

**“Facing Off With Favoritism:  
We Value True Biblical Community”**

2/21/99

Last night in our concert Greg Buchanan, wonderful, wonderful brother in Christ, was here sharing and many of you were able to be a part of that. I know you enjoyed it. I called on him, just impromptu, in the first service and he came at an unprepared time and stepped up and just did a wonderful job playing for us then. I love and thank God for Greg Buchanan. I think your heart will be blessed this morning. Let’s listen and share this moment of praise.

(Greg Buchanan, harpist, performing “Just a Closer Walk With Thee” and “There is Something About that Name.”)

Amen. That is so beautiful! That was so very beautiful! Thank you, Greg, for just adding so much to our worship this morning. And to Sonny, the choir, and the orchestra, to you just for the time we have spent praising the Lord together today. It has been good to be together and to sing praise to the name of the Lord.

When I was a sophomore in high school and then continuing on up until about a freshman in college I worked in a furniture store on Elvis Presley Boulevard in Memphis, Tennessee. In fact, in the year of Elvis’ death I was working the day of the funeral and will never forget the procession of white limousines all up the Elvis Presley Boulevard there in front of the store where I worked. Because of my age and stage of life I was not in sales, I was in delivery. What I did was when sales were made I had the opportunity of making deliveries. During that period of time in my life I worked with a great variety of people who would come and go in that type of a job.

One of the young men I worked with for just about a year was an African-American young man who was about seven feet, two inches tall. I wish you could have seen us carrying a sofa together. It was a sight to behold. I don’t know how many times I just had to say, can we just put it down a minute? I mean I felt like I was carrying it by myself because the leverage just didn’t work right!

On one particular day we drove about an hour and a half out of Memphis over into Arkansas to deliver a large delivery of furniture in an area there. We had been on the road since we left the warehouse that morning. We had driven straight to a sort of roadside market that was there and we stopped at this market. I needed to get a few extra directions and then we were going to take advantage of picking up a snack and using the restroom and those kinds of things. We walked in the door of this little store and there were three men standing at a counter not far from us. I walked in the door first, he walked in behind me. When we walked in the door I simply said, I am sorry but where is your restroom? The man behind the counter in the center looked at me and said, the restroom is in the back but we don’t allow niggers in here.

That moment, ladies and gentlemen, is frozen like a concrete pylon in the memory of my mind because there have been few times in my life when I have ever felt a greater sense of shame, a greater sense of embarrassment, a greater sense of frustration, and of anger. I really didn't know what to do. Obviously this man was a white man. The man standing behind me was a black man. The man who was with me was a man that I had been trying to share Christ with. The man who was standing there, as though it were, had just devastated any valuable effort I had made to build a bridge in friendship. I was only 16 or 17 years of age. I don't remember exactly what I said, it was something to the effect of, we wouldn't spend a dime in this store and we turned around and walked out. I have never forgotten that moment in my life and how awful that made me feel and how bad it must have, on the one hand, made him feel and yet I think he probably coped with it even better than I did in the moment. Yet there is nothing like prejudice. There is nothing like favoritism. There is nothing quite like snubbing and snobbing someone else. Obviously, as we come to this place called the church of Jesus Christ, it is something that should be very far removed from us – those kinds of attitudes, those kinds of experiences. But, according to James, a man whom we have been getting to know quite well over the last few weeks and months, we learn today there is a potential for a problem of prejudice, a problem of partiality, and a problem of favoritism, even in the church.

This morning I want you to take your Bible and I want you to open it to James, Chapter 2, and verse 1, because here James addresses and takes on this issue of prejudice, partiality, and favoritism. Now our word prejudice is simply pre-judge. It literally means to judge someone before you know anything really about them. It is to simply make a judgement based on that which is surface. But in James, Chapter 2, verse 1 James says clearly and definitively, “My brethren (this is a family issue, this is a challenge to the church) do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, with partiality.” What is the word? Partiality. It could be translated prejudice. It could specifically be translated favoritism. Because what it literally means is to show favor by receiving one's face. You can either receive one's face and, because of what you see, give favor or communicate condemnation or contempt. It simply is saying that in the church of Jesus Christ we are not to receive people just at face value. That is we are not simply to put a judgement on them, a sense of pre-judgement upon them. Instead we are to see them in a different way and a different light. James makes it clear in James, Chapter 2, verse 1 that any sort of favoritism in the place called the church is wrong.

