it off. So it's a little bit weird, but what I'm asking then is that our church begins to pray and say, "Lord, would You bring those funds to us in 2016 so that we can become a church who has already accounted for our debt and then is able to get on our faces and pray and say, "God, what is next for us as a church?"

Speaking of next... we called it the "Next" initiative. We started it 20 months ago. Many of you committed to that, and you have given generously and liberally to see that happen, and I thank you for that. Some of you are new. For some of you, today is your very first time; you don't even know what I'm talking about. What we have done is we have asked our people to give above and beyond their normal giving to see our debt reduced, mission projects funded, and some parts of our church remodeled. We have seen those things happening very faithfully. It has been exciting to watch God move in that. So I am praying now and asking that God will continue to move us forward. Now, I stand before you today and tell you, "I don't know what God has next for us, but I'm committing now to begin praying and saying 'Lord, when we have this piece of our financial puzzle accounted for, will you give us clarity to show us where it is that we are to move?'" I don't know if that's facilities; I don't know if that's planting... I don't know what that is, but I know that God will give us to that very, very clearly, so that we can see the Gospel multiplied in this place so that we can see our city reached for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So how do we do that? Well, we begin by acknowledging, "This is way bigger than us." They say if your dream isn't so big that you can accomplish it without God's help, then it's not a God-sized dream. Basically, I just said I'm going to try and get all the pastors in the city of Houston to cooperate. (Laughter) I mean, that's a pretty big God-sized dream. Then on top of that, to ask for these kinds of financial resources, to say, "Lord, we want to be able to transition more completely toward a church that is not just about addition but also multiplication." These are things that are beyond my ability, but they are not beyond our God. Our God, I believe, wants to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ begin to move like a wildfire across this city, across ethnic groups, across socioeconomic groups, and begin to engage the brokenness of this city so that this city begins to truly look more like heaven.

The question now is, "Will you join us in that?" I can't make you do that. I can't force you to do that. But if you believe that God has called you to be part of this city, I'm going to ask you today to prayerfully consider joining us in these things.

Here in a moment we are going to make an official commitment, but before you do that, I just want to tell you what I'm going to ask you to commit to. If you have a worship guide with you, you can look on the info tab. Those are the things that I'm going to ask you to respond to here in a moment. I'm going to put them on a slide here, and you can just look and see what those are:

1. I would like to be part of the next HNW Discover (that's our membership) class on February 21st at 4 p.m. You say, "You know what? I've been visiting... it's time to join."
2. I would like my child to be part of the next New Christian class on February 21st. If you've got a child that's ready to know Jesus... ready to be baptized... you could sign up for that.
3. I'd like to be baptized on "Going-to-Heaven" Sunday. (Again, we're not going to heaven on that day, but we're going to have baptisms on that day)
4. I'll invite a friend to the "Heaven Matters" series.
5. I'll be part of the Night of Prayer and Worship on February 10th at 7 p.m.
6. I will participate in loving my city with #WeLoveHou.
7. I would like more information about the Disciple-Making workshop with Caleb Southerland on Saturday, January 23rd.
8. I would like to attend the Domain Engagement luncheon on February 21st.
9. I would like more information about a global trip.
10. I will pray for the Lord to provide the resources to account for our debt in 2016, and I will pray about taking part in a special offering for debt on February 28th.

Those are the things to pray for, and I'm going to lead us in prayer right now. I just want you to ask, "Lord, just put on my heart what it is that I need to do." Let's pray.

"Lord Jesus, thank you for Your goodness. Thank you for Your grace. Father, I pray... I don't want to manipulate people... I don't want to do things that are emotional. Lord, I want Your Holy Spirit to lead people to take the step that they need to take. God, I pray and I ask right now that You speak very clearly to each heart in this room, that they know what they are supposed to do. God, I pray that You bring exactly the right people at exactly the right time to do precisely what it is that we have been called to do as a church. Father, I believe You want to hit the accelerator, so I'm ready to follow You. I pray this in the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen."