

**“Followers of Jesus Christ
We Value Servant-Ministry”**

2/14/99

Would you be seated please?

It has been a great time of singing and celebrating this morning and I am so glad you have been here and been a part of it.

I don't know how effective our camera may be at a distance. Judging by the reports that I received last week I was paranoid about wearing a large Band-Aid and the majority of people came up to me and told me that they never saw it. I guess I don't have a lot to worry about but I will tell you that this week I discovered a way to neither cut my face nor my sermon. If you get close to me you will know what the result of that is in my life. Thankfully, being fair-haired and light-skinned in complexion you probably can't see it but I have, as a means of survival, allowed my beard to grow. As a result, you won't be able to call me scar face. Scruffy maybe but scar face never. Anyway, this is just a report and an update on the crisis that I faced in my life last Sunday as I came to be here with you.

On the outskirts of Chicago, in a community known as South Barrington, Illinois, within an hour of our time of gathering and worshipping here, a thriving community church known as Willow Creek Community Church will be meeting and gathering in that community. It is a very interesting church because it really started as a weed, though it were, an overgrown student ministry and a church in Chicago that began to dream dreams of God doing something fresh and new for their lives. In 1975 in a movie theater the Willow Creek Community Church was established. Since that time it has captured the attention of pastors, missionaries, and church growth analysts from all over America and around the world. In fact, it is said today to be the most attended church in America. For all of the things that different people may like or dislike about the uniqueness of the Willow Creek Community Church and for all of the things that could be discussed and debated about pattern and style and all of those sort of things, there is one thing that has been very simple and very clear about this church and that is that they had a mission that was simple and was transferable. The mission statement of this church reads as follows:

“To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.”

That is simply why they came into being. To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Because it was a new church and a new church plant it was not their intention that they would simply grow by finding people who liked similar programs or who were from a common denominational background. But, instead, they would simply develop a strategy of ministry that would take them to the edge of where irreligious people lived and in that process they would press the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their hearts and ultimately see them turn the course of their lives and become a part of the church of Jesus Christ. Because this was their mission, it was a mission of which I call raw evangelism. Raw evangelism in that they wanted to start

with people who were nowhere spiritually but to bring them to a place of intimacy with God. Here these many years later, I think the world can witness the effectiveness of that mission. In fact, just a few years ago Willow Creek Community Church celebrated their 20th anniversary. In honor of that anniversary celebration they did something very wonderful. They rented out the United Center in Chicago. Now you know of the United Center. You may or may not immediately recognize it but you have seen it many times on television. It is the place where Michael Jordan plays basketball. They rented out the basketball arena there in Chicago, filled that entire arena, and talked about the journey and the history of what God had done through the dream of turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. In a specific and appointed time in that service all of the house lights were dimmed and darkened. Someone came to the platform and began to talk about the wonder of seeing people who had come to know Christ and had entered into a relationship with Christ because of the message and because of the mission of this church. Every one in that place had been given a little penlight and on cue and on command they were asked, those who were there, who had made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ through the extension and the outreach of that ministry, to light the lights. Within just a moment 20,000 penlights came into illumination. It was an incredible moment! People began to cheer, they began to cry, they began to weep as they recognized what God had done through the heartbeat of a people who had clearly seen and clearly understood that their mission was to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

In reality what Willow Creek Church did is not something that is new or novel. In fact it really is that which is to be the role and the responsibility of the church in this age and in every age. Because the heartbeat of a local church is to be reflective of the very purpose statement of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who came and who said that he had come to seek and to save that which was lost. So Jesus, in describing the world, said that the world is a lost world and that he had come to see those be saved. Willow Creek simply personalized that, made it intentional, and made a difference in a community in Chicago, Illinois.