Obviously the account I shared with you is one of the most common accounts of prejudice, of partiality, and favoritism that we see. It is that of race. Because of someone's color, because of someone's background, because of someone's ancestry, we judge the value of their life. While this is something that has been very dominant and predominant, especially in the part of the country where I grew up, in the mid south in America, it is something that has been known throughout the history of all mankind.

In the day and time in which James lived and ministered there was great animosity. There was great tension between the Jew and the Gentile. Not only between these but between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were a mix of Jew and Gentile, sort of a half-breed race and they were despised in a very distinct fashion by the Jews.

You can go to other parts of the world today and there are great tensions between race. We see that right now in Yugoslavia and Kosovo, the whole conflict that is transpiring there. It is a racial conflict based on a prejudice of race and background and ancestry. One of the ways in which favoritism can be shown is through race.

Another way in which we see it today is through looks, how a person looks, their appearance. We live in a world that says image is everything. If a person looks pretty or dresses nice or seems sharp then that person seems to have a greater sense of acceptance. We have people who pursue the perfect hair, the perfect clothes, the perfect make-up, the perfect appearance so many times favoritism comes at the point of the way someone looks. It can be race, it can be looks, it can be age.

You can oftentimes find discrimination based on age, whether people are young or whether people are old. Many times there is a great tension that comes and we feel this in the church, a tension between younger people and older people, and traditions, and preferences. Many times this can become a challenge and favoritism, partiality, and prejudice can become an issue in the church in that arena even as it does in the world as well.

Sometimes we find prejudice, favoritism, and partiality at the point of a person's title. Who are they known as? I don't mean we shouldn't show honor to people of great stature or office or responsibility. The Bible is very clear, give honor to whom honor is due. There is a place for honor and for authority and leadership. But, at the same time, if we tend to value people simply based on their titles or their networks, who they know, who they associate with, then we have made a great mistake.

Then there is the issue of wealth. How much? How much is someone worth? What is the difference between the haves and the have nots, the difference between those who seem to command the greatest amount of financial resource. Do you remember that one day Jesus told of a day when some people were coming to church and they were giving their offerings? There was a little lady who came by and she took what would have been the equivalent of two half cents or two pennies today and she put that in the offering plate. Obviously her offering was seen as just a little tip, a little token, in the eyes of many who were there. But Jesus said that woman just gave the biggest gift. I am sure those who were around Jesus were taken back because they had seen the flow of gifts that had come. But what Jesus was saying is that this woman's gift was based not on what she gave but on what she had left and she had given everything she had. You know you can give out of what you have. I mean if you are a millionaire you can give a thousand dollars and it is not even a blink in the eye. You are a multi-millionaire, you can give hundreds of thousands of dollars and it is not sacrifice. Yet, at the same time, it doesn't matter whether you be rich or whether you be poor. The issue is what are you doing with what you give and are you trying to somehow prove that you are more of something through what you have? You see, Jesus wants us to learn not to have but to give, to give away.

It was this issue of wealth that James addressed. In fact what he does is that he sort of pulls back the curtain, as though it were. Let's just imagine that James was behind that curtain and he kind of pulls the curtain back at church one Sunday morning and he gives us a picture of what happened one day at church. James, Chapter 2, verse 1 says, "Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, with partiality." Verse 2 – "For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings and fine apparel and there should come in a poor man in filthy clothes and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, you sit here in a good place and say to a poor man you shall sit there or sit here at my footstool, have you not shown partiality among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Here is the picture. You peek around the corner and a man walks in the back door. The usher meets that man and obviously recognizes him as a fine, respectable, outstanding man. He obviously has some things that prove him to be a man of quite great financial stature. The usher says, oh, we have a seat for you. That snooty usher takes that man and brings him right down in front and puts him on the front row and says, why don't you get right here. He may even had a good thought. He may have thought I bet this guy will put a big offering in the offering plate today. But he set him right down in front. As I look around the curtain another guy walked in the door. You know what the usher did with him? He sort of looked at him, looked him over, and said, you know seating is a little tight this morning why don't you maybe just sit right here or why don't you just sit right here in the hall. He just sort of put the man down. There was a snubbing that took place in this church. It was just as offensive, it was just as injurious, as though it were, in the presence of God as what happened to me that day in that convenience market over in Arkansas. Because the fact of the matter is that God values people. God is never interested, nor should his people be interested, in the difference of race, or age, or talent, or wealth, or any of those other things that we talked about because there is to be a different value system in the church.