You know, in a very real sense, we do share that mission today because realistically the whole work of the whole church for the whole age in which we live is to be that of reaching people who are outside the kingdom of God and of reaching people who do not know the truth about Jesus Christ and of bringing them into a living relationship with him. But the fact of the matter is that any church that has been in existence for a period of time has another challenge associated with it. It is not only the challenge of reaching and touching the edge of the community that is around it but it is the mission of trying to deal with and attempting to focus on the accomplishment of that mission on the people who are associated with it. You see, because a church, once it is established and once it begins to exist, and once it has meetings like the meetings we are having this morning, a church has a tendency to gather people who are religious in nature. They are sincere, they have an interest in spiritual things, and they can be categorized as religious people.

I guess what I want to point out to you this morning is that there is a night and day difference between religious people and spiritual people. There is a difference between

people who truly have become a follower of Christ and people who simply go through the process of religious activity on a regular basis. So just as there was a church that was established and gained the attention of many in America today of turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ, there is a matter to which we have to attend in our own church and in our community. That matter is this – that we have to turn religious people into truly devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Because there are religious people who come and who assemble, even with us, but who do not know what it is to truly be a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke of this kind of a person. Jesus said there will be those in the last day who will stand and who will say, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, didn't we do works of goodness and kindness in your name, didn't we do all of these things? But Jesus said, I will look at them and say, depart from me I never knew you. The problem would be that they were people who were religious but they were people who did not have a real and evident relationship with Jesus Christ. It was all external. It was not internal. It was something on the surface but it wasn't a transformation from the inside out. The nature of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to change a person's life from the inside out and to make them a different kind of person not weird, not odd, not perverted in any way but in every way to make them a more complete person, a more whole person, the kind of person that God intended for us to be.

Now the very matter that we discussed this morning indicates that it is possible to be a religious person and to be a lost person. It is possible to be sincerely religious and many people are. I want you to know that I don't think that there are a lot of people who will go to churches today who intentionally are trying to cover up as hypocrites. There are some, I admit there are some, but many of them are sincerely seeking to be religious but the problem is they are sincere but they are sincerely wrong because they missed the basic message of what it means to trust Christ and what it means to follow Christ.

This morning, in preparation for a time of sharing in the table of our Lord in communion together, I want us just to take a few minutes and look together in the Book of James, Chapter 1. At the subject of turning religious people into truly devoted followers of Christ and understanding the great difference between simply being a religious person and being a person who has a driving and thriving relationship with Jesus Christ.

James has a whole lot to say about authentic faith. He has a whole lot to say about what real religion looks like. Yet nowhere is it clearer than in the very simple and the very straightforward text that I want us to read from this morning, James, Chapter 1, verse 26 and following. James says, "If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." Obviously James is comparing two types of people here. On the one hand he is talking about people who think they are religious. Literally, the word he uses there is an interesting word because it is found only here in the New Testament. It is talking about religious in the sense that they are ceremonial, that they are ritualistic, that they may look devout and pious because they are

going through the religious motions on the outside. James says there are people who think they are religious because they are going through the motions, they are doing the ceremony. But he said this religion is in vain.

He said, on the other hand, true and pure religion when religion is real and when faith is real in a person's life it changes some things about who they are and how they operate. It makes them more authentic and it makes them have a different attitude from simply a person who is trapped in ritual and in religious observance. I guess what James is saying is in a very old word and a very old cliché. He is really saying this, ladies and gentlemen: if your religion hasn't changed you, you probably need to change your religion. Because the fact of the matter is that real religion changes your life. The faith in Jesus Christ, the true faith, authentic faith is a faith that makes a difference in how I live every day. So, let's see what is he saying? What are the key concepts that James delivers to us that become the points of measure for everyone of us to look at, examine, and observe today and say, is my religion really real? Am I simply a religious person or am I truly a devoted follower of Jesus Christ?

Let's look at what he says together. He says that if any one among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue... What does it mean to bridle your tongue? Obviously, you know what you do with a bit and a bridle. If you are thinking in the arena of a horse, you put that bridle on a horse and by that bridle put into the mouth of the horse you are able to take a strong and a mighty animal and you are able to control that animal, to see it subdued, and to see it in some way surrendered because of the presence and because of the response that that horse has to the bridle. Most of us do not do a lot of horse riding these days, though some may. Many times we don't think in terms of bridling our tongue. That is almost a strange phrase to us but how many times have you said in the course of a week, bite my tongue? Hold my mouth? You see, it is the same concept. What James is saying here is that if any of us think we are religious and there is not a sense in our life in which there is the ability to hold, to bridle, to restrain, to control things that would otherwise be out of control in our lives, then we need to really stop and check our religion. Nothing could have been more poignant or more picturesque than the fact that James chose the tongue.

The tongue is a very small part of your human body. Yet the tongue is said to be the strongest of all of the muscles in your body. Did you know that? The tongue is the strongest of all of the muscles in your body. An interesting thing this tongue – the way it works, the way it operates in human anatomy, the way it processes, and the way it participates in communication and in speech. What James is saying here, starting with the strongest muscle in the human body, yet implicating every other part, very simply what he is saying is this – if you are looking for the key word, here is the key word – if you are a truly religious person, if you are truly a follower of Christ, then your life is marked by the quality called submission. Submission. It means that that which may be strong and may be capable of being out of control has been brought under control. The greatest evidence that any person has truly given their life to Jesus Christ is that there is a change in the disposition on the inside of their being to the point that now they are the kind of person who has a disposition that is one of submission. They are a surrendered

person. They are meat. Just as you would take a mighty horse that would be wild and brazen and out of control, you take that horse and you give it strength and dignity and honor by bringing it into control and bringing it into submission in the same way what Christ does. He takes the wild, maverick, mustang tendencies of our being and he doesn't do away with them he just brings them in control so that they become a part of being a strong but submitted person. He says it all begins with checking the tongue.

You know, if you go to the doctor when you are sick, one of the first things they are going to do is they are going to take one of those little Popsicle sticks, oversized Popsicle stick, stick a gauze on your tongue, pull it out, and go aaaah, right? You know how they do that. They look at your tongue. In fact, in all likelihood, they are going to take a little instrument called a thermometer and they are going to stick it under your tongue and they are going to use that to determine whether or not you have a temperature. I know today they have gotten sophisticated and have something they stick in your ear, but still most of us use the tongue and that is better than the other things they have had in days gone by, right? Sorry, I am getting a little carried away here. Anyway, just the same, your tongue is a great indicator of how your body is physically. Just as the physical quality and health of the body can many times be determined by examination of the tongue, spiritually the Bible is saying that one of the ways that you can know your religion is real and that you are true is what is coming out of your mouth.

Today is Valentine's Day. It is a wonderful opportunity to say, "I love you." To say I love you to your mate, to the person to whom you have committed your life and by the grace of God have been joined together. It is an opportunity to say, "I love you", to friends and family members. Though we can do it every day this is a specific day, a specific opportunity, to express in a unique way, sometimes through a card, a note, a Valentine to them that you love them and that you care about them. It is certainly a day to express to someone your feelings about them if you haven't expressed them. That also happens on Valentine's Day. The tragedy is that while many of us will participate in a day like Valentine's Day the effect of Valentine's Day is negated because of what we do with our tongue the rest of the days of the year.

I am convinced, ladies and gentlemen, that the greatest tool of domestic assault in America is the tongue and that the greatest place where people's lives are being damaged and destroyed and injured is in the homes. That is where people are caustic and careless in the way in which they use their tongues and the way in which they communicate to them. The Bible simply says that if your religion is real, you are going to be different.

The Bible speaks of a godly woman over in the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 31. In verse 26 the Bible says when she opens her lips she speaks with wisdom. Then the Bible says, and there is kindness on her tongue. One of the key things that are reflective of a woman whose life is surrendered and submitted to God is that she has a speech that is filled with kindness. Not just to women by any means though the Bible says in the Book of Ephesians, Chapter 4, that all of our speech and all of our communication is to be brought and surrendered to Christ. The Bible says don't let corrupt speech corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth but that which is good for edifying, literally

for building up. We destroy people with our criticism. One of the greatest ways in which we bring injury and pain and suffering into the lives of other people is when we use the sharp, daggardly-type instrument called the tongue.