The church is to be known as a community. A community of people who are equally valued and equally respected because of the fact that they are all in need of the grace of God and have all been created in the image of God. Consequently the church is to be a place where community, true Biblical community, is valued.

Far too often, as Louis Smeads writes in his book, "A Pretty Good Person", we all fall prey to bad habits. He says we put labels on people the way designers sew labels on their clothes and then we let the labels tell us what people are and what they are worth. If we value intelligence in children we label them as fast learners or slow learners. The first question we ask about any child is how he or she is doing at school. If we value money we label people as well-to-do or poor. The first thing we wonder about people is how much money they make. If we value physical appearance we label people as attractive or unattractive. The first thing we ask about a person is what he or she looks like. Here is a church group that puts premium on stable families and lasting marriages and when a woman in that church gets a divorce the church labels her as a divorced woman and blinds itself to her reality, to her pain, and to her gifts, and to her needs. People come along who are physically disabled and we label them disabled and we thereby blind ourselves to the infinite treasure of all that they have to offer us.

James is just saying, ladies and gentleman, this should not be so. There is a family problem in the church and it has to do with favoritism. Today James is challenging us to face off with favoritism so that we might instead value becoming a Biblical community, a household of faith, a body in Christ.

There are several things that James points out and that I want to stick with you this morning. The first one is that James says very clearly, favoritism is a violation of the law of Christian love. Let's just make no bones about it, it is a clear violation of the law of Christian love. He says, if you say you have faith and you show favoritism, then the fact of the matter is faith and favoritism should be like oil and water, they just won't mix, because it is not the true quality, the property of real faith, to show favoritism to others.

If you were to skip down just a few verses there, we have not read this one yet, but skip down if you will, to verse 8. "If you really fulfill the royal law," according to the scripture, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself you do well. But if you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." Two very powerful words are used here. The first word, the word sin, is the word *hormotea* (sp?) in the Greek. It means to miss the mark. It means to fall short. The Bible says that if you have an atmosphere where people come and they do not receive love and respect and honor but instead are treated with partiality and favoritism, you have totally missed the mark of God's standard in your life. But then he not only calls it sin he calls it a transgression. To transgress is literally as though if there were a boundary, a border, right here and you willfully, you choose, to step out of bounds, to go over the border, that is the idea of transgressing. The Bible says you fall short. The Bible says you are out of bounds. Your faith cannot be defined as true and authentic faith if what is marking your life is favoritism instead of a quality of true Christian love. Favoritism is a violation of the law of Christian love. Why is that so? Because God does not play favorites.

Listen to me this morning, ladies and gentlemen, I know that we talk much about the nature and attributes of God. We extol God as being holy. We extol God as being faithful. We speak of God as being righteous. But I want you to know that one of the equal qualities presented of God in the Bible is that he is impartial. Our God is a God who doesn't look at a person's face, or class, or education, or background. He is a God who loves people because he has made them in his own image, red, yellow, black, and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world. One of the things every one of us has to clearly see and understand this morning is that people matter to God. Not just my kind of people. Not just your kind of people. All kinds of people matter to God. If we fail to recognize that and if we allow the church to become a place where discrimination and where favoritism is played out, then we will cease to be a genuine community of faith.

You see, the Cross is the leveler of all mankind. In the world classes say we are different. Cultures say we are different. Colors say we are different. But the Cross says we all have one need. We need to be forgiven of our sins. It doesn't matter what class, culture, or color you may be. All of us have this one thing in common. We are sinful.

We have fallen short of the glory of God. We cannot rise high enough to gain acceptance with God so it doesn't matter how much you know, it doesn't matter how much you make, it doesn't matter how refined you may be. Refinement is never a substitute for a rebirth. Every one needs to be born again. Every one needs to be saved. Young, old, rich, poor, African, Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic – every one needs to be saved. Every one needs the gospel of Jesus Christ. Everyone needs to confess their sin. Therefore, the church should be a place where there is a great atmosphere of acceptance to anyone to come and to know Jesus Christ. Now, I did not say a place of tolerance I said a place of acceptance. I have it about up to here with all of the tolerance talk in our world today.