We all grew up hearing a little simple proverb, a human proverb that goes something like this – sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. That is a lie. That is a bold-faced lie. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me? Do you believe that for a minute? I am telling you that nothing hurts like words! Sticks and stones may injure the skin but words pierce the heart. The Bible is simply saying to you and to me that if we are truly religious people, then it is going to make a difference in the way in which we communicate because our tongue is going to be moved from criticism to kindness. With the poison of criticism we pierce, we injure; we destroy others in our lives. But with words of kindness, encouragement, affirmation, and concern we take even the most broken hearted and we begin to make them know of the love of God and of the value of their own existence.

Nothing is a greater expression of defiance. Nothing is a greater expression of arrogance than when someone uses the tongue by sticking it out, to say to someone, I don't care what you say, I don't care what you think. The bottom line is that many of us instead of having a tongue that is bridled still live our lives with our tongue stuck out. You know how you have to teach kids not to do that. Isn't that a weird thing how kids seem to learn that? I mean they just learn to stick their tongue out at somebody! You see what an expression that is of an unsundered, unsubmitted life. The Bible simply says, if any man is real and his religion is real, he bridles his tongue. The key word is submission.

There is another key word that James gives us here. That is not only that a person who is truly religious has the key word that marks their life of submission but is the key word called service. Service. Listen to what it says. It says, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious and does not bridle his tongue, he deceives his own heart." This one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this – to visit orphans and widows in their trouble. The idea of visiting others in their trouble, specifically orphans and widows in this case, is the idea of performing an act of kindness, an act of service on behalf of someone else. I like to think of service as being simply defined as love in action. I think that is what service is. Service is love in action. It is when I love you enough to be willing to bow my knee, to surrender myself to do something on your behalf that will benefit you though it may cost me. Service is the key quality in life that releases us from the bondage of the twin brothers called self-centeredness and selfishness. You see, we are all born with two feet, one called selfish the other called self-centered. We tend to live our lives trying to plant our feet on every thing that will let us fulfill selfishness and self-centeredness. But Jesus Christ says I want both of your feet to be surrendered along with your knees to a spirit called service and that when religion is real in your life that the whole essence of true and living religion is that authentic faith is reflected through a spirit of service.

Back in the first century people who were orphaned and widowed had a very hard life. There was no social welfare system as such, no government protection for them. As a

result, if children were abandoned, they were simply released to the streets to make it on their own. In that day and time, if people were widowed, they were left without inheritance and they were simply left, as though it were, to be homeless, to be left as beggars in the streets of the city in that day.

Just a few days ago I was watching on television a news report about what has happened in Honduras in recent months since the devastating hurricane that went through that area. I learned that the populace of children in the streets has increased dramatically because so much damage and desolation and poverty and the children have just sort of been released. It is a horrible, horrific thing to see. Yet that is the very thing the Bible is identifying here. It is that the group of people who lived in the first century, the women and children, widows and orphans, who needed someone to attend to them. The word that is used here is the word visit which literally means not just to drop in, say Hi, how are you doing, but it literally means to pay attention to, to go and check on them on a regular basis, to try to visit them at the point of their need. The Bible says that when the Spirit of Christ is real in us there is this quality called service that distinguishes our life from others around us.

It is amazing how many places service can be found. You know this morning because some people have made that commitment to Christ, rather than being here and sitting and listening to this time of teaching they are in rooms on the periphery of this building called children's rooms, pre-school and children's rooms. They are there this morning simply caring for and tending to the needs of children but not just child care they are singing them songs about Jesus who loves them and telling them that the Bible tells them of the love of Jesus. We have people who faithfully, week in and week out, perform that because they have a spirit of service and they see that as an important contributing part of the ministry. Others have provided the service this morning of hospitality, of coming early and setting up and preparing for us to be here. I thank God for that. They are there week in and week out in our church, and not just for what happens on Sunday morning. The true spirit of service is to be characteristic of who we are – visiting those who are in the hospital and are sick, weak. I am sure this passage of scripture is what gave way in the early years to the church, to the concept of connecting with people who are weak and broken physically, of going not only to places like hospitals but going to places like prisons and visiting those there who have been the failures and the rejects of society. Frankly, many of them don't deserve a visit but the fact of the matter is that neither did you nor did I deserve the grace of Jesus Christ in our life. Were it not for a Savior who left heaven and came to earth and suffered on our behalf we would not know what it is to be saved. Were it not for the grace of God we may very well be right where they are today.

You will notice in your worship guide this morning that there is going to be a dinner this coming Wednesday evening for involvement in prison ministry in Broward County and in our community. I want to see this a strengthened part of our ministry because I believe it can be a place where the gospel of Christ can touch a rejected life and transform that life but it is going to take people who have a spirit of service. It can be with children. It can be with diseased. It can be with people who are prisoners, who are defiled. It can be

in a whole series of things but the issue is that in the life of the person who is a truly devoted follower of Christ is that their life is now marked by service.

I love the fact that the Bible says to visit the orphans and widows in their trouble. The word trouble means their affliction, their stress, and their pressure. Because it never changes, it never relieves. It is the aching day in and day out of waking up and realizing that someone they have spent a lifetime with is there no longer and they need someone else to come along and to love and encourage them. You see the Bible says that truly religious people are people who are characterized by the spirit of service.

So submission, service, and another thing we see here, pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this – to visit orphans and widows in their trouble AND to keep oneself unspotted from the world. To keep oneself unspotted from the world, what does that mean? You will remember, if you were here last week that I told you that the word world could sometimes be translated from the original language, cosmos, that which is arranged. What the Bible is saying here is that there is an arrangement, there is a cosmos, there is a system called the world. Truly devoted followers of Christ are not simply the splattered and spattered victims of this system but they live their life distinctively from that system. It is not talking about people. The Bible says that God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Jesus came to the world to reach lost people. When the Bible says we are to keep ourselves unspotted from the world it doesn't mean that we aren't to have connections with people who are lost. But it means we are not to live our life as though we were spotted, as though we were somehow defiled by the system in which we are living.

I think the greatest picture is the idea of a white shirt in an Italian restaurant. Have you ever tried to eat spaghetti, I mean a really big plate of marinara pasta with a white shirt on? It is so hard to keep yourself unspotted in that situation. Have you ever had on a white shirt or a blouse or a dress and had to walk through a mechanic's shop where greasy parts are everywhere. I mean, all you have to do _____ and suddenly you are defiled. I am not trying to paint the picture that Christians are some sort of Lilly white ornaments who simply walk through the dirty world but there is a sense in which we are to live a life that is distinctive and is an alternative.

I think of what the concept of unspotted means, it means the idea of standards. We, as followers of Christ, live by a fresh set of standards. There is something different on the rule of the heart that changes the way that we live our lives rather than simply living spotted and speckled in this world system. We are to live by a fresh set of standards that are reflective of a desire to live a pure life.

Over the last few years there have been a number of hit movies about pigs. You can make a pig an actor. You can give a pig a bath. You can put a bow on a pig. You can put clothes on a pig. But let me tell you something, if you get a pig near a mud puddle, the pig is going straight for the mud because there is something in the nature of a pig that loves mud. The very issue here is that when religion is real and religion is true you don't want to go roll around in the mud anymore. Because, you see, when Christ is real in my

life I am no longer content to just live any old way like everybody else, I want to live in such a way so as to be a reflection of the fact that Christ came to deliver me from the mud and the mire and the muck of a life that is out of control and to be brought to a place where my life is marked by purity in Jesus Christ.