Tolerance says I am okay, you are okay. It doesn't matter anything about us we are just all okay. Let me tell you the difference between tolerance and acceptance. Tolerance says I am okay, you are okay. Acceptance says I am not okay, you are not okay, I need God's mercy, and you need God's mercy. I thank God that he loved me and I love you. You see that is the difference. A church needs to be a place that is permeated with the atmosphere of acceptance, where each of us recognizes that we are unworthy, that we do not deserve to be here, that none of us has a right or a place apart from the saving grace of God. It is the love of God so amazing and so divine that has brought us to a place where everything in us should be spilled out and opened up to show loving acceptance to others. Whether they are like us or very unlike us they need to know Christ. We are to call all men in all places to come to the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Favoritism is the violation of the law of Christian love. It is the royal law of God to love him and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But there is something else that James says to us. He says to us that not only does favoritism violate the royal law of God he says favoritism adds confusion to the big screen of life. If you look at life on the big screen and you really look at it for what it is, you blur the image, you blur the truth when you bring favoritism to it. The way he communicates that principle is that he says, beginning in verse 5, "listen my beloved brethren, has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who loved him but you dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?" James says, now wait a minute, let's just stop and ask this question, why would you play up to people who play down to you? Why would you show favor to someone simply because they have greater possessions? He says, you know that just doesn't make sense. It is an ignorant thing to do. It is the height of stupidity to somehow try to classify people on that basis and on that means because there is a crucial thing we have to understand. Net-worth and self-worth cannot be equated. Your net-worth does not change your self-worth. If you don't have much net-worth it shouldn't give you a low self-worth because every person is valuable because they were created in the image of God. Every person is valuable because they are the object of God's affection. Therefore, we need to understand that the church is the one place where we can't miss the picture. There are great riches in poverty, it is the wealth of learning that Christ is all you have and Christ is all you need. But there is also great poverty in riches because riches become the substitutes of that which really satisfies in life.

How many times do we see it played out in the sports world and in the entertainment world and in the political world? People who arrive, people who clip all the benchmarks, people who gain all of the notoriety, the successes, who gain all of the dollars and the bucks, they have everything. Everything to live with but nothing to live for. You see, James says, look, don't dare let a rich man come to church and be treated with preference because he is rich. All you are doing in that moment is that you are hiding from him the depth of his need and the problem with him is that he hasn't seen that he is poor towards God and spiritually he needs to be made rich. Don't let a poor man come needing the only thing that you can give him as the church of Christ which is the message of grace and you turn him away and you treat him down because he is poor. God can make him rich. You see, God chooses and God uses common people. God favors the poor. I mean that in the sense that he cares about their need. Not in the sense that he is partial, not in the sense he doesn't love the rich, he does. You will remember that even when Jesus was here it was the poor people who heard him gladly. It was a rich young ruler who turned away from him because he had great riches and he couldn't lay his life down for Christ. You see, we don't need to increase the obstacles, we need to remove them. We need to understand that God uses common people.

It was Abraham Lincoln, our President who once said, God must love the common people because he made so many of them. God has chosen people of this world, common people, poor people.

Paul was trying to deal with this issue in the church in Corinth. I love the way in which Eugene Peterson presents it in his paraphrase of The Message. I Corinthians, Chapter 1, verse 16 says, "Take a good look friends at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the brightest and the best among you, not many influential, not many high society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these nobodies to expose the hollow pretension of the somebodies. That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have, right thinking and right living, a clean slate, and a fresh start comes from God by the way of Jesus Christ. That is way we have the saying, if you are going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God.

You see, ladies and gentlemen, we need to understand God isn't prejudiced against the rich but what God is communicating is that many times they don't see their need. The poor who know they have need many times we despise them and fail to communicate to them the truth of the love of Christ. God loves poor people because they can magnify him through their necessity. Yet, too often, rich people dismiss them because of their excesses. You see, what God wants us to see over and over is that all of life in the big picture is about where people are in their relationship with him not in their relationships to things. That is the essence of what James is trying to communicate. It is that we need to have a place where people can come and see they are valued because of who they are and not because of what they have, how they look, or what else they may be.

You know what the real issue is in life? The real issue in life is not what you have. The real issue in life is how many people you help. If you have a lot, help a lot. You are to be pitied if you have a lot and you help nobody. Isn't the child that we pity the most the spoiled brat who can't get beyond having to have all the toys to himself. We just walk away and say, what a pity. What a pity it is in life if God has given you much, you take what you have, and you fail to help anyone else. You see, it is just clouding the big screen of life. James says, let's get away from the confusion. Let's quit playing up to people who play down. Let's recognize the importance of a spirit of acceptance.