What the world is looking for, ladies and gentlemen, is a group of people called Christians who live a credible Christian life by living by a different set of standards. My heart is broken today because I fear that the church of Christ has lost its credibility because we are as spotted as the world. I don't mean we are not sinful. I don't mean that we aren't fallen. I don't mean that we don't struggle with temptation and frustration of the striving and the battle against sin. I do mean there must be the evidence in my life and in your life that the heart beat is to be pure and undefiled before God.

As an expression of love to Christ today I want us just to spend some time going through an experience, a spot removal experience called the Lord's supper. Now hear me carefully. If you have never come and given your life to Jesus Christ and received him as your Lord and Savior, there is no power in the elements of the supper through the external religion to somehow take away your sins. There is no saving power in the elements. The elements are representatives of what Christ did for us. He came and became flesh and walked among us but his flesh was bruised and broken; therefore, we have the broken pieces of bread, Jesus being given as a sacrifice for us. His body was pierced and his blood was shed because, the Bible says, that God's standard is that without the shedding of blood there is no payment of sin and Jesus shed his blood to pay for our sin. What the Lord's supper does is call us to a place of examination. We are to look and to say has my life been stained and spotted by this world? If so, then go back to a wonderful promise, a faithful promise, I John, verse 9 that says, if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I simply want to let these moments this morning be a time where God does a cleansing work in our life.

If today you don't know for sure that you know Christ and you are not sure about your status before God, may I suggest that you simply observe. There is nothing wrong with observing. It may be a good time of teaching and of learning for you. For those of you who know Christ, let there be an examination and then partake of the supper remembering that you have been bought with a price and that you are not your own. You are to glorify God with your body and your spirit, which are his.

I want us to pray and then in our prayer I want to ask our men to move into place and begin to serve the bread and to share in the supper.

Father, this morning I thank you for your word, its power and its truth. Lord, I pray that we would not be religious people but that we would be made righteous in Jesus Christ and that the relationship with Christ would be true and real and effective in our lives.

Father, I pray that these moments will be moments where we are called again to submission, to service, and to standards that are distinctive in this world. God do a

renewing work, a cleansing work, in your people. Oh God, do a saving work in the heart of anyone who is lost and needs Christ for I pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jesus, when he met with his disciples, said that we were to take and we were to eat this bread as a reminder of the brokenness of his body on our behalf. Before we eat this bread today I want to remind you of the need for your body and for my body to be a body that is surrendered to Christ, that it would be a body in which we would show our service to Christ. I want you to just take the element and hold it with me, if you will. With eyes and heart lifted upward say, Lord Jesus, I am your servant. Would you say that with me? Lord Jesus, I am your servant. Thank you.

Lord, with gratitude in our hearts we thank you for the wonder of the knowledge that you could take human flesh and that you could use it in a way that would matter for time and eternity. I simply pray today that there would just be a renewal of the servant-heartedness of your people in Boca Raton Community Church. Father that we would look for many avenues to express that service and love for Christ in others. May they know that we are believers by our love for you and for each other and for those around us. Let service be our love in action, I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Gentlemen, would you assist us with the cup?

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you do show the Lord's death until he comes.

Father, thank you for the message of Calvary's love, for the privilege today of knowing that real religion is not based on our works but on your grace. Lord, when that grace touches our lives it overwhelms us, it cripples us, and it takes us down. We can't help but be people who are submitted and people who want to serve and people who have different standards because it is what Christ does in us.

Lord, I simply pray this morning for anyone who is in this building and who has never said, dear Jesus, come into my heart. Dear Jesus forgive me of my sin. Jesus, I want to receive you and I want to become a Christian. Lord, I pray that would happen even in this moment as someone in the quietness of this moment would cry out to you in his or her heart.

Lord, I thank you for blessing our gathering this morning, for working in our lives, and I trust you Lord to use this morning and this moment to truly make a difference in us this week and in the days to come. We pray it together in Jesus' name. Amen.

Shared by David McKinley
2/14/99