There is one more thing that James talks to us about this morning and that is not only that favoritism is a violation of the law of love and that favoritism brings confusion to the big screen of life, he also communicates to us that favoritism prevents authentic biblical community. It keeps us from being what God wants us to be. We are to be a household of faith. We are to be a community of love. By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another. The true atmosphere of a biblical community is that it is a community that is marked and hallmarked by love. Yet favoritism brings the very things into that community that injure it and keep it from being what God wants it to be.

As I look at it and as I think about it, there are three things, there are three words that come to mind that keep us from being the church that God wants us to be. Prejudice. Preference. Pride. What are the three things that keep us from being the church God wants us to be? Say it with me. Prejudice, preference, and pride. Yet so many churches today cannot get beyond their prejudices, cannot get beyond their preferences, and cannot get beyond their pride to fulfill their purpose. Their purpose is to help to seek and save the lost and to be a community where people can come and where people can be loved.

Look at how James addresses this in James, Chapter 2, beginning in verse 10. He says, for whoever shall keep the whole law and yet stumble in one point, is he not guilty of all for he who said do not commit adultery also said do not commit murder. Now if you do not commit adultery but you do commit murder then you have become a transgressor of the law. James says, wait a minute. Doesn't it just make sense? God has 10 commandments, a chain with 10 links. How many of those links do you have to break to break the law? Just one. If I am dangling from that roof up there with 10 links in a chain, I don't have to have three of them break, just one is sufficient to let me fall. So he says, if you break any one of these links, you have broken the law of God. What is he saying? He is saying it doesn't matter whether you may have an outward sin of commission, like murder or adultery, or whether you have an inward sin of disposition, like prejudice, pride, or preference. The issue is that sin of disposition can be just as great at destroying what God wants his church to be as the sins of commission can be in destroying the testimony of the church of Jesus Christ. That is a powerful statement, ladies and gentlemen, that he says, if you are breaking this law it doesn't matter what else you may be priding yourself in. God is interested in his people being a people where there is a spirit of love not a spirit that is sinful, not a spirit that is harmful, but a spirit of love. It is love that builds and molds our life in harmony for Christian service. There is nothing as attractive as a house of love.

I want you to know that I need to get real personal here and tell you that I think we are missing the mark in this area as a church. The reason that I say that I think we are missing the mark is because this house is not full of people. I want you to know, if the people of Boca Raton community ever believed that this is a place where they can be loved we will not be able to keep them away. If they ever think that our love is real, that love will be like a magnet that will draw people from every color, class, creed, background imaginable, and culture. They will come because people want to be in a place where they are loved. Ladies and gentlemen, we must not let anything keep us from creating an atmosphere of authentic biblical community. One of the pillars of who we are and what we are must be the pillar of love. Someone said that churches have two kinds of pillars – the pillars of the church who serve the church and the caterpillars who simply crawl in and out and come and go. I am afraid we have too many caterpillars.

The question is, how can we be a community that overcomes favoritism, pride, prejudice, and preference so that we can communicate the love of Christ to others? Let me just answer that question with several very simple steps of application:

1. Greet one another. Don't be like the snooty usher in this case who greeted one person, a person of preference, but who didn't greet the other man who was probably the greater man of need. You see, greet one another the Bible tells us. When you come to church make it your mission to be a greeter. Some of us just need to get deprogrammed. That is our problem – we are programmed to get in the car on Sunday morning, we drive to somewhere near the same parking spot every Sunday, we get frustrated if somebody is in our spot, boy, that just blows it all. Then we park in that place, we walk the same pathway, we come and sit in the same seat, we get up and walk out the same door, and walk away with the same people, and that is the program of how we do church. I want you to know we need to break that program and we need to break that pattern because people will walk in these doors every Sunday who have no program and no pattern. What they need to meet is a person who greets them and who welcomes them, and who makes them feel good about being here because this is a house of love.

I am amazed at how many people will go into churches this Sunday in America just curious. Just interested. Just because they want to know that they will walk in the door and outside of maybe an usher grunting at them when he hands them a worship guide, no one will ever speak to them. They will walk in, they will take a seat, they will get up, and they will walk out in the flow of people but no one will personally greet them. Community begins with a greeting because a greeting says you are important, I value you, and I am glad you are here. That is one of the reasons we have tried to go to this trouble to create this whole community central concept. It is so there is a big greeting place on Sunday mornings across the street where you can meet and greet and connect with people. Not just your people, not just your hunger, but so that you can meet and greet, and I can meet and greet people on a common ground level. It doesn't matter your age, your background, or what Sunday School class you are in. It doesn't matter whether you live locally or far away, there is a place to come where we can gather and where we

can greet one another. Make it your mission to be a greeter and to be valuable in what you do!

2. Show kindness and hospitality. Show kindness and hospitality. Recognize how important it is that when you walk in the door that you are showing kindness to others. Don't drive up on Sunday morning and get ready to turn in your parking place, see somebody else ready to turn in it and try to beat them in there. Learn how to just say, go ahead, praise the Lord, somebody is here today. Don't fight your way into the building saying, I have to get my seat! Who in here has your name on a seat? Is your name on any seat in here? I want you to know the seats don't belong to you, they belong to God and to the people he brings to this place. Thank God that you can be here and thank God that we have good seats. But, ladies and gentlemen, we need to come with a kindness. If somebody is in your seat, you know the greatest thing you can do is say, hi, how are you? My name is David McKinley. I don't think I have ever met you before. I am so glad you have come today. I hope you enjoy it. That is a great seat.

You might be surprised what God would do in that man, woman, boy, or girl's life. You see, everybody contributes to the atmosphere. If you slip a mint out of your purse or your pocket during the service, I know you all do from time to time, turn to that guy you don't know and offer him a mint. You might have a mint ministry on Sunday and somebody will go away and say, you know they gave me a mint when I was there!

You see, ladies and gentlemen, show kindness and hospitality because everyone contributes positively or negatively to the atmosphere.

3. Appreciate diversity and communicate acceptance. Appreciate the fact there are people different from you coming. Be grateful for that. Be curious about what God has done to draw them here and appreciate their uniqueness and communicate acceptance.
4. Then share what you have with others. Become a person who shows up to contribute, to give. There is a world of difference in an atmosphere where people are giving and where people are taking. A lot of our churches are in bondage because they are full of people who have come to take instead of people who have come to give. I tell you when you gain an atmosphere of giving, whether it is time, talents, treasures, tithes, or whatever it may be, you would be amazed at what happens in that atmosphere, that giving atmosphere.
5. Refuse the rule of preference. Instead of preference let us live on purpose. Let's let our purpose be the one thing the church is to do to show people the favor of God's love and to lead them to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

I wish I could tell you that what happened that day in Arkansas in that doorway was the only time I saw the ugliness of that kind of prejudice in my life. But, frankly, that was not the worst case.

The worst case that ever happened in my life happened in 1973 in the front of the auditorium of my home church, Belvue Baptist Church. At the close of the service, after

having given an invitation, an altar call asking people to come and to receive Christ was given. People came and responded that day and receded and were paired up with a counselor. We had a tradition in that time that before they all left we would simply take a moment and introduce them to the church. We began to introduce a group of people on that Sunday morning and a black man and his white wife came and stood at the front of the church. We had a process whereby we would ask for those who were in favor of receiving those who had come to let it be known. A lady in the back of the church got up and walked down the aisle and came to the front. There was a microphone there at the front and she took the microphone, the pastor did not resist her, he gave her the microphone and she took it and she said (I just want you to know...this woman was a Bible teacher, this woman's son was a theologian), she said, I just want you to know that I don't think the black people and the white people ought to go to church together. There were 3,000 people in that auditorium that morning. It was like a gunshot in that building. My pastor, Adrian Rogers, took the microphone back and said, ladies and gentlemen, you have just heard someone share an opinion about a matter relating to our church. But, he said, the call of God upon my life is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to every person in every place and the day this church refuses anyone based on their race, based on their background, and anyone who wants to come to Jesus we refuse them, on that day you have my resignation as your pastor. I tell you, that church stood in unanimous applause for that pastor that morning. It was a defining day in a mid-south church in Memphis, Tennessee because God exploded the ministry of Belvue. Over the weeks and months that came and followed the church began to grow to such proportion that it could no longer even contain itself in that parameter. It had to move to another section of town. Today, as we have met this morning, they have had probably in the neighborhood of 8,000 to 9,000 worshippers who have gathered together and the ministry of Christ has continued to shake the city of Memphis.

Let me tell you something else. Just a few weeks ago I went back to my home to do a funeral service for my grandmother. While I was there I drove past the old Belvue property. I walked in that auditorium and walked around that morning and remembered the memories. I was married there, I was baptized there, and I was ordained to the ministry there. That congregation today is known as the Belvue Boulevard Baptist Church. It is an African-American congregation of over 4,000 people who are ministering and sharing Christ in that spot in that city. I thought, hallelujah! Thank God that the message and the ministry of the church goes on!

Ladies and gentlemen, not pride, not prejudice, not preference but purpose. We have to face off with favoritism in our lives that we might be in the favor of God by fulfilling his purpose in this generation.

I want to ask that heads be bowed and eyes be closed. No one stirring, no one looking. Red, yellow, black, or white, you matter to God today. Rich, poor, young, or old. Educated, uneducated. You have to just start where you are and come to God based on where you are. The wonderful thing is he will never fail to make good on his promise to receive you, to save you, and to make you a valuable part of his community known as the church. Have you received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? I can tell you if your

faith is no more real than to get beyond pride, preference, and prejudice you need to question your faith. Real faith changes the heart. It is an inside job. It doesn't just put religious clothes on the outside, it changes the heart on the inside. Today if you have never received Jesus Christ, I want to give you an opportunity to receive the One who came and was stripped of everything, died, and bled on a cross to pay for the sins of pride, prejudice, and preference, and to show us the love of God. God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were all sinners Christ died for us. Today if you have never received Christ, I want to invite you privately and personally where you are to just pray this prayer with me:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. Lord I know that I need to be saved. Come into my life today dear Jesus. Forgive me of my sins. Cleanse me and make me the person that you want me to be. I receive you into my life dear Lord. I receive the gift of eternal life. Help me to live that I might love others for you.

While heads are still bowed and eyes are closed, if you prayed that prayer with me, I want to ask you to do something that may not be altogether comfortable but is very important. I am going to ask you to just slip up your hand and then put it down and tell me that you prayed that prayer with me this morning. If you just prayed that prayer just slip your hand up and then put it back down. Just up and then down. God bless you. Up and then down. God bless you and you.

Oh Father, how I thank you today. How I thank you for people in this building who have used this as a moment of trusting in Jesus Christ. I pray today, oh God, that this would be the new beginning of new life in Christ and a liberty in their life they have known because of the love of Christ poured out in their hearts.

Father, I pray for others who are here today who have not made a connection and a commitment to the community called the church and who need to become a part of a community that they might be a contributor and that they might really give of themselves and give their life away that they might be able to be a part of a community of love. I pray you would gather them with us even this morning.

Thank you for the time we have shared in the study of your word. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want you to look up here. We are not going to take long but we are not going to leave until we have given an invitation for people to come and receive Christ today. If you prayed to receive Christ and we can help you and give you materials, we would love to do that in this moment. We have pastors and some trained counselors who are here. We are not going to stand you up in front of the church or vote on you or do any of those kinds of things. We just want to touch and encourage and pray for you in your decision for Christ. Maybe you need to join this church. Now that is a process. We will tell you what is involved in that process but we cannot even begin it if you don't let us know. We

want people to come who will be a part of this community and live to make a difference for Christ.

Maybe you need to follow Christ in baptism. You need to say I belong, I am following Christ, or whatever it may be. Come just as you are. Come wherever you are. Receive Jesus Christ today.

Let's stand together and sing that chorus together, Come Just As You Are. Pastors will be here to receive you. I am here to receive you. Come.

That pull you feel is the Spirit calling you to God. Don't resist Him today. Don't let pride get in the way. Jesus went to a cross for you. Follow him. Take a stand for him today.

This morning after the service these pastors will continue to be here. We have a Welcome Center in the foyer. If you would like to just go by and request some information, follow-up information to a prayer you may have prayed, or information about the church, we will be glad to put that into your hands.

I am so thankful you have come today. I hope you will come back and bring a friend with you and that this will become the place where that friend comes to know Jesus and that you will be a part of that in his or her life.

Tonight at 6:00 we will continue our conference season. Dr. Gregory Weybright will be with us.

Sermon presented by David McKinley  
2/21/1